

Interview with Andrew Arnett, commercial fisherman

Occupation: commercial fisherman

Port Community: New Bedford, Massachusetts

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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Project: The Graying of the Fleet Part II: How and Why Young Fishermen Choose to Fish?

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is February 12, 2019. I'm in New Bedford, Massachusetts, with Andrew Arnett. Could you please state your occupation?

Andrew Arnett [AA]: I am a captain of a commercial fishing vessel and a commercial fisherman for ten years now.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

AA: Fulltime.

SS: Did you say the name of the vessel? AA: No. I'm captain of the Captain Bligh.

SS: What's the homeport of that vessel?

AA: The homeport is New Bedford, Massachusetts.

SS: Andrew, how old are you?

AA: I'm twenty-six years old.

SS: My last biographical question is what your educational background is?

AA: I dropped out when I was sixteen.

SS: Ok. That's all I had for basic biographical questions. Where would you like to begin to tell your story as a young commercial fisherman?

AA: I guess we'll just go down the list [editor's note: Andrew referred to a handout provided used by the interviewer listing possible topics that would be discussed]. The list is in pretty good order.

SS: Sure.

AA: Quick description of my career. I started off when I was sixteen, snailing in Narragansett Bay and doing scup pots and sea bass pots. I also set tub trawls for stripers. It was pretty spread out. It was full days. I loved it from the jump. About two years into my career—because I was only fishing on that boat from April to maybe January—I was sitting home a lot of the winters for two years. My third year, I finally decided to go offshore. My first offshore trip was actually on the Captain Bligh. I ended up fishing there for four years, out of Point Judith. When I found I was having my first daughter—my only daughter, my first child—I ended up working with Steve Arnold on the Elizabeth and Katherine there, for like two years, because of more family time and all that. Then, I decided I wanted to go back to running boats. I came up here and met Chad and I've been here ever since. I've had a couple little jobs in between—just fishing with friends, a lot of the different day boats, been out with Terry Mulvey, been out with the Duckworths, been out with John Fish, pretty much everybody. I've been running boats. I was twenty-two when I took my first boat. I just had two years when I was with Steve. Been running boats ever since. Going on two years with this company. I've done it all, almost, except go to the West Coast. That was one of my dreams before I ever had children. That kind of put the kibosh on all of that. I do scallop trips in the spring. I go as far as mate and engineer on the scallop boats in the company. So I do a lot in between, on top of being captain of the Bligh. It's mainly a crab boat, so it's pretty seasonal for us. In the downtime, I would go scalloping or even take transit trips out of Point Judith. I'll go with Bunky on the Atlantic Pearl every now and again—whatever to stay busy. Ever since I've been up here with the scallop boats, I've been pretty busy with just this company, just stay right in this company.

SS: Let's back up a little bit. You said you started at sixteen in Narragansett Bay. Was that your own vessel and license, or were you working for somebody else?

[03:58]

AA: No. I worked for Joe Baker on the Autumn and Josh.

SS: How did you get connected with him and with this whole fishing thing?

AA: He's friends with my dad. My dad's a fisherman. My dad's been fishing since he was like seventeen or eighteen and he has his own little day boat. He snailed and stuff in the bay, so him and Joe became good friends. I was sixteen. I went for that summer. I went back to school for like a week. I was like, "Nah." I was like, "I'm going to go back out fishing."

SS: Was North Kingstown where you grew up?

AA: I grew up in Narragansett and South Kingstown. But yeah, we were out of Wickford for a little while, and we were fish potting around Block Island. We'd just stay in Point Judith because he had a slip there too.

SS: When you grew up, your dad was fishing?

AA: Oh, yeah. I met my dad when I was like eight years old, maybe. I've been around boats ever since then. I went out with him as a kid, just fish-potting on the beach. I was like ten years old when he finally brought me. It took me years to convince him.

SS: Why was that?

AA: Not that my dad has anything against the fishing industry, but he's seen what it once was and what it is now, and I understand. Especially being a parent, especially to a son, I'd rather he stay in school than do this. Sad to say, but education is important, definitely.

SS: When you first started going out sometimes with your dad, what made an impression on you about fishing?

[05:41]

AA: Well, obviously, it was summertime, so it was beautiful. Right there, off the lighthouse, just off Point Judith, so it was almost seeing home from the other aspect, being on the water. Just fishing in general—seeing what you catch. A lot of people don't realize it's cool when you get on a large volume of fish and you catch a lot of fish. It's crazy. With a little wire trap, you can catch fifty to a hundred pounds in a trap. As a kid, I can't even pick these things up. It was cool. And that's what my dad did. So there's always that influence, whether he liked it or not.

SS: Did you think then that you might be doing this for a living?

AA: No, no. It's funny. I always thought I was going to be a vet. I liked animals. Growing up as a kid, I loved animals. No, my dream was to be a vet. I ended up fishing. It's still involved with animals. It's just marine life. Different path, but same category. I still deal with animals. I still see it all. I'm sure you know, from talking with other people—the whales, the dolphins. It's an everyday thing that most people don't ever see.

SS: Yeah. That's something that really means something to you?

AA: Yeah. It drags you into it. When I first went offshore, seeing kids my age that quit on a boat, and I was like, "This is nothing. I know that it's not for those people, and it's for me." Just liked it, as soon as I fell into it. My dad hated it. I told him I wanted to drop out. He wasn't happy. [laughter]. He gave me a month to get out of the house. I was sixteen. I had my own house. He was like, "If you want to act like an adult, live like an adult, I expect you to live like an adult." It sounds harsh, but it helped me when I was younger to establish myself.

[08:09]

SS: How did that decision come about? You said you were working for Joe for a summer, went back to school for a week, and decided to drop out and go back fishing?

