

**Interview with Carl Berg, commercial fisherman**

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman

**Port Community:** Sakonnet Point, Rhode Island and New Bedford, Massachusetts

**Interviewer:** Sarah Schumann

**Date and year:** February 15, 2019

**Location:** Tiverton, Rhode Island

**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 15, 2019. I'm in Tiverton, Rhode Island. I'm with Carl Berg. Carl, could you please state your occupation?

Carl Berg [CB]: Fisherman.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

CB: Fulltime.

SS: Fulltime commercial fisherman. What is your homeport?

CB: I was say Sakonnet, but also New Bedford, occasionally, and here, once in a while—Tiverton. I'd say Rhode Island and New Bedford, really.

SS: What vessel or vessels are you associated with, currently?

CB: Right now, I'm on a gillnetter called the Second Nature, which is owned by a pretty well known family around here, fishing-wise. I was on a crab boat out of New Bedford called the Genesis and a couple others. Do you want all of them since the beginning of time, or just right now?

SS: How about for now, just right now.

CB: Probably just those two.

SS: You also have an oyster farm, you said before?

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: Is that your own farm?

CB: Yeah, I just have a lease about two miles from here, right in the river.

SS: The Sakonnet River?

CB: Yup. That's more of a part-time startup. I don't know if I'd really consider that commercial fishing.

SS: Ok, let's get back to that in a second. Let me just establish your age.

CB: Twenty-six.

SS: Twenty-six.

CB: Twenty-six and a half, I guess.

SS: Ok. My final basic biographical question is your educational background.

CB: I have a degree from URI [University of Rhode Island].

SS: Ok. In what?

CB: Political science and sociology, a pre-law criminology degree.

SS: Ok. That's an undergrad degree?

CB: Yeah, undergrad. I graduated 2015.

[02:16]

SS: Alright, that was it for the basic biographical questions that I wanted to ask you. Where would you like to begin to tell your story as a commercial fisherman? You can start at the beginning and work forward, or start now and work backward, or whatever works.

CB: I'm just telling my whole entire biography?

SS: Sure, if you're comfortable. Otherwise, I can guide you with specifics, but I'd love to hear it from your point of view.

CB: Yeah. I guess I'll bullet-point it. My first year, I was in high school or I might have been a freshman in college. I used to do tree work and logging. It was alright. It wasn't amazing. Around here, it's kind of a small town, so I had heard that some of the guys down at the point needed a hand fishing. One of my really good friends, his father has a charter boat. I'd been on that out to Block Island—all the sporty stuff. I heard that the guy that I run a boat for now needed a deckhand. I said, "Fuck it. I'll give it a shot." I ended up liking it, so I did that for at least three years. I was a deckhand for an inshore lobster boat, but we went pretty far. I wouldn't even call it inshore. It was Area 2, which is federally permitted. It's not offshore lobstering. It's Rhode Island Sound, southwest of the Vineyard, those kind of areas. That was a pretty hard job. The guy I work for, he goes pretty hard. After that, him and his brother decided to buy a gillnetter, and I worked on that for a while. His brother's a ship engineer. He was gone a lot. He ships out for two or three months at a whack. He was thinking about getting somebody to run that. At that point, I was like, "I like fishing enough," because at some point, you either like it enough to where you kind of get your own operation or start running boats, because guys that are on deck their whole life, you get a little beat up. So he bought that boat with his brother, and then actually a year later, or I don't know exactly how

long, but they bought a slightly bigger boat, because they had bought it off another guy in the harbor. It was only a thirty-footer, a thirty-foot BHM, because they wanted to fish in the winter offshore and you can't really gillnet offshore in a thirty-footer. At that point, I was like, "I'd be interested in running that boat." I ended up taking that boat. It must have been three years ago now. I pretty much run that from early November to mid-June, the best time of year to go gillnetting.

SS: Is that for monkfish?

CB: Monkfish. Skates. When I first started taking it, we were trying dogfish and all that crap. At least around here, it's not worth it. You can do it. I don't know what dogfish is nowadays, but it was like six thousand pounds and I don't think anybody even wants them for more than twenty cents.

SS: The dollars and cents don't add up?

CB: I guess it's worth it. In Chatham, they do it. They do really well, but they're fishing two or three panels, and they're in. Around here, you don't want to fish a lot of nets to catch your limit. They also have the marketing up there. But anyway, I was doing that and still making deckhand trips. Then I started fishing out of New Bedford, here and there. A friend of mine runs a really nice, big crab boat for the Fleet fishery—one of the new crab boats. I was making trips with him. Then I'd actually trained one of my good friends, the guy that I was taking deckhanding for monkfishing, I trained him to take the boat that I was running, because I wanted to go offshore crabbing. Then, this summer into this fall, I was doing that and I was taking out this steel boat, the Genesis. It was alright—a different fishery, and you're also out for five days, six days, something like that. It's a little different. I don't mind it, but my girlfriend was getting a little angsty about it. A month ago maybe, the guy that I had given this other boat to take, he had some family issues come up. He asked me to take the boat back. I like monkfishing, probably more than crabbing. Financially, it probably makes more sense to go crabbing, but I enjoy the gillnet fishery more. Crabbing is a really good fishery. It's lucrative. There's plenty of them around. Some people love it. It can get a little—I don't want to say boring, but you pretty much pull up the same thing over and over again, and hope it has crabs in it.

