

**Interviewee Name:** Sonya Corbett

**Project/Collection Title:** Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:**

Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Eliza Oldach (UC-Davis)

**Interview Location:** Rockland, Maine

**Date of Interview:** 03-01-2019

**Interview Description:**

Sonya Corbett, a trap-maker with Sea Rose Trap Company in South Portland, ME, speaks about being a woman in the lobster industry, her transition to trap-making, her involvement with Portland political organizing, and her love for the industry.

**Collection Description:**

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**Transcription by:** Eliza Oldach

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[17.51]

NS: Natalie Springuel

EO: Eliza Oldach

SC: Sonya Corbett

[0:00:00.0]

SC: I was thinking I should have brought my jacket but I don't need it.

SC/NS/EO: [Indistinct, laughter.]

NS: Okay, we are up and running. Yeah. Sorry about the delay. Um, can we have you state your name and spell it for us?

SC: Sonya Corbett, S-O-N-Y-A C-O-R-B-E-T-T.

NS: Great, and what do you do? I see your shirt says Sea Rose rap.

SC: Yep I build lobster traps.

NS: You build lobster traps.

SC: Yep.

NS: Awesome. tell us about that.

[0:00:30.0]

SC: Um I started lobstering and decided my body couldn't really handle that much more, so, um, I had a family friend that had his own lobster trap company, he's been building traps for over thirty years probably. And uh he's a retired fisherman as well. And he uh just asked if, if I would like to join. And I said yes 'cause I was looking for a job to keep in the industry because I love the industry so much, it's been my whole life since I was 20, I guess. Um, I fell in love with it and I didn't go back to college, and kept up with the industry. Love building traps, it's something I could see myself doing for quite a while.

NS: Um, what do you- how does one build traps, could you describe it?

SC: Yep, um we get all our wire in rolls, um, when we get it to the shop we get it on a straightener and when it comes off it's nice and straight. We cut all the pieces to size. We get it to the bender, we bend up all the pieces, the body, the ends, the bridges. Um, start clipping it together, and then we, we cut all the heads ourselves, we make our own concrete weights. So depending on the different runners they want, or the weights, we put all that on. he heads on, tie 'em back, door goes on, they're ready to go. We get orders of one hundred to three hundred. So it's very, it's monotonous, doing the same thing, over and over again, but it's, you gotta you have to love it in order to do it and be happy with your life (laughs).

[0:01:56.1]

NS: Yeah, how, what's the size of the company that you're with?

SC: Um, not big. Um, we have my boss, and then his son, they run the company, and then there's four of us workers. And we just opened another location at Bristol, up at Pemaquid, um and there's one guy that works up there.

NS: And where's your first location?

SC: South Portland.

NS: Okay.

SC: Mmhmm.

NS: And you said that you had been lobstering but it wasn't so great for your body anymore.

SC: Yeah, I was getting really tired all the time, and I was year-round offshore in the winter and all that, and it was just one of those things where, I miss it every day, still, now that I'm not doing it, but I was just kind of at the point where I decided that I needed something else, I needed, I don't want to say I needed more, I needed less (laughs). Yes, yeah, probably it was less. A lot of uh daily struggle. Get up at 3:00 in the morning and hurt yourself all day, is the way I felt I was going being a sternman, if I was a captain it'd probably be a different story but I never went that route.

[0:03:00.3]

NS: and what made you want to stay in the industry, what do you love about the industry?

SC: So many things. the community, probably, the best. I mean I spent, being a woman, I started out on the boat on Chebeague Island which is where I'm from. And there're women captains out there whatever and when I came back to Portland and started working at a retail store as a commercial fish manager, being a woman and trying to get, get respect I guess took me a while. And once I got it it was almost like a drug, it was almost like, who else can I get to like me, like, this old guy really hates women on his boat, like, I wanna see if I can get on that boat, and I would and. It was kind of like a thing I just kind of came in love with, first of all, the ocean, of course, but the ocean and the people and the, just the community, and started having real, real feelings for issues that they have and you know all that stuff so. I don't wanna get out of it.

NS: How did you first get into the fishing industry?

[0:04:02.1]

SC: Um, being um from Chebeague, my family I, my mom's cousin, uh, was a captain and I just needed a summer job in between college. I went out there and lived there and I worked for him. And then I just never left. I just decided that it was a good way to make some quick

money and it was fun, living on the island with all the different sternmen and you know, just that kind of summer life. And then I just, yeah, I never left after that.

NS: Are you here in, uh, in Sea Rose Trap Company in the trade show?

SC: Yep, we have a booth there.

NS: Cool.

SC: Yep, we made chairs and the, you know, all the lobster trap chairs you see and the tables and stuff, we do all that fun stuff so it's artistic kinda you kinda get into making fun stuff too.

NS: That's great. I love those chairs.

SC: Yeah.

NS: Um, you said that you started finding yourself sort of interested in the issues that—

SC: Yeah.

NS: Are sort of impacting the industry. Excuse me. Industry. tell us more about that.