AA: Well, I've always been hands-on, so I didn't ever do really good in school. I always passed my academics because I did school sports when I was younger—a lot of school sports. Just as I got older, I found that the more hands-on classes—we had agrosience, the FFA in Narragansett—just stuff like the more hands-on classes, I was fine with. But when it comes to reading books, just wasn't my thing.

SS: But then you found fishing?

AA: Yeah. With fishing, I made a bunch of money. I was like, "Alright." Sixteen years old, I fished for a summer and I made like fifty, sixty grand in like five months. My bills were nothing. I had no children.

SS: Wow. Your dad wasn't a fan of that decision?

AA: No, for a little while. But then he seemed to take too it when he saw that's what I really wanted to do. He supported me.

SS: What did your friends at school think of this decision?

AA: Well, it's funny, because a lot of my friends have actually come work for me. I've gotten a lot of my friends into commercial fishing through the years. I didn't have a lot of close friends. I knew a lot of people growing up, but as far as a lot of close friends, I was selective on who I really hung around with. We all actually had the same problem in school. We were all hands-on, loved to be outside doing stuff. My first mate was one of my best friends growing up. Another kid who's working on the boat with me, he's a close friend of mine. He moved here from Virginia. He actually trained racing dogs, greyhounds. That's what he did before he went out fishing. It's funny how a lot of them fell into it. I have some friends my age who work out of Point Judith. It's pretty much the whole young generation I know. I almost grew up with all of them, as far as Rhode Island, even Massachusetts. There's not many young guys up here either. I've gotten to know all of them. Just a select few who really have their stuff together, who really foresee wanting a future in this. There's a lot of kids my age who just like the money and they like to party. It's different for me. It's not just the money. Money is good, but we work for it. It's not always good, either [laughter].

SS: You said it's not just about the money for you. What else is it about for you?

AA: I mean, everything: sun-ups, sun-downs, hauling gear, being out there. The whole crew is under the age of—I think Tyler's the oldest, and he's like thirty-one. Maybe he's only thirty. Ricky's twenty-eight. Brandon's twenty-two. I'm twenty-six. Just all being out there. We all have good attitudes. It's like a second family. We have a blast. A bunch of twenty, thirty-year-old kids offshore. Responsibly, I mean [laughter].

SS: Do you pick your crew? Is that part of your role as captain, to recruit your deckhands?

AA: Oh yeah. You go through guys. You don't always get along with everybody. People don't always meet the expectations. We do fish hard. I'm never home. I'm always fishing. We just did an eight-day trip to move twelve hundred pots sixty miles. We work hard. We move our gear all the time. We fish all the time. It's all you can do. You got to stay on top of things.

SS: You said the first time you ran a boat was when you were twenty-two. How was that? How did that come about?

AA: That was on the Captain Bligh. That was the first boat I ever ran. We were supposed to go fishing that night. I'd been on the boat for three years already. I was already hauling gear, setting gear for probably two years at that point. I was the first mate there since my first trip. Keith had something come up with his daughter and we were supposed to leave that night. He said, "Find another guy," and he threw the keys at me. He said, "You're taking the boat." "Alright." Like eight o'clock at night. "Awesome." I took it from there. I ran the Bligh for a year. Right about then, I was about to have my daughter so I went to work with Steve, just to have more time off while she was younger. I worked with Steve for about a year, a year and a half.

SS: That was dragging?

AA: Yeah, dragging. Then I came back up here and I was running the Genesis and the Christine Marie.

SS: What kind of boats are those?

AA: They're all crab boats. We had the Sea Star that sank and the Captain Bligh. I'd go mate on the Ryan William, William Lee, and Grace when they were scalloping. I stay busy all year. Dragging, depending on whether the fish are there or not, is not really seasonal. You can just put your net in the ocean and you'll find fish. Your options are more open. You're not just going for crabs. You're not just going for scallops. Everything has its time of the year. Dragging, you chase squid. The fluke open up in the winter. A bunch of guys do their fluke quotas and all that. For me, coming up here was huge, because there was never that stability for me with inshore fishing. With crabbing, when crabbing dies, it dies out for like three months, and the Bligh never had lobster grounds. Lobstering was never an option. You just piss off the wrong people. That's why coming up here and being able to scallop in the spring, although the short-term and part-time boats, the amount of money you make in a short time. You still get a month off, if I'm lucky. I say I get a month off, but there's always stuff to fix on the boat, always something to fix.

SS: Tell me about the company that owns the Captain Bligh. How many boats does it have and what is that like?

AA: We have the Captain Bligh, Christine Marie. We sold the Genesis. We got the Ryan William, the William Lee, the Noah, and the Grace.

SS: Are those all crab boats?

AA: All crab and scallopers. All of them are crab boats except three. Three of them are scallop boats. One guy runs them all. He's a good guy. Taught me a lot. I became a beast at scalloping pretty quick, smoked everybody on deck on like my second trip. It was pretty sweet. The money—obviously scalloping is a whole other level of money. I had never seen a fifteen thousand dollar check until I went scalloping. I mean, "I want to get a new car [laughter]!" That's the biggest thing for me, because I am very mechanically inclined. I've always been working on diesels and fixing up cars and stuff. For a little while, I was almost halfway thinking about going back to school and getting my GED and going for marine diesel. I just couldn't bite the bullet on it. I started my GED and I was like, "I'm not even going to do this. Why am I kidding myself?"

SS: Because fishing just has such a hold on you?

AA: Yeah, honestly. Even being home for a week, I start to lose my mind. I'm just ready to go fishing. It's nothing against anything at home. I'm just ready to go back out there. It's good, because I'm very competitive, and I keep up with all the other guys that have been doing this for twenty or thirty years. I go harder than most of them. It's just nice to be able to keep up, be competitive. I like to think I know what I'm doing [laughter]. Sometimes it's like I wish I'd stayed on deck sometimes.