[08:27]

SS: What do you like about the monkfishing?

CB: It's more interesting. You get a multitude of species—monk, skate, fluke. This time of year, you start getting tilefish. You get generator fish. Pretty cool stuff. I've gotten mackerel in monk gillnets before. I don't know how they get stuck in them. I guess when they're running that hard, you'll get them. It's also what I started with. I did that and lobstering. I did offshore lobstering and inshore lobstering. Crabbing, at least on deck, is more of a grind. You're pretty much just hauling gear and hauling gear and hauling gear until you fill the boat, and then you're going in. This year, the price dropped a little bit. It's still worth it because of the amount that you can catch. But you're talking six or eight-hour offloads, picking crab. It's definitely a hard fishery. It's a good fishery. Now I'm back on the monkfish boat.

SS: That's the Second Nature?

CB: Yeah. It's down in Sakonnet Point. The owners of it, I've pretty much fished with for quite a long time now.

SS: The [name redacted] family?

CB: Yeah, them and Fleet and this guy. The new owners of the boat that I was running—he sold to these new owners—that’s pretty much the people I’ve done the majority of my fishing with. I’ll probably go back to New Bedford this spring. There might be another opportunity to take another offshore crab boat. Somebody asked me this winter to take another boat this spring, so I might hand the gillnet boat back to this guy if he resolves his family stuff. I’ll give him back this boat and I’ll go run another boat. That’s where I’m at.

[10:47]

SS: It sounds like the family that you come from doesn’t have any connection to fishing?

CB: No. Nobody in my family fishes.

SS: What do your parents do, or your siblings if you have them?

CB: My dad works around here a lot. He’s a land broker for open space—for farmers and Nature Conservancy. He’s essentially a real estate broker, but for open space, for easements. He’s pretty well known around town. My mother had a bunch of off-and-on jobs. I think right now she’s working with a church. I wouldn’t call it a job. It’s more of an activity. A slightly paid activity, I guess you could call it. I went out fishing rod and reeling, and I used to life-guard and surf a bunch, so I’ve been around the water. But no, nobody in my family [fishes].

SS: What was it about fishing that appealed to you and sucked you in?

CB: I don’t really know. At first, it was probably the money. When I started deckhanding on that lobster boat, he was probably one of the better fishermen for lobsters in this area. I knew what other guys were catching, and we were a highline boat. When you’re nineteen years old and you’re a freshman in college and everybody else is making ten dollars an hour at some work-study, and you’re coming in with seven and eight-hundred dollar checks, and doing that two or three times a week—when it’s good; it’s not always good—I guess comparatively, when the money you’re making seems to be pretty good. And then, I don’t know. I just like fishing. It’s kind of hard to explain. You can kind of tell if guys like it or not, especially if you take a guy. Some guys, after two or three trips, it’s like, “This guy hates this.”

SS: How can you tell? What makes it a bad fit for some people and a good fit for others?

[13:27]

CB: You have to be comfortable on a boat is the first [thing]. Seasickness obviously. I took a guy on that crab boat. My first trip, I took two experienced guys and one guy who said he had lobstered in Maine. I think by that he meant that he had gone on an inshore boat for an afternoon of hauling singles, because he was—I felt bad. He was violently ill the whole trip, couldn’t get out of his bunk, trash bag right by his face. One of the guys I’m taking now is actually related to my good buddy who was taking the boat before. I don’t think he had ever fished. He’s from Colorado or something. He’s fine on a boat. I’ve never seen him get seasick.

SS: Other than the physical ability to not be seasick, what else is there that separates somebody who’s cut out for this life from somebody who’s not?

CB: I don't really know. I think that on a boat, you could say that you have more freedom, I guess. People who like structure and nine-to-five jobs, I've never met a fisherman that's like that. You still have to listen to what's going on and do your job and stuff, obviously, but it's a little different than a regular job. That can attract, you know, different characters [laughter]. But yeah, it's one of those things. It doesn't really matter. You don't really need any qualifications. You got to be able to work hard. That's it. If you can do the same thing over again, and listen and work hard, anybody can pretty much make money fishing. I've been on deck and taken guys of all different types of background. Some guys are there just for the check. But you've got to like it a little bit if you keep doing it. This time of year, it's not fun. In the summertime, you see those videos of guys in Maine with the half a million dollar boats in the summertime, pulling singles. But this time of year, you got to go pretty far out. If you're fishing in federal waters for anything, you're deeper this time of year. It's when the water is colder. Everything is deeper. You're going further out in shittier weather. If you do it this time of year, it's either fulltime or you really like doing it. I know guys that take the winters off. Some of them can, because they're in a lucrative fishery or they've been doing it a long time and they're older and they don't need to fish all the time. This time of year is some of the best fishing for crab and monkfish, so go figure. It makes sense to go.

SS: How did that align with your studying at URI? Were you fishing in between?

[17:12]

CB: I went there for aquaculture and fisheries, but I don't want to badmouth URI. I really liked URI, but that program at least, when I was there, didn't seem very well put together or funded, compared to what I had heard. Back in the seventies, there was a two-year program where they gave you essentially your own resources, and even bank loans. A lot of the Point Judith guys that are around fifty years old or older, or forty-five to sixty, a lot of those boats, they went and got that associate's degree at URI for two years. I haven't seen any kind of program like that in the country nowadays.