[0:04:59.4]

SC: Um, the bait issues, right now, the Portland just went through a Save the Working Waterfront movement, where, um, we have a lot of money from big hotels and so they try to come in and take over the waterfront, which would push the fishermen off, push them off their parking, little things like that, access to the wharf, places to store their traps, and, but we just went through all that, and passed, um, there was a, back in the 80s there was a movement where they actually got the city to pass a referendum, maybe, I'm not sure exactly what the word would be, where, if you're on the water side of Commercial St you can't, um, build unless it's directly marine related. That kind of fell apart up 'til now, so we got that passed again. So, if you're looking to build a hotel or, you know, office space there, you can't anymore, if you're on the water side of Commercial St.

NS: And, um, what are the, so you've been in Portland for a long time, right?

SC: Yeah.

NS: What are the—how has Portland changed, how has the waterfront changed?

[0:06:09.7]

SC: Um, I guess just the—it hasn't really changed much to be honest. he fishermen do a great job of fighting for what they want. Um, there are definitely hotels, parking garages, and that kind of stuff going in, but I don't personally see that much of a change, I mean we get some you know, some of those big upscale restaurants come in, and where one of my friends has his boat, um, we like to hang out on the boats a lot, just kinda like everyone gets together, we have some drinks, we go for a cruise and come back and hang out listening to music and a nice restaurant went up right there. And they said, they were actually really good about it. It

took a bunch of parking, but, as long as uh, we kinda kept things to a minimum, they allowed all the lobster boats to be there. 'cause people come there, sit at a restaurant with all the windows, and they wanna see that, they wanna see the working waterfront, that's why they come, so, hopefully we get more, if things try to progress that way, that people are a little more understanding of all of that. So.

NS: Yeah. I feel like Portland's really been in the news

SC: Yeah

NS: In the last six months about the waterfront.

SC: Yeah. And the fishermen are doing a great job at keeping what they want alive, 'cause it's their livelihood for sure, and then their kids, and their kids. Yeah.

NS: And what do you think, um, the rest of the Portland community feels about the, the waterfront?

SC: the consensus seems to be along with the fishermen, they want things to stay the same. You know, I mean, I don't think that it's anyone locally that's trying to come in and build the big hotel on the water or take up, you know, any of the wharves, so I think locally, it seems to be the same consensus of let's keep it the way it is. You know, of course we want to grow, we want tourists to come, we want—if we build it they come, but the way it is right now, so uh we don't really have to change much. And everyone always wants to change. Sometimes it's okay to stay the way we are.

[0:08:12.6]

NS: Yeah, yeah. What's it like transitioning from being part of the harvesting end of the industry to part of the, sort of gear?

SC: It was, it was easy. I see the same people, I build for the captains that I worked for, um, and just as long as the love for the industry, you know it just, personally it took a while for me. I still, you know, asked to go out on the boat. My little brother lobsters, my cousins you know, all my friends, and I was like "Oh, if you guys need help on Saturday, like, I'm not doing anything" and then it comes down to the day and I'm like "No, I'm okay" (laughs). I don't wanna get sucked back in. So I just, I try to stay off the boats, but, you know, it's, it's okay being with people that I still see all the fishermen, still, get to be part of the industry as much as I was for the most part.

NS: And I, I love meeting a woman who makes the gear.

SC: Mmm.

NS: That's so cool, are there—what's the sort of ratio do you—

SC: Oh, God.

NS: work mostly with men?

SC: Yep.

NS: In this end of the business too?

[0:09:16.8]

SC: Yep. Um, all men for the most part. Ah, there are, I think, there's a lot of women, we cut heads, twine comes in a 50 pound bale, we cut down the strips and then cut down the heads individually. here's a lot of women that are into that, can do that from home, and I can do it from home sometimes, and um. So, pro—I met one other woman that's a trap builder, she works for another company. I haven't met her, but I've seen a picture (laughs). here's that. But no I don't really know of very many. Yeah.

NS: What's it like being at the Forum for you, you've been coming to the Forum for a while?

SC: Yeah, every year since I was 20.

EO: Oh my gosh.

SC: Yeah, I never missed one whether I'm working, I worked for the retail, a retail company that's here every year and I was with them, or if I'm not working with a company, if I'm on a boat, I'll just come and just be here, so. Every year I try not to miss it.

NS: What do you like about it?

SC: The people, definitely the people. I mean I, coming this many years, I literally know, I walk in like "Okay, this person's booth is gonna be here, that booth is gonna be there" like it's, nothing really changes much, but um, it's just, seeing the people I haven't seen in a year, and catching up, yeah.

NS: Yeah. Do you have any questions?

[0:10:31.7]

EO: Yeah, I'm, I'm really curious, you said you were successful in passing this, or re-upping the referendum in Portland. What was the—what were the conversations around that like?

SC: Um, a lot of it was educati—educating people about, people that don't know the local, you know, local, people that don't know needed to um to get signatures, that was a big thing. Um, and there's a lot of rules surrounding that, like I couldn't collect signatures because I'm not a Portland registered voter. So like a lot of fishermen don't actually even live in Portland, they live in Falmouth or, you know, Scarborough or wherever. So um that was a little difficult to get people that could even walk, you know walk around and say "can you even sign this" for that reason. Um, conversations for the most part, yeah, just like, educating people on what what was and trying to update that, you know, back in the action. And yeah, they were successful. I—a very, very proud moment for the, for the fishermen.