SS: Why is that?

AA: More responsibilities with being a captain. You make a lot more money than everybody else on the boat, but people don't realize all the stuff that gets done. You don't just take a boat out fishing, take it home, and go home. There's fixing stuff and paperwork and doing

settlements. Just everything—trap tags and keeping up on the gear, running around, getting supplies. When you're only home for two days, that's not much time. That's the toughest part about fishing, especially because I have two young children.

SS: How do you make that work?

AA: Because of her [my girlfriend]. I definitely do not see my kids as much as I'd like to, and that's for sure. Like this week, I'll see my kids for a day and a half.

SS: How old are they?

AA: My son just turned one in January and my daughter's going to be four in April. Good kids, almost too good. I hang out with my other friends' kids, and I say, "Damn, my kids are good."

SS: Probably because they don't see you very often!

AA: Well, they're just so easy. My son, even when he was younger, would never cry. He always smiles. That's awesome. That's what life is about. I missed my son being born when we was born. I was out fishing, trying to make it home, but it all happened so quick. That's tough. You miss a lot. I also look at it as I'm young, so I need to go hard while I can, because I don't care who you are, you can't go this hard forever. That's why I see myself owning a boat. I see a big future in little fifty-foot draggers with federal permits. What I see is that it's going to get worse for the big boats.

SS: What do you mean by that?

AA: I don't know. I just feel like with expenses and stuff like that, it's so hard to keep up. You can't take an eighty-foot boat out and go grind on just a little bit of fish when you're burning three or four hundred gallons a day. When you're out on a little dragger, where you're burning a hundred gallons a day with just one other guy on deck, no food or just a little bit of food, it's a crazy thing, but it makes a big difference in being able to keep a business running. You always have insurance. A lot of people have payments. It's hard. I personally would not see myself investing in an eighty-foot boat. It just makes sense. You can buy a fifty-foot boat, cut the expenses and the people on deck in half, catch the same amount of fish. An eighty-foot boat can't catch any more limit than a fifty-foot boat. We all have a thousand pounds or two thousand pounds that we're allowed, so why burn more fuel and take more guys, if you don't have to? It definitely makes sense. It's huge. Scallop boats are part-time boats now, a lot of the fifty-footers. The William Lee is a fulltime [boat], and that's like sixty-five feet. That's not even that big either.

SS: You said you see yourself owning a fifty-foot boat eventually?

AA: Yeah, eventually. This year, I'm waiting for a couple more things to happen, and I'm going to have my own Rhode Island multispecies license. I'm working on that. Springtime is before you know it—a couple months.

SS: What are you going to do with that?

AA: Just hold onto it for now. It would be nice if I could save enough money to just buy a fifty-foot dragger and not have boat payments, and start worrying about house payments.

SS: But that's where you'd eventually like to get? Settle down a little more and do day trips?

AA: Yeah, after I put my time in. I'm doing good now with what I'm doing. I definitely do better than most kids my age.

SS: Have there been any hard parts? Challenges, learning curves, struggles?

AA: No, not really. Don't get me wrong, there's plenty of hard times when you just want to pull the plug, you just want to quit. I'm just not a quitter.

SS: What kind of stuff makes you feel that way?

AA: Oh, just stuff breaking or if stuff doesn't go right. The weird thing about fishing is you never really make a plan, because the plan never works. It's weird, but that is literally what Keith taught me when I was young. Don't even go out there with a set plan in your head for the week, because fishing is fishing. You can't go out there and think you're going to catch, and you can't go out there and think you're going to not catch. You don't know what you're going to have and what you're going to have to do. You're out there and you read your gear. With fixed gear, that's essentially what you do. You pay attention to your gear. You're catching more here, you're catching less there, but I was doing good here, so fish are moving this way. You just got to stay on top of stuff. Fixed gear definitely isn't the future. That's another huge thing about dragging and mobile gear, being able to bring your gear home. It's just you lose so much to the draggers. It's very competitive. I'm young and I do well. There's a few guys out there that almost don't like to see me doing good. When I come through, I come through. If there's crabs, I'm going to be there. It's not like lobstering. If you haven't been lobstering there for twenty years, you don't have set sets. It's fifty-fathom edge, sixty or seventy miles long, that we fish. Anybody can fish wherever they want.

SS: Crabbing's not territorial like lobster?

AA: Some guys are. Some guys think they own places.

SS: Why is there that difference? You're both using pots to trap crustaceans. Why isn't it as territorial?

AA: Because there's a lot of crabs. There isn't an issue of catching crabs. There's plenty of bottom.

SS: I see. It's just not as limited a resource and area?

AA: Yeah, it's not like it's a grind. When they're in fifty fathom in the mud, they're just in fifty fathom in the mud. It's not any more of them to the east or to the west. It's a lot to do with depth. They go back and forth.

SS: Interesting. So the crabs themselves are not as territorial as lobsters are.

AA: Yeah. There's a lot more mud. But lobsters are worth a lot more money, too.

SS: Good point.

AA: Crabbing really wasn't big until a few years ago. Very few boats did it. I remember getting forty-five cents. The Captain Bligh was out there. I would go three or four trips

without even seeing a boat. There's a million guys doing it now. There's got to be close to twenty boats. Six years ago, there was a handful—maybe five or six guys. Those were big boats that could hold a lot, because you needed that gross weight. We started getting sixty-five cents and more boats started getting into it. Then it went up to seventy and when it got to a dollar, anybody who had a lobster boat, crab boat, didn't matter if it was like a fifty-footer where you just went out and put five thousand on for the day or if you were a hundred-footer and you put on a hundred and twenty. Everybody and their mother and their brother got into it. It's going to catch up. It is. Everybody right now is bringing in anywhere from forty- to eighty-thousand pounds every week. Every boat. How do the crabs keep up with that? That's a lot. You're talking about a lot of tonnage. That's a lot of mating. You know what I mean? That's a lot of production. I definitely think we're catching enough.