SS: Is that what you were hoping for?

CB: No, I knew that wasn't going to be it. At that point, I was fishing a little bit, and I was like, "I'm interested. I'm not smart enough to be a marine biologist, because the biology and the chemistry just goes way over my head. I could probably do it, but it wasn't something I wanted to put my time into." I was in that for only like a year. It didn't help that I was just kind of slacking off a bit. After a year, I was like, "My grades are not great," so I transferred into a different major. At that point, I was like, "Well, I got to graduate. I'm not going to go to college for one year and spend fifteen thousand dollars and then fail out at something." I don't know what the program is like today, but it was kind of gutted, is the word I'd use. The teachers who were there were really good, like this guy, Dr. Rice. They were really knowledgeable. I think Rice actually sits on the marine fisheries board. He's at a lot of the meetings. But you never know. The educational types at least, are kind of more on the side of regulation anyway, so the program there is more focused towards aquaculture, I would say, or at least, with fisheries—a lot the observers I've taken have come out of that exact program. They're fisheries majors at URI, either post-graduate or in school currently. It's not an amazing career. It's a good little in-between if you want to work for NOAA or a government agency like that one day.

SS: At that time, when you were studying in college, did you know that, or hope then, that you would make a career out of fishing fulltime?

[20:29]

CB: It was probably half and half. That's why I was going to college—just in case. It something happened or if I break my leg, you got to get a desk job. But even after college, I never really applied for positions that I'd gone to school for. It was definitely useful to get the degree, but I don't know if it was entirely necessary or worth it for the money I spent/am still spending. If I'd just fished fulltime for those four years—it was really five years. It was a good time, though. A lot of guys who don't go to college and get out a little bit—it's good to meet new people and do new things, at least for a change. I don't know, at this point, I'm kind of in it for the long haul, I guess.

SS: In fishing?

CB: Yeah. With the farm and other stuff. There's some drastic changes in federal fisheries quotas or regulations, which is why I kind of got the farm. For a guy that's sixty-five years old, they don't really care. If you did it right, you should be able to retire at fifty-five or sixty, especially if you fished fifteen or twenty years ago, when fishing was pretty good. But if in five or ten years, they decide to shut it down, I can't really retire at thirty-five. That's kind of what this farm is for. That kind of aligns with, I guess politically, it's a very safe thing. People like the idea of growing shellfish and cleaning the bay. It's kind of like anybody can get behind that. With commercial fishing, liberal or environmentally leaning people kind of judge it, I guess you could say, without really knowing what's going on, but it tends to happen.

SS: How would you say that affects you, that judgmental attitude?

[23:23]

CB: I don't really care at all, as long as it's not affecting the regulatory process. If that lobbying's strong enough to affect NOAA, it's like the windmills and all that, which is kind of a problem, because if there's enough things that can actually start to affect what we can catch and how much we can catch. But people just saying stuff, I don't think it bothers any fisherman, really. I really don't give a shit.

SS: Can you say a little more about the windmills?

CB: Like what?

SS: I don't know. You just mentioned them.

CB: Well, that's kind of like a green trend. There's a lot of people who push for those who really have no idea. It's like a political poster. "Let's go green." If you're that kind of person and you see that, you're going to support it, I guess. I'm assuming those were lobbied really heavily. It also doesn't help that Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Connecticut are very liberal states to begin with, so they all want renewable energy. I don't know. It's just a little ridiculous. I think it's going to bite them in the ass. That's kind of the new craze. I've read up on all this stuff. There's so much about how much power they won't put out. You could talk to any guy who fishes about windmills, and you could literally be here until tomorrow morning bitching about it. It's one of those things where we're going to have to see what happens. I don't really have the position or the authority to really intervene too much in that. I'm just hoping that they don't go overboard. I can't see those things turning forever. The North Atlantic's pretty fucking rough. If you put something in there, don't think it's going to

last forever. The one off Block Island, I don't know if they've had any failures yet with that one. Whether it's true or not, they were saying they want to lay one out like every mile for like fifty miles or something. I mean, that's a nightmare. They did that in Europe, and when they did that over here, a lot of guys from Europe were saying, "You guys shouldn't do that, because now we have to deal with it." Like in the North Sea, they have a lot of them. They have a ton of them up there. I'm assuming it's only going to lead to them, in the future, leasing out portions for other things. It would be stupid to think that the natural gas and oil industries in the future wouldn't be interested in putting platforms there. It's one of those things where it's kind of a slippery slope. I think that a lot of people who support the windmills don't realize that, or they don't care because they're so focused on pushing an agenda. And it works with both sides. Everybody's trying to push an agenda nowadays. You put the blinders on and whatever political party you fall under, you have to push their agenda. That's why it doesn't help when you have super liberal states up here, but then again if they were super conservative, there might be natural gas platforms out there. It's one of those things where if something's for sale and somebody's going to make subsidy money off of it, it's probably going to go through. Frankly, the money that the federal government can get and that state governments can get and subsidize through those companies is, I would say, more than the revenue that the fishing industry brings in. I mean, you have New Bedford, which is huge. It's giant. That's got to be over a billion dollars a year. I would think those windmills, somebody's making a lot of money. If I was running the research boats for the windmills, or I was the head of the windmill board, maybe I'd think the opposite. It's just kind of, you already see the research boats out there doing sonar surveys and towing across the bottom. Most of them are conscientious to fishermen. Sometimes you got to call them on the radio and be like, "Hey, you're towing this half a million dollar, big sonar device across the bottom. You may be hooking into someone else's gear. Some of them are foreign-flagged ships with foreign captains, so there's a language barrier. Where I'm fishing right now, I'm past all that. We're deeper than that. A lot of the areas they're selecting for the wind farms affect spring run fisheries. They affect some lobster grounds. They affect squid grounds a lot. A lot of squid boats are going to be pretty much fucked. A couple groundfish boats. I don't know how far west they want to put them. I just looked at Vineyard Wind, it was kind of Cox's Ledge and south, southeast of that. Those are really, really good fishing grounds. It's one of those things where if fixed-gear fisherman—gillnetters and lobstermen—can set around that, then it's not a big deal. Then you have guys that are towing squid nets and stuff, the big ones—they run pretty wide nets. If there are stacks of windmills close together, you'd get hung up on that. You'd get hung up on a windmill. Plus, I don't know if they're going to put in zones. I've heard of people tying up to the Block Island mills to go fishing—like, you know, rod and reel—but I don't know if that's legal. They're going to be owned by private companies, so they could really dictate how close you could get to them, technically. I know people that have been to the talks, to the meetings. I haven't been to any of the meetings, so I'm definitely not the person who has all the facts.