[0:11:40.3]

NS: Yeah, that's great.

EO: Now that you've done that, do you have another, um, policy change in mind that you're working on in your community?

SC: Um, not that I know of, that was a pretty big one (laughs). It took a lot of effort. Um, not that I know of, I mean the bait shortage thing is pretty big right now, um, and there's not really much you can do about that, to be honest, it's just, I have a, one of my best friends, she's a woman and she, um owns a bait company in Portland, and she's, and they fish for herring. that's what they do. So, she's—people are so really affected by that, like, "I'm gonna have to get a different apartment, cheaper apartment" like their whole lives are changed 'cause of this. And then the fishermen of course too. Um that might, that's something that you'd love to tackle but you really can't 'cause, it's above us at that point, it's not just, hey can we go to a City Council meeting and try to change their minds, like that's not gonna work, so. Just things that are kinda out of your reach, things that you can tackle that, you know, you can make a difference.

[0:12:46.4]

NS: Do you guys, in the trap-building part of the industry, think that the bait issue, or even the whale issue, is, will have a potential impact on your business?

SC: Yeah, the whale issue, um, they're talking about, um, cutting the trap limit from 800 to 600, that could be, you know, anything that will impact the profits of the fishermen will impact everyone down the line. Including us, for sure. And you know, even, they love to get new trucks, it will probably affect even the Ford dealership, you know, like you never know. Um, so yeah. Things like that will definitely affect us, and if they have to change their rope, we sell rope so you know, uh, kind of stuff like that, you know, it all affects the whole bunch of people down the line that you don't really realize until it's talked about or, or really there, until you're in the moment and realize that our trap orders have been cut in half because people—if you're cutting your limit from 800 to 600, all of a sudden people have 200 traps to get rid of. And the licenses are all, and they're gonna, it affects a whole bunch of things. You could buy used traps for cheap, and who needs brand new traps when you could do that?

NS: Right, so, you're in the trap-making business, um, I, we interviewed someone yesterday who was, he was an engineer, he was trying experiments with ropeless

SC: Yeah.

NS: Traps?

[0:14:12.5]

SC: I heard something about that yesterday. Uh, somebody was talking about it yesterday—today. Um. Seemed very interesting. Expensive probably, for fishermen, and they already went through that once with the whale thing, they needed to switch from, all their lines that go from the trap to the buoy, um, had to be switched over, so that it was sinking line instead of floating line, so, it went through that, all the fishermen, they got a little bit of a credit for passing in their old rope, it, they had to buy all new rope. And that's a lot of money, and a lot of product. Um, so we'll see how this goes. No- I don't really know if it, it, if it, doesn't seem

real enough yet for that to actually take place, it's such a big change, and I guess we haven't really discussed it that much.

NS: Yeah.

SC: I guess we'll kind of see once again when it comes down the line.

NS: What do you hope for the industry in the future?

[0:15:11.9]

SC: The future, God. Peace (laughs). Peace. No more um territorial wars or, you know, there's some fighting that's, I hate. Um, let's see, even between companies, trap companies, stuff like that. But let's see, yeah, probably just everyone can't we just all be friends (laughs)? That's, yeah. Obviously growth and the cut-backs, you know, they're facing so many challenges that are hurtful to them and their livelihood. I guess some of them are necessary, and some of them just seem backed by money, once again. So, yeah.

NS: Any other—

EO: Yeah, if, so if someone were coming to you today and they said "I'm gonna join the lobstering industry, I'm going to become a lobsterman," um, what advice would you have for them to be able to weather future challenges?

SC: Um, God I that's a good question (laughs). Um, I guess you just have to have an open mind about everything. You know, open mind and a lot of money (laughs). It's a lot of money. But I mean, even to get into the lobstering industry now, there's a huge waiting list to get a license stuff like that, so it's almost impossible for someone to join, say, "Oh, I'm gonna start, I'm gonna get a boat, boat built get some of my own traps" and 12 years down the line they'll probably get a license to be able to do even that. So I mean it's a lotta patience, a lotta time, if you really care for industry, there's so many things you can really do to I mean get involved in the industry, get involved in the fights, get involved in the, all the things you care about to make a difference 'cause that's where it comes from, that's how things change, that's your voice, making a difference in what you believe in.

[0:17:15.5]

NS: Yeah. Um, I have one last question, um, I think you said you got into the industry when you were around 20?

SC: Yep.

NS: Um, what would you say to your 20-year-old self about getting into this industry?

SC: You go girl!

SC/NS/EO: (Laughter.)

SC: You go, you're gonna do it, you're gonna make it. Yeah, that's probably it (laughs).



NS: That's great.

Yeah, wouldn't change a thing.

NS: That's great. Anything else that you want to say?

SC: No, I think we covered it. That was good, yeah. I feel good about it.

NS: Great, thank you so much for sharing your story.

SC: Yeah that was fun.

[0:17:51.8]