SS: Do other people feel that way too?

[27:50]

AA: I don't know. That would be a good question to ask some guys. I don't really talk to many people. I just keep to myself. I kind of do my own thing. But they got to. They got to see it. They got to think about that kind of thing. This is what they do. A lot of guys didn't want to hear it, but I said it years ago, that they should have put either trip limits or done like a history where each boat gets a certain quota for the year, because there's too many guys doing it. You can only catch half a million pounds every week for so long before they get cleaned up. I've already seen that now. When we first started, there was nothing. You were barely catching if you were doing a thousand pounds a trawl. Now, if you're doing a thousand pounds a trawl, it's pretty good. You're making money. Back in the day, we used to have five-, six-thousand-pound trawls. Pots would be stuffed to the cover. Now it's like I think the best one I've had all year was like twenty-six hundred. I found the book on the boat from when I first ran the boat, and I'm going through it. Everything was like fifteen hundred, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand. I'm filling the boat in like three days—sixty thousand. Now I just did an eight day trip, because we moved all our gear, but it's still usually between five to seven days to do forty thousand.

SS: So you've seen it go down.

AA: Yeah, in certain areas. There are still areas where you do really, really good. It's just there's guys there. I try to do my own thing, stay away from everybody.

SS: Do you get involved at all in fish politics and science, going to meetings, that kind of stuff?

AA: Not much, no. I've been to a couple when I was younger, and I never really was attracted to it. It generated a lot of heat and a lot of hate. A lot of guys were at each other's throats. It's like, "If you guys came together or got your stuff together, and you went towards the government as hard as you guys go after each other, we might actually have a voice." Some of those guys, man, it's like "Woah, dude, you need to chill out." We're all here to discuss something, not start foaming out at the mouth because someone asked you the wrong question and you didn't like it. Chill out." That's like the biggest problem I see in meetings, for sure. There's always one or two guys. Sometimes it's five or six. I went down to URI, they were doing them down at the Bay Campus. I wasn't interested. Literally, it went nowhere. It was literally a bunch of fishermen screaming at each other for eighty percent of the time. It's like, "Where did we get? We all just sat here for three hours. Where did we get? We got nowhere.

We literally got nowhere.” It’s sad. There’s so much hate towards each other in this industry, because it is so competitive. Everybody has a couple friends. But everybody has enemies, too. If everybody stopped caring about the next guy and worried about themselves, and everybody came together and got more involved with scientists and stuff like that, and maybe if more of them took it upon themselves to maybe even do more themselves. You can put data together. Most captains sit in the wheelhouse on their ass. If you really want to be productive, you can go out there and see what’s going on and see what’s getting thrown over and how much youth is getting killed. It doesn’t take a scientist to know that stuff. If anything, a fisherman knows it better than anybody. It’s what we see. It’s what we live every single day. It’s not like once a month, we go out for a couple hours, tow a little skiff net and take samples. We chase these things year round. A lot of them do a lot of complaining: “Screw the government. Screw this. Da, da, da, da.” “But what are *you* doing? You blame the government, but what are *you* doing?” It’s funny, because half the guys that are like that, most of them have been thieves their entire life and have gotten busted. So it all kind of makes sense, too. “*You* screwed up. *You* lost your federal permits.” You know what I mean? I didn’t make you steal fish. You stole fish. We all have rules to follow. It’s just like on land. We have rules to follow on land. You can’t go around beating people up and stuff. You go to jail. Same thing with fishing. You break the rules. You should go to jail. You should get it taken. It makes it harder on everyone else, because then the government thinks, “They’re stealing. Everybody’s stealing.” Fortunately, it’s not the case. I’ve worked with a lot of guys, and a lot of guys do follow rules and regulations. But there’s always that handful that will try to get over it and try to make that extra money, like that whole big Carlos thing that happened here. He’s an ass. I don’t know too much about it, but he screwed up the whole quota. The whole quota got shut down. Is that what it is? What is it called?

SS: Sector.

AA: The whole sector got shut right down because he wanted to steal. It wasn’t just him in the sector. You affect everybody else around you when you do stupid stuff like that. There’s definitely more that we could even do as fishermen. If everybody tried to play a role, be productive, log information, do whatever—I mean do something! It’s not really so much with lobsters and crabs, because we’re not really regulated too, too much. We’ve got size limits and stuff like that, but we can catch whatever we want. It doesn’t matter. We just throw them in the tank and guess by basket or barrels or whatever you dump in the trip you tally. Doesn’t matter. For the draggers, it’s way more difficult than what I do. I know that from working with Steve. We did a bunch of stuff with the University of Cornell and a bunch of universities, so that was cool. He was always for—not *for* taking observers, but he wasn’t *against* it. Of course, when I was working for him was around the time when they started charging us to take them, so that was a hot subject. But then again, it’s like, you got to get information somehow. Nobody’s going to come out and do it for free. From what I understand, obviously the scallopers make more money, but the scallopers really all came together as a community and funded a lot of their own money and stuff to get more involved. In exactly what, I don’t know, but I remember the owner of the company was telling me that. You have to make sacrifices. If you want a future, you’re going to have to make sacrifices. You’re going to have to take people out, whether you like it or not. It’s just how it is. “Take them. What’s the big deal?” It’s funny, because so many people hate observers. They’re so mean to them and everything. They’re just a human who’s doing their job. “Take it easy.” But then, on the other note, not all observers do their fucking job, either. That’s the worst part. I’ve seen the guy I work for one time completely lose his mind. We saw a whale, and there’s something with marine mammals, even if you don’t catch it in the net, it’s a sighting and you’re supposed to report it. He was trying to say that he wasn’t going to do it because of the paperwork, but