SS: It's a lot to keep up on.

[31:06]

CB: Charter fishermen, that's a different thing. They're like, "We want structure. We want windmills." I don't consider that commercial fishing. That's different. I would say every commercial fisherman is probably very against them. Unless they're getting paid by the windmill people to say something else, or unless they got a job lined up on a windmill research boat or a windmill survey or supply boat, I would say they're all against them.

SS: I think where we started with that was you were talking about the oyster farm and how that was something of a fallback and an extra insurance?

CB: Yeah, I guess sort of a fallback. Initially, it wasn't extremely expensive. I haven't really made any money off it yet.

SS: How big is it?

CB: It's only three acres.

SS: That's on the smaller side?

CB: Yeah. I would say average in Rhode Island is about three acres, because my understanding is that at some point, if you want to expand, you have to prove you're using the entirety of your lease. The guys who have big leases have been doing it a while. They have a lot of product in the water. I just started two and a half years ago. I literally had stuff to sell last year. With fishing, I'm not out there all that often, but that's the good thing with oysters. I mean, they're oysters. Some are going to die, but they're going to grow pretty much whether you mess with them. Comparatively, at the time, it was cheaper than trying to get my own boat and permit—which I'll probably do eventually.

SS: How would you compare those costs? How much does it cost to start an oyster farm versus get your own boat and fishing permit?

[33:20]

CB: Permitting wise, it's only about fourteen hundred dollars. If you want to buy a monkfish permit, that's eighty grand. If you want to buy a good Area 2 lobster permit, you're talking twenty-five, and they're cutting the traps every year so you got to buy two, so that's fifty. You want to buy even an in-state gillnet permit in Rhode Island, because there's a moratorium, is probably thirty. People are asking thirty, and I don't think I've seen one sell for under twenty-five. Just permitting-wise, it's a lot cheaper. When you talk about the gear and seed, and all that, that adds up, but I'd still say it's a lot cheaper. I have a twenty-five foot skiff, like a little lobster skiff, that I used. I mess around with sea bass pots and stuff. I wouldn't say I fish them hard. It's something I do in the spring. I go and haul my sea bass pots.

SS: Do you have a restricted finfish license?

CB: Yeah, and a clam, but I've only been bullraking once in my life. I bought these nice bullrake heads from this guy in Warwick who's been doing it forever. I thought I'd try it out, but I don't have a whole lot of time and I don't know if I like it, to be quite honest with you. It's kind of different. There's guys that like staying in the bay all day, and then there's guys that like fishing. It's two different styles. It looks hard. I'll give them that. It does look hard to bullrake all day. I don't really use my state license as much as a lot of other people, but then I would say there are a lot of people who use their state license a lot that don't really fish in federal waters as much. I would say most of my fishing is done in federal waters, outside the boundary lines. Like I said, I'll do sea bass. It's so easy. I'll do sea bassing for a little bit in the spring and the fall. I just leave my pots out for scup once in a while. If the price goes up, it's good money. I didn't have to pay for that, because it was a lottery. I just kept on applying and applying.



SS: They don't give out a lot of the finfish licenses through the lottery, do they? I know they give out a few more of the quahog licenses.

CB: No. It was like six the year that I got it. Quahogs, like the second year I applied, I got it. Then the finfish took another year or two. It's kind of weird, because the way it works—at least from my understanding in Rhode Island—is that for finfish, priority is usually given to finfish harvested in state, if you were on an inshore lobster boat and you decide to save scup or some nonrestricted fish and sell them. When I was applying to this, ninety-five percent of my work was on federally permitted boats.

SS: So that actually put you at a disadvantage?

[36:53]

CB: I don't know. The way I read it, it was almost like if you were a deckhand or a captain—well, you can't really be a captain on a state boat because it's an owner-operator fishery—if you were a deckhand on a state boat, like a state gillnetter for example, you might have priority over someone that was on a federally permitted gillnetter. I got mine the other year, and there was six guys. One of my guys, the guy that I've taken forever gillnetting, he got it too, which is kind of funny. I wasn't even there. It was in Jamestown because I was the last number called out. My deckhand was in. I was texting him, like, "I'm busy. Let me know if I got it or not." He's like, "You're literally the last name that get pulled." It's a nice license to have. If I go rod and reeling for fun once in a while, I can sell them. The guy I sell them to is literally right there [across the street].