when he pulled out the paperwork, it was like nothing. It was like a sheet of paper. One little page of paper. He made it seem like it was a big ordeal and he wasn't going to do it. The guy I was working for lost his crap on him. "So that's what you do? You just do what you feel like doing?" What's also a tough subject is that there's also observers who don't care. They're just there for a job and a paycheck. Then you get really good guys who are watching every fish come into the boat, putting everything in baskets, doing their part. They're done before you. They even help you sometimes. I've seen it. They're not even supposed to. They still help. That's a tough subject, because there's people who care and there's people who don't, and there's always going to be people who don't. It's a job. In every industry, there's people who hate their job.

[38:10]

SS: I'm sure it's the same in fishing as well, with people on the crew side of things.

AA: Yeah, of course.

SS: I'm sure you've seen that as a captain.

AA: Oh, big time.

SS: For fishing crew, what would you say distinguishes those who are good at it and are going to stick with it and value fishing and are going to make it work, versus those who are not really meant for fishing?

AA: You kind of just see it physically. You know what I mean [laughter]? Pretty quick. From seasick, obviously, I've seen that a million times. A young kid who wants to go fishing and ends up getting seasick and ends up in his rack for five days, sick as a dog. Then you have guys who you take them out for the first time, and obviously they're not as good as your normal fulltime crew or your full-share guys, but it's like, "You did it. You put your heart into it. You didn't complain. You didn't cry. You just put your head down and you did it." It's really those guys. It's those guys who just shut up and work, as terrible as that sounds. It's literally the truth. You never question a captain, whether you like it or not. I've seen plenty of stupid stuff that's been stupid in my eyes, but I just shut up and did it. Everybody has a boss. I still have a boss. I don't own the boat, so I have somebody to answer to, too. The big thing with fishing is being able to get along with people. I'm not real social. I don't like talking to audiences and stuff like that. It's not my cup of tea, for sure. But I get along good with people. There's yes and no. I do get edgy. I have no patience for stupidity and stupid stuff. My patience level is not as high as it probably should be. But that's where having good guys [is important]. I don't have to yell at my guys. If my guys screw up, they know it. I don't have to yell. That's the biggest thing is your crew. You're only as good as your crew, whether you're scalloping, you're dragging—well, dragging, you still got to put fish down—but as far as crabbing, lobstering, scalloping. Your guys are the ones shucking scallops. Your guys are the ones stacking traps. Your guys are the ones culling through the crabs. You can't do it all by yourself. It's a huge, huge team effort. That's where me and my guys get along good. I'll be like, "You guys want to do this or you want to do that? You guys tell me. What do you want to do?" You work with your crew. You be a boss, but you don't be a jerk at the same time. You work with your guys. You get a lot further than being a screamer. My mate's been fishing with me since the day he went fishing.

[41:36]

SS: The crew you have now, you said it's three guys plus you?

AA: Me and three guys.

SS: And they're all young, about your age. Do you think they're planning on sticking with this career? Would they like to?

AA: Tyler, he fished in Alaska, longlining codfish on a big, huge processor—two hundred foot vessel. He was out there for a while and then he ended up going to Argentina. He spent a bunch of time in Argentina and saved his money. When he came back, he went back to cutting down trees. I actually met him last spring. He was on the docks looking to go back fishing, because that's what he wanted to do. That was pretty cool. He'd never been crabbing. That was new to him. He took right to it. He's definitely a reliable, good kid. They like to have fun. Don't get me wrong. There's some rough mornings when they come to the boat from the night before. But they're young. None of them have kids. They're just living the life.

SS: It sounds like that adds a lot to everybody's job satisfaction on your boat—the fact that everybody's in the same peer group and can be buddies as well as co-workers.

AA: Yeah, we all go have a drink together when we come in. It's like our religious thing. We come in, go to Knucklehead's and get a drink, get food, have a nice meal. It's cool. We hang out. Yesterday, me and my girlfriend hung out with Tyler and his girlfriend for a while. It's cool. It's definitely nice, because you spend more time with them guys than you do with your own family. At least, I do, this time of year. It's big. It's nice. It hasn't always been like that. I've definitely gotten rid of my fair share of people, even friends. If you're not going to put a hundred percent into this and you don't want to be here, somebody will want to be here and somebody will love it. It's tough, too, working with your friends, because you do have to be their boss. But they all know. We do well. It's not like any of them question anything I ever do. My mate knows what he's doing. He's been crabbing a year less than I have. He knows just as much as I do. He's going to actually start taking the boat this summer, probably when I go scalloping. He'll take the boat so that the boat can keep going. That will be good for him—another young guy at the wheel. He'll be twenty-two or twenty-three by then. Good time for it. That's when I started. He pays attention. It's weird just having young crew. All the other crews come in, guys like forty, fifty, sixty. Two guys put together, their age combined is more than our entire crew. It's like, geez. It's funny.

SS: Well, it seems pretty unusual to have a boat with four people under twenty-six.

AA: I'd almost be interested to even know if there's a boat with a lower average than my boat, as far as age.

SS: I would bet there's not.

[45:46]

AA: Probably not. Definitely not. All it takes is a fifty-year-old guy on deck.

SS: Right, to bring the average way up.

AA: It's funny.

SS: You've been in two ports: Point Judith and New Bedford. With regard to young people within those two ports, do you see differences?

AA: As far as numbers-wise?

SS: Yeah.

AA: It's weird. Every since I left Point Judith, I feel like there's a lot more young kids getting involved. Fred did that whole internship thing and that whole program. That got a few kids going. Just a few other random kids showed up. They start out day fishing and stuff. I definitely feel like Point Judith is building faster with the young guys than possibly up here. But I also know more people. That's home to me. No matter what, Point Judith will always be home. For me, I know everybody there. I see the young guys coming in. That's also different, because I don't know many guys up here. I don't see crews. We're very isolated. We have our own barge [where we tie the boat up], which is nice, because there's a lot of shenanigans around here. It's nice to be out of the way and not have people coming to your boat and stealing stuff.

SS: Is there any kind of program like Fred's program in Rhode Island, around here?

[47:22]

AA: Not that I'm aware of.

SS: Do you think that would be a good thing?

AA: Oh, yeah. From what I understand, it was pretty successful. How successful? I mean, did you create captains? No, because you'll never know until you get to that point. I mean, yeah, it's definitely—even if you get one person out of it, it's worth it. It's sad to say, but we need as many people as we can get. We really do. I try to bring young guys in all the time. If I need a guy for a transit trip, I'll take a half-share guy just to get his feet wet and get him out there. If they do good, I'll get him on a boat with one of my friends. But not very many people make it. I've seen a lot of young kids fall to pieces, completely to pieces. It's not for everybody. If anything, a select few.

SS: Select few? I know it's kind of hard to describe it in words, but how would you describe the select few people out there who are really made for this career?

AA: I mean, you definitely got to have a little wild side to you. That's definitely the bottom line. I almost feel like every good fisherman, you got to be a little spontaneous, spunky. Because it's not your everyday job. It's not something where you're just sitting at a desk. Even if you're in there in the machine room doing machinery, it's not the same. It's very physical. It's physically abusive, and by the end of the trip, it gets mentally abusive. Everybody's ready to go home. You got to have it in you. It's awful to say, but you got to definitely have a wild side. You got to be a little crazy, almost, to do it. The first time I went offshore and saw my first twelve-foot seas, it was like "This is crazy! Why am I even out here right now? Is this ok?" Now, it's just like, "Ah, it's blowing thirty, forty, fifteen-foot seas. Haul slow. We'll do a couple for the day and get some rest and start again in the morning." Even just starting inshore, coming home from Narragansett Bay, coming around the lighthouse, like, "Oh, this is crappy out in a thirty-two foot boat." Now my whole aspect of weather [has changed], because I fish on a big boat. It's funny. It's different. I can't quite explain it. It's just two different levels. Your inshore fishery and your offshore fishery are

very different. I really, really, really recommend to young kids that are trying to get into this industry to start off day fishing. I really feel like that helped me out a lot when I went offshore, because there is a difference in the physical abuse and work between day fishing and offshore fishing. You're not going home every night. It is a big thing. A lot of day boats, they just go in the summer, so the weather's a lot nicer. You get used to hauling gear before you have ten-foot seas underneath you. You don't recommend to a guy that's never been on a boat before, "Yeah, go on the Captain Bligh in the middle of February, blowing thirty." It's not the place where you start, for sure. I definitely have influenced a lot of kids. A couple young kids that still day fish. You can do good there too, it's just not as good. It's so seasonal. When you have kids and bills and car payments, stability is the hardest thing. It's the hardest thing in this whole industry. Having my options open—being so young and being a captain—also helps. I've learned responsibility maybe a little bit younger than most people. I started when I was sixteen. "You want to be a man? Guess what, you got a month." "Alright." Fishing, if you start young and you keep your stuff together and take care of everything you need to take care of, there's definitely a huge future. There's not many land jobs, unless you go to college for eight years, where you can go out, and just on a decent trip, make a couple grand. That's not an everyday thing. That was my whole thing that got me into fishing. I had two other jobs other than fishing. My first job ever, I worked on a horse farm, and I loved it. Remember I said I wanted to be a vet? I loved it. It was one of my favorite jobs. Then I went and I worked in a kitchen at Fat Belly's restaurant. I worked there for two weeks. You get your check and you're like, "Oh, man." It's like one fun night. That was like a whole other thing. Once I made the money I make fishing, going and trying to do something else is [hard]. Fishing is a lifestyle. You pace yourself off your income. You live off your percentages of your income, so if you get into car payments and stuff like that, you need to make those car payments. It's crazy for a young guy like me, just to get anything. Even to buy a boat, there's interest on everything these days. I got a thirty thousand dollar car that I'm ultimately paying like fifty thousand for. It's crazy. Over five years, it just builds that much interest. It's hard. Once you get yourself into the routine of living as a fisherman, what else are you going to go do? There's literally nothing. You can go back to school, but how are you going to live? You have two kids at home. How are you going to pay your bills while you're at school? Who's going to pay your bills? It's like even if you wanted another option, how? How would you do it? Some people do do it. Some people do fish and go to school. The guy that owned the Bligh who I worked for for like four years, he sold the boat, he went to school. He obviously had money from when he sold the boat. He went to school and now he has his own welding company. He does work all the way from Boston to Point Judith. But it's hard, even if you did want to take that extra step. If I wanted to go back to school, how am I going to go back to school?

SS: You said earlier that in terms of your future—you have a long youth ahead of you still, but at the point when you start to want to slow down a little, you might get a fifty-foot boat. Can you remind me what kind of boat you were thinking about?

AA: Just a dragger.

SS: A dragger. And you see all of that as doable, given the costs and this and that?