SS: Can you tell me a little bit about the transition from deckhand to captain, and how that went for you?

[38:05]

CB: In what regard, I guess?

SS: Well, it's sort of a big step from working on deck and doing what you're told and repetitive things, compared to running the boat, where you're the one in charge.

CB: The first boat I ran, spent the most time on, isn't a big boat. It's only a forty-footer Novi-style gillnetter, which is not a whole lot. System-wise, it's a fairly straightforward boat. When I started running the crab boat out of New Bedford, that boat's got a lot more systems on it. It took me a hot minute to figure all those out. A lot of times, he'll just say, "Take the boat. Here are the keys." Sometimes it's not really like a trial run. There were a couple times when I had to come back in because something blew up or something. I'd say at some point, most people that really like doing it want to make the jump. Before I took that other boat, I had been talking to a guy about being a captain for a gillnetter. I told the guy I'd been working for for a long time and that I'm working for now, "If I don't take this boat, I'm just going to go and take that boat. I'm going to run a boat either way."

SS: Why did you feel that way?

CB: What?

SS: That it was so important to progress to captain at that point?

CB: Once you get older, it's kind of like a saying, "If you're not in the wheelhouse by the time you're thirty," or at least that's what guys told me. I don't know if it's true or not. I'm sure there's plenty of guys that start running a boat when they're forty-five years old. Especially, two, if you don't have the family system. If your father or grandfather has a boat, it's a lot easier, kind of like a natural progression. When none of your family fishes, it's kind of one of those things where, "I got to start doing this soon, to build up my repertoire, I guess." If you want to run a big offshore boat one day, you can't go to the guy that owns it and say, "I want to run this boat." "Well, do you have your own boat?" You say, "No." They're not going to give you the boat. It's one of those things where you kind of want to build up. I don't like listening to people either. Obviously, you listen to the boat owners, but it's kind of nice not having to listen like when you're on deck. When I take the boat, I'm not screaming at my crew. I think that's the advantage of being on deck for a while and then moving into the wheelhouse—going through what they're going through. I know a lot of guys that have been on deck that move to the wheelhouse. I would say they're definitely more laid-back, better in that regard. I've never worked for somebody who just jumped in the wheelhouse after never being on deck, but I can only imagine they wouldn't really get it. They wouldn't get it, know what it's like. That's probably an advantage to doing that.

SS: Who is your crew? How many people and what are they like in terms of age and background and stuff?

[42:02]

CB: They're all around my age. When I was crabbing, I was taking older guys. One younger guy and two older guys. With crabbing, I eventually got steady crew, but when I was first taking the boat, I was trying to find guys that fit. With gillnetting, I've had pretty much the same age and same crew for a while. They're all around my age. I take three guys in the wintertime and two guys in the spring and the fall. I've only really taken guys that are real old a couple times. They're pretty much all my age. The guy that I was talking about earlier who got the license with me, he's been fishing a while. The other guys I've been taking, not so much. They're good. Monkfishing you can pick up pretty quick. You're picking fish. You just got to learn to pick fish. You stand there all day picking fish, picking more fish. The thing with fishing is if someone can't do it, it's because they're physically or mentally unable to. It's something that you can learn. With scalloping, you got to be fast, so that's an added thing. You can't just shuck a scallop really fast, so that's where you got to have some coordination and just be really, really fast. Most fisheries, you want to be fast, but it's something that anybody can learn if they want to.

SS: So it's a matter of attitude rather than physical ability?

CB: Yeah, I guess "attitude makes the difference." It's kind of one of those. As long as you like it or can bear it, then you should be able to. Everybody's different. That's the thing with running boats and deckhanding. I've deckhanded on a bunch of boats, and some guys. When I take my guys, I let them do it their way. I show them a faster way, but if they're doing a way that's completely ass-backwards to me, that's not what I was taught or what I would do, but they're getting it done just as fast in the same exact way, then I don't really give a shit. "Do it however you want." I took a guy crabbing once and the way he was stacking pots was ridiculous. Not only was it slow, but it was dangerous. I had to go show him, because at that point, I was like, "You're spinning circles around yourself, getting tangled up in the line." Everybody's got a different way to do stuff.

SS: I want to ask a little bit about the process of learning. You said earlier that you had hoped to get enrolled in the fisheries program at URI in the hopes of picking up some knowledge there, in an academic setting, to enrich your knowledge from the experience of fishing, but you found that it didn't really serve that purpose.

CB: It wasn't really so much for knowledge of commercial fisheries. I would say it was just more that I liked fishing, and that was on the brochure under aquaculture and fisheries. That's really how simple that process was.

SS: I see. You're going to go to college so you might as well do something you're interested in?

CB: Yeah, that was my whole process. "We'll see how it rolls."

[46:08]

SS: I see. Well, I guess the question I was trying to get at was, how have you learned all the skills that you have to know? What has that process been like?