AA: I mean, yeah, if you spend your money right and you know the right people. I'm fortunate enough to be involved in the company that I'm involved in. The owner of the company has literally become like a second father figure to me. He just built his new house. I helped him move into his new house. We're going to do dinner one of these nights. The fact of me earning his respect and his trust is huge. That's where I really succeeded in my career is

I've never burned a bridge. Every boat that I've been on, I've put a hundred percent into. If I ever left, I always left on notice. I always left on good terms. I literally talk to Joe Baker still. That's the first job I ever had. He still checks in on me. It's cool. It's cool because I was lucky enough to have a lot of guys that I ran across in my career who wanted to see me do good and knew that I was able to do what I'm doing today. It feels good. It feels good to be the select few. Do you even know the percentage of kids under thirty-five who are fishing?

SS: I have no idea. I don't think that number exists.

AA: It can't be much.

SS: There is no data on captains and crew. Permit holders, they know, and I doubt there are very many under thirty.

AA: I doubt there's very many under forty. You could probably up that. That's the craziest part, the permits. But like I said, I'm lucky that I've met good people who have my back. Right now, if I really wanted to, I could probably get a loan to the company to just start my own gig. But you got to be in the position. It's almost like when is the correct time to do it is the question. Do you do it now, start now? Or do you save your money so you can invest in something successful and something decent, not a beat-up boat? That's another problem. You save all your money to go buy a boat and a permit, and all the boats these days—because it costs so much money to buy a new boat, because the Coast Guard regulations—all the boats are old. Not everybody can just build a new boat these days. It's actually few and far between. What's the newest boat in Point Judith? The newest boat I can remember is the Dragon Lady, and it's not even there anymore. There isn't. There isn't a new boat. The Dragon Lady is probably the last boat that was built and brought to Rhode Island, new. It's crazy. It's like you're investing in something that you got to be able to keep investing in, on top of investing what you're already investing. It's hard. It's tough. Do I want to? I may not. Who knows, maybe one day I will go back to school. Who knows? Right now, I'm good with what I'm doing. I'm getting the Rhode Island state waters license, so if I wanted to even get a skiff, just skiff fish, wait for the kids to get a little older and maybe bring the kids out in the skiff, haul a couple fish pots or something, some sea bass. But a big, big jump in really investing in a fulltime, \$750,000, million-dollar company, I don't know.

SS: Is that what you estimate it would take to get this fifty-foot dragger that you're thinking about?

[60:34]

AA: With permits, maybe you could find something okay for five or six hundred. If you wanted to do it the right way—nice boat, it would definitely be like seven hundred thousand. That's what I would estimate, once you get the loan. That seven hundred thousand probably turns into one point one. It's crazy. It's a lot of money.

SS: It is a lot of money. But because of your relationships, because of your reputation, it sounds like you feel like you could get some backing from people to make that happen?

AA: Yeah, it's just like not possible. I make good money doing what I do now, running somebody else's boat. When something breaks, I call him. He doesn't call me. I call him, like, "This is broken. You need to fix it."

SS: So it's not necessarily a step up to own your own boat. You might be in some ways better off running someone else's boat.

AA: No, not necessarily. It's kind of a thing my dad taught me, "A boat is like a hole in the ocean that you put money into." I mean, it is. Every boat. Even if it's gone through, stuff always breaks, because it's like heavy machinery. Technically, it is. It's under a lot of pressure. You're putting everything to a lot of use. Stuff just breaks. It's literally the world we live in. Half of fishing is being able to fix stuff. It really is. Even just simple stuff. You lose trips. You have to get towed all over. There's a lot more to it than just fishing, too, unfortunately. I actually enjoy that part, doing boat work. I'm going to learn to weld this year. It's fun. I love it. I'm not going to do anything else, unless I get some crazy thought in my head that maybe one day I'll go back to school. I just don't see it. I don't see myself going back and sitting at a desk [laughter].

SS: It sounds like you've found your fit in fishing.

AA: Yeah. It's really all I've ever known. I've only had a couple other jobs. My buddies own a construction company, so I've poured foundations. I've done construction work, just if they need help carrying something or whatever. I'll just go give those boys a hand. I did snow detail there for a while, because when you're an inshore fisherman, a day fisherman, it's a good chunk of change if a snowstorm comes through and you're home. You can get some accounts. Ended up doing CCRI. They had a contract. You had to stay there twenty-four-seven and keep the sidewalks completely clear, because the school's open. I just was like, I hated it all. I was always so miserable. The ocean is where I'll be, for sure, for a while. I'm not leaving where I am right now, for a long, long time. When the time's right, that's when I'll invest, if it still makes sense [laughter]. That's another thing. I've seen so many bad things happen and not very many good things. It's like you see so much stuff go downhill in ten years. Wait another ten years. You can only take so much. That's why them big boats, unless something drastically changes, the small boats is where it's at. I think a lot of guys would say that. If you ask a lot of guys, a lot of guys will say that. It only makes sense. The limits—you don't need an eighty-foot boat to go put on eight or ten thousand pounds of fish if you're lucky. You got this big old boat and you're putting nothing into it, burning all that fuel, extra guys. It makes sense.

SS: You think in the future, it will be more smaller boats?