CB: A lot of stuff you get taught by other guys—both deckhands and captains, because I've learned a lot of shit from being on deck with another guys who's been doing it a long time. Sometimes, deckhands in particular aspects may know more than the guy running the boat, about a particular thing. Then, a lot of guys I've worked for—the owners and the guys that ran boats—know they're stuff. I've never set foot on a boat I didn't feel comfortable on. I've never been on a junky boat or a rusty shithole boat. All of the boats I've been on have been nice high-line boats with good captains and good owners. It definitely helps out. Around here at least, a lot of guys fish out of the point or they fish out of New Bedford. It helps knowing. When I was fishing on one of the Fleet boats, I had known the captain for a little bit. He's older than me, but I had known him for a while and he needed a fill-in guy. It wasn't a fulltime thing. I think I made three trips with him. That kind of helps out when you know the captain of the boat.

SS: Just being part of the same circle, the same social network?

CB: Yeah, I've never been on a boat where I didn't know the guy running it either personally or by reputation. That's kind of stupid, especially offshore. There's guys who just step on a big boat, if you have no idea who's running the show or who runs the boat. Do they take care of the boat? Do they put money back into the boat? You can tell who puts money back into their boats. It's pretty easy. All the boats that I've been on have been sound operations. Anybody can do that. They just have to do their homework, I guess. I would say that's most of it, and then the other stuff you learn just from shit fucking up, a lot of times. There's just times when something fucks up, and it's like, "Well, I got to figure it out. We, collectively, the crew, have to figure it out. Or we're just (a) not going to make money, and (b) we're just going to sit here." It's one of those things. Or you figure it out, because if something's slower when you're hauling gear, or something's not as good, it's just one of those things. It's like trial and error. A lot of trail and error. I think everybody's like that, at least in fishing. At least people I've talked to.

[49:35]

SS: Is there anything else that you've considered or would consider doing with your life, like if for some reason fishing wasn't working out for you? Do you think you could easily pivot to some kind of other job?

CB: I would still want to be in the industry, like maybe shoreside. Maybe work for a bigger company. There are a lot of shore captains that do maintenance and move boats around. The big owners in New Bedford or down in Point Judith, they kind of need a shore captain. You need guys that make everything happen on land, because logistically there is so much shit going on. But I don't think I would ever want to get away from the greater industry.

SS: Why does being part of this industry mean so much to you? Fishing and enjoying the life of it is one thing, but you want to stick with it even if you're not fishing?

CB: I haven't been doing it that long, but I've heard from some of the older guys that once you start getting into it, and you keep on doing it and you like it, you don't really want to stop. It's one of those things where it can be a pretty shitty job. It's not like a normal job. You hear people bitch about getting stuck in traffic coming home. It's like, "Get out of here." It can be a pretty difficult job, so you got to like doing it. You got to really like doing it. All my experiences with all the guys I know that fish and the guys that I know of that fish, at least around here, I would say they all feel that way.

SS: What is that way? Can you say more?

CB: That they like fishing so much that it's worth all the other shit that comes with fishing. Like, you got to stay down all day to work on a boat because something fucked up, or you got to leave. I'm not usually so hardcore that I take Christmas fishing. I think I've only been fishing on Thanksgiving once. But there are guys that go out fishing for Christmas and Thanksgiving. Everybody has family and stuff. I don't have kids or anything, so I can't really relate to that, but there are slight sacrifices. But you also put that on yourself. That's because they like to fish. People say, "That must be a sacrifice." But I've never met a fisherman that was really mad about leaving. I'm never really mad about leaving. At the end of the day, I fish. That's what I like to do, is go fishing. I know some guys that will go offshore. I know a kid around my age who crabs. He'll go out for seven, eight, nine days and fill the boat. He doesn't care. He just wants to go fishing. It's one of those things, I guess. At another job, if there was enough shitty stuff, you'd probably consider not doing it anymore. I've never been scalloping, but I would assume that some of the scallop guys do it because it pays really well. A lot of fisheries pay well at certain points of the year. Most fisheries, if you're good at them, you can make a pretty decent living. But I don't think it's entirely a money thing. I don't think a lot of people would do it for free. I don't know a guy who would go and take a boat out there for free for a week. But at the same time, you do have shitty trips here and there, and it's not like people quit after that. I've never seen a guy quit after a shitty trip.

SS: Could you put your finger on what it is, besides the obvious need for money—because you said it's not usually just about the money—what else is it that really captures people to stay with the industry?

[54:11]

CB: I don't really know. I would say that they just like to go fishing. I just like to go fishing. I couldn't speak for them. If you're fulltime, you just like fishing. It's one of those things where some people don't like it and some people do. The guys that stick around just like to go fishing.

SS: Your parents, you said, didn't have a background in fishing. What did they think? What do they think now about your being a fisherman?

CB: They don't really care. They like all the shit I bring home—the lobsters and crabs. It's subsidizing their seafood intake. My dad's a real outdoorsy guy. Not so much with the water, but he used to log in Pennsylvania, and then he was in construction and architecture. Now he's doing all the paperwork and stuff. But he likes being in the woods all the time, so I think he understands it. Around here—I could throw a baseball at my house—I grew up in Little Compton. Around there, that's what people did. If you were living there, you either landscaped or did tree work or you fished or you farmed on the local farms. It's not like there's a Staples to work at or a law office. It's a pretty small town. It's not a lot of infrastructure there. I would say ninety percent of the jobs are outdoorsy type. People obviously commute, but if you want to stay in Little Compton and work in Little Compton, or at least in this area, there's a good amount of fishing out of this area—not nearly as much as out of Point Judith. Even Newport is substantially bigger.

SS: Little Compton seems to have a much younger demographic in fisheries than a lot of the other ports, at least looking at it from the outside.

CB: A lot of the guys down in Sakonnet, there's probably three or four families that own most of the boats down there, so it's kind of like a generational thing. The guy that I work for, I don't even know how old he is, but he's got to be well south of forty. His brother that co-owns the boat is I think in his upper thirties. His cousin who has his own offshore crab boat is, I would say, no older than thirty-five or thirty-six. There's a couple of guys that are older that fish down there. It's a pretty local port, I would say. I've never fished out of Newport, but I know it's a state pier so people tie up. There are some guys that I like that fish out of Newport and Point Judith. I know a younger guy out of Point Judith that monkfishes. I think his uncle monkfished. He's a pretty well-known guy. He's a nice guy. He's older than me, but he's not old. He's got to be early thirties, tops. At least out of Point Judith, I would think a lot of those older guys all went to that URI program. I talk to guys about fishing, but I don't really talk to them about how many young guys are fishing. I really have no idea.

[58:34]

SS: Before we started, I mentioned that one of the reasons I'm doing this is that this is sort of a hot topic of conversation.

CB: Yeah. I didn't really realize that was actually a problem.

SS: You hadn't really thought about it? In your perspective, do you now perceive that as a problem? Had it never dawned on you to think that there aren't enough young people?

CB: I mean, all the boats that I've run, most of my crew has been younger, plus or minus five years on me. A lot of them, you can tell they're not going to be fulltime fishermen. When I was working out of New Bedford this summer, the main captain is a young kid. I think he's the same age as me. His other captain for a scallop boat is mid-thirties maybe. I think it differs by fishery, but I would say that at least running boats, there's not a whole lot of people that I know that are under the age of thirty, unless they own the boat or their family owns the boat. That's kind of an outlier. There's probably a ton of guys that run a boat, but I would say it's harder. It's definitely a lot harder to run a boat if your family doesn't have boats to begin with. It's like any other job. If you worked at a restaurant that your father owns, and you can

cook, there's probably a likely chance that he might make you the cook of that restaurant, because you're his son or daughter. The captains that I do know that are younger haven't had that either. The other guy that I was working with last summer that was my age, he just worked on deck for a while and worked his way up too.

SS: You were talking about how a lot of the jobs that are available in Sakonnet are outdoors jobs. The crew that is working on—

CB: I guess that's what I'm saying. I'm saying there are no businesses in Little Compton, in this area, to go get a decent job at. You can work behind a deli counter, I guess, for eight dollars an hour.

SS: Is the crew that is working on those Sakonnet boats, is it pretty local then? Is the pipeline mostly people like you who grew up in the area?

CB: No. It used to be. I think a lot of times it used to be. But the guys that I'm taking now, one's from the Providence area, one's from Portsmouth, and then the other guy that I've taken, I don't even know where he's from. I guess you could say that maybe that's a sign that there's not a lot of interest. I don't know about other towns. But then again, I guess places like NOAA and things like these wind farms aren't really helping stir up interest in something. It's kind of like the guy holding onto the typewriter while someone's inventing the Apple computer in his garage. It's one of those things. Maybe younger people are thinking, "Why would I want to go into that, if it may be obsolete? If it may be outsourced to farmed or foreign interests in the next ten years?"

SS: How do *you* feel about that?

[62:27]

CB: If you do it for a while and you like it, you're just going to keep doing it. It's one of those things. If you like fishing, you're just going to keep fishing. I don't have children. I can't talk for other people who have more of a financial burden than I do, to support their families. Maybe that affects them greater than me. But unless I'm living in a dumpster somewhere, roasting stuff over a trashcan fire, I'm probably still going to go fishing. I can see for a younger person than me, or someone who hasn't fished at all before, I can see how that maybe wouldn't be the wisest—. You always hear documentaries where the fisherman's like, "I would never want my son to fish." I don't know if that's true or not. It could just be good TV or something. I don't know. I can understand it. But it's also something that people actively seek out to do. I never met somebody on a boat that just tripped and fell onto it and said, "Oh, I'm going to go fishing." It's kind of like something where they go, "Ok, I want to go try that." It's not like something part-time where you're like, "There's an open position. I guess I'll go give it a shot." I don't know. That would be my best explanation. I heard something else in Point Judith, where somebody's trying to train young fishermen. I don't know if that was legitimate or the extent of that or if they were looking for deckhands. But the first thing is you got to want to go fishing. You can't teach that. You can teach somebody all the safety stuff, but if they don't want to go fishing. I don't know if that program worked or if that was part of this?

SS: No, it's not related to this. That was the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island. Fred Mattera.

CB: I've heard of Fred. He's a big safety guy.

SS: Yup. He does a lot of safety training.

CB: Maybe that's a good avenue. On the one hand, it's like you care. But at the same time, it's people's own decision to get into this line of work. As long as other guys go fishing and I can still go fishing, I don't think every old guy's going to die tomorrow. I know a lot of old guys that kick ass, that could probably walk around other guys on deck. At least from what I've seen, I would say the majority of people in ownership or running boats or even on deck, maybe not here but at least in New Bedford, are north of forty, I'd say. There's a lot of young guys. I really have no idea what the percentages are.