[75:25]

AA: Yeah, unless something changes. But, I don't know. What do you change? They'd have to give a bunch of quota back and all that, and what was the last thing they ever gave back? I literally cannot think of one thing that they've given back. Sea bass has been nothing but been cut since I've gotten involved in fishing. The fluke limits, nothing but cut. Even right now, the federal Rhode Island fluke thing that them guys are doing, it's fifteen hundred pounds every two weeks. When I first started dragging and went and did it—it was only three or four years ago—it was two thousand pounds every week. That's a huge difference. That's a difference of two weeks with four thousand pounds to fifteen hundred. That's more than fifty percent. That's a huge cut. Snailing in the bay—what scares me about crabbing is when we were snailing in the bay, we were doing two thousand pounds a day. Now, the guys do like three, four hundred pounds. That's a good day. They're going good. Everybody and their brother, once the snail price went up—something to do with the Caribbean conch, I think they're considered endangered. They weren't producing snail anywhere else. That's why conch

became so big that quick. Its price went up. Narragansett Bay was like “boom.” Everybody who had a Rhode Island license could do it. If you can go out and you can do two thousand pounds, fifteen hundred pounds on a little twenty-foot boat at eighty-five cents every single day, you’re making really good money. Why wouldn’t you do it? You’d be stupid not to. That’s the scary thing about crabbing. It’s literally the same situation. Same situation. When I fished for Joe the first year, we weren’t getting nothing for the snails, and when the whole thing happened, it went up to a dollar-fifteen. I can’t quite remember. It was big money for a little boat. Home by noontime. It was crazy. Now it’s just not the same. It’s obviously a bigger fleet and bigger piece of ocean where we are, but percentage wise, the percentage that we’re taking and the bottom we’re fishing, I mean there’s not very much of the fifty-fathom edge right now where you can go and set a crab pot, because it is literally, for I would probably say sixty or seventy miles of edge, there’s just gear down the whole edge. Everybody’s half a mile apart from each other, but you run east and west across each other. You set back and set back and set back and set back and you clean them up, and then you move to the next area. It’s like, how many years can everybody just keep doing that? The amount of crab coming in every year, I don’t have a specific number on it, but it’s got to be crazy, opposed to if you looked like six or seven years ago. But it’s one of them things, where we don’t take observers. We don’t ever take scientists. There’s nothing like that for crab fishermen. I won this raffle thing through the lobsterman’s association, because I caught a tagged crab. I told them, “If you guys ever want to do anything, just let me know.” You don’t hear nothing back. But I’d be willing to do it. I’d be willing to take people out so they can see what’s going on. I don’t want to be the guy who’s like, “We should start taking observers,” and everybody’s like, “Fuck that.” But, not saying I’d take observers, but maybe scientists. Do some stuff with universities, more of that even. A lot of that is proven to be successful. That little project I did with Steve and the University of Cornell was deemed successful.

SS: Was that the squid trawl network?

AA: No, it was for the windowpane. We had large mesh panels in the belly so you would catch the scup but flush out the windowpane. We did it with another boat side by side, and we’d just switch off. They’d put the small mesh over the belly and tow with the small mesh, and then we’d have the large mesh belly. Then we’d switch. We’d put the cover over ours. They’d put the cover on theirs. They deemed that to be successful. I mean, it was. It definitely let the flounder and stuff through. You may have lost a little scup with it too, but it’s a sacrifice you take if you care about your future, if you plan on doing this forever, doing it for the next twenty years, thirty years. You got to think about the future of not just today and tomorrow. That’s the toughest part is a lot of guys don’t care, only because a lot of guys are sixty years old. It’s like, “I only got another ten years, you know what I mean?” A lot of them don’t give a shit about nothing.

SS: The older guys that don’t have the future to worry about?

AA: Because they don’t. They’re going to be dead. It’s terrible to say, but they’re going to be dead. You only live so long. It’s terrible. I don’t know. You just need to figure out a way for people to come together—all of us in the entire industry. Draggers talking to people with fixed gear. People working together. Come together because we all have the same problem, it’s just different fisheries. If you really look outside the box, it’s all the same issues. Just you go for something else that I don’t go for. At the end of the day, when you’re a fisherman, you’re not really just a scalloper. You’re not a dragger. You’re not a lobsterman. I don’t know if you ever find anybody who’d say, “I’ve only ever been dragging.” Almost everybody I know has been gillnetting, dragging, longlining, lobstering. Everybody’s trying a little bit of

everything, because you're trying to see where the shoe fits. Every fishery is different. I hate scalloping. I like the money. When stuff's slow and everything's tough crabbing, the option's there, so I go and do it. I mean, who wants to stand on a box for twelve hours, and then go to bed for three, and then wake up and do it all again for twelve hours, go to bed for three. You're standing in a box, cutting, cutting, cutting. I hate it. I hate it. You're going to go out and you're going to make over ten thousand dollars, maybe twenty thousand dollars. Can't say no!

SS: Worth it to suffer.

AA: But that's where the difference is with me. I couldn't scallop full-time. I couldn't. It's just not the same. You don't enjoy yourself. It's literally because of the regulations that you're only out there and can only have so many days at sea. Or you got a certain amount that you got to catch, so you want to cut out as quick as possible so you burn less fuel. It's more money for everybody. For me, when I'm lobstering, you're outside, you're always doing something different. Scalloping is probably the most mentally abusive fishery in the world. You just stand there.

SS: The boredom? The monotony?

AA: Yeah. You're just in a box. A little box for five, ten days. A lot of the guys are tough. You leave the box to go to the bathroom and they rip your head off. It's really like that. It's bad on scallop boats, because there's so much money on the line. Some of those boats stock a quarter of a million dollars, half a million dollars in ten days. A lot of money. You can't play around. It's not my thing. I just do my four or five trips. Right in the springtime too, so it's beautiful out—not too cold, not too hot, chilly mornings. Is there anything else?

SS: No, unless there's anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add. Any final thoughts?

AA: Not really. We pretty much talked about everything. What's the last one on this list?

SS: Let me see. Psychological aspects.

AA: We didn't really talk about that.

SS: We talked about it a little—how you feel.

AA: You got to be crazy.

SS: [laughter]

AA: Do you have a pen on you? I'll sign this [release form].

SS: Sure. Why don't you go ahead and sign that, and I'll turn this off.

AA: I mean, you can do whatever you want.

SS: Ok, well sign it anyway just so we've got a paper trail.

AA: I know you said you'd send an email and all that.

SS: I'll do that just to make sure.

[end of interview]

[76:25]