SS: I don't think anybody does, really. In terms of thinking about your own future, where do you see yourself in ten or fifteen or twenty years? Or where would you like to be?

CB: In a perfect world, probably owner-operator of something. But I would only do that if it made financial sense. If in five years or ten years, I wanted to buy an outfit, and for some reason, permits are half a million dollars and I have five pounds to catch, I'm not doing it at that point. I would say it really depends on the regulatory processes. I don't know if it's true or not, but they say it's the second most regulated thing after the FAA. I don't know if that's true or not. They all say it. Someone would have to look through a lot of books in order to answer it, but I would say it's pretty regulated. It's ironic that domestically, it's regulated, but a lot of foreign—not even seafood, but just a lot of foreign food in general—isn't really regulated that much. Kind of the out of sight, out of mind principle. It's like, "We don't care if seafood comes from Asia and they're pumping sludge into the water and it's disgusting. As long as it's not happening [here]." Because you always hear, "Oh, there's guys towing off the beach in Montauk or the Vineyard." I read an article about people bitching about the noise. There was a guy towing for mantis shrimp in the bay, and they were bitching about the noise from the old Detroit that he's got. It's those people that are probably the people going out for dinner and buying forty-dollar sea scallops. It's kind of hypocritical, I guess. If it was worth it, I'd probably look into getting my own outfit. It would help if NOAA—because when you have the regulations, if they opened that up, it would open more stuff. When they have a stranglehold on fisheries, it's hard to compete. Which is like with every U.S. business, when you over-regulate domestically, and foreign businesses are under-regulated, then it's incredibly easy to import that foreign product for a substantially lower price. It's one of those things where if you over-regulate domestic industry, it shuts them out. I think seafood should be costly. It costs a lot of money to catch it. I don't know. I don't make policy.

SS: Do you get involved in advocacy at all or science?

[79:43]

CB: I try to fish as much as I can, and then with the oyster farm, I'm pretty busy, and I really hate meetings. I hate talking. Just listening to people yap all night. I went to one of those meetings of the Rhode Island Fisheries Council. They have them over in Bonnet, at the Bay Campus. I went to one or two of them. You hear people talk and talk and talk, and most of them are going to have a different opinion than you, at least people who are not commercial fishermen—you know, researchers and scientists and recreational fishermen. I just kind of feel like, "Oh my God." You just want to tell them to stop talking about what they're talking about. I'm sure there are plenty of fishermen that do go to those and advocate on behalf of other fishermen. I think most fishermen definitely share mutual interests and opinions when it comes to regulations and things like windmills. It's kind of a universal, across-the-board thing, where if you fish, you probably agree that regulations are a little much. Just the way

they go about them can be a little ignorant. But I'm not a scientist. I just know what I see fishing. People have good years and bad years. Two years ago, monkfish wasn't that great. Last year was really good. This year was really, really good. Same thing with scallops. They say they have low years with a lot of parasites in the meat, and they have high years where the cut's really good. Same thing with crabs and lobsters.

SS: It's variable.

CB: Yeah. I would say there's more to it than the theory that everything's dying out there. But I haven't talked with anybody or worked with anybody to know if that's all their opinions are. But I'm skeptical. It's kind of hard not to be. I just know what I see fishing and what I've heard from other guys, and what I see when the regulations come down and how they affect me. Like some years, they'll close skate for the winter, which isn't a huge deal, because I like to go monkfishing that time of year anyway and skates really beat up the nets. But at the same time, there are so many skates out there. I don't know if before I was alive, there was way more skates. If there was, you could probably walk on them. I don't know. Some of this stuff is a little much. It's probably better than at some point back in the seventies and sixties, when they were just pair-trawling everything up. But at the same time, you got to find a happy medium. But then again, I only know about the fisheries that I've participated in. The groundfishery, I don't know a whole lot about. I know a lot of guys kill it out there. I've heard a lot of stories about NOAA, where they don't really know where to tow, they don't know how to tow, things like that. I don't know if they're true or not. I kind of believe they're true, because I can't see a scientist running a groundfish boat better than a guy who's been doing it for thirty years out of New Bedford or something. It's kind of one of those things. But I don't know enough about that to really talk about it, because they're probably the most affected—probably a lot more affected in their fisheries than I am in what I'm doing. And I haven't really been around long enough to see the, you know—

SS: Ups and downs?

CB: Yeah. I mean, I'm twenty-six. I wasn't alive when it was like, "Woo! No regulations! Let's hatch the boat every trip with whatever we get!" I wasn't alive for that, so I don't really know. You'd have to ask an older guy, over the age of thirty-five, about that predicament.

SS: Are there any other things we haven't talked about yet that you think are important to understand your perspective as a young fisherman?

[75:14]

CB: I don't think so.

SS: Oh, it's three-oh-five.

CB: Yeah, I probably have to leave by three-ten. Traffic shouldn't be too bad. Unless you have something specific?

SS: No, I don't think I have anything specific. Are there any closing thoughts?

CB: Do people usually submit closing thoughts?

SS: [laughter] Sometimes.



CB: Is it going to be useful to them? If there is a problem, are they going to be able to fix the problem through this project?

SS: I'm going to turn this off so I can [answer any questions about the project].

[end of interview]

[76:13]