

Interview with Christopher Knight, commercial fisherman

Occupation: sternman (commercial fisherman)

Port Community: Matinicus and Spruce Head, Maine

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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Location: Rockport, Maine

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 March 1, 2019. I'm at the Samoset Resort in Rockport, Maine. Could you please state your name for the audio?

Christopher Knight [CK]: Christopher Knight Jr.

SS: Christopher Knight Jr., what is your occupation?

CK: Sternman.

SS: Sternman, on a lobster boat?

CK: Lobster boat.

SS: What homeport is that out of?

CK: We go out of Matinicus, but the boat, we keep it at Spruce Head.

SS: What's the name of the boat?

CK: Audrey Eileen. The last one was his first daughter, Miss Madeleine. He just built this one last year, and he had to name it after his other daughter.

SS: [laughter] Yeah, that's only fair. Alright, what's your age?

CK: Twenty-seven.

SS: Just briefly, what is your educational background?

CK: High school.

SS: Was that around Rockland?

CK: Yeah.

SS: This is where you grew up?

CK: Yeah.

SS: Ok, that's it for the basic biographical information that I wanted to capture, so at this point, I'll just basically hand it over to you to tell me your story as a commercial fisherman. You can start at the beginning or wherever you would feel most comfortable.

CK: I got into it because of my family. My grandfather was a lobsterman on my mother's side, and his father was a lobsterman. I'm pretty sure his father and his father, whatever. Same thing for my father's side. So I started when I was young, got traps. I had my own license. When I was a kid, the house burned down. We lost all the documents. I didn't get to get my hours in on time. I was at an age when they were starting to change the laws on the licensing, and regulating it a lot more. Then you had to get a thousand hours before you were eighteen and have them all signed. I didn't get it.

SS: Would you have had it if those papers hadn't burned?

[02:14]

CK: Yeah, I would have been a captain now. I would have a whole different lifestyle. I ended up being a sternman because of that, while everybody else in my family has their own boat. That kind of stung.

SS: Yeah, I can imagine.

CK: I got into it for family. Most people I know, they start fishing because that's what their dad does. That's what their uncle does. Around here, you're really not going to make that much money anywhere else, especially if you don't go to college. You're looking at like a gas station job, if you're lucky. Or you could go fishing and you can make alright money, if you get on the right boat. It's all about being on the right boat.

SS: Are you on the right boat right now?

CK: Yes.

SS: How did you get on that boat?

CK: My father was painting his boat, and I had known him previously. We went down to his shop one day, and he didn't have a sternman. He takes two guys, and he needed a guy. I happened to be down there working on the boat, so I was like, "Hey, I'll go with you." I went with him for a couple years. Then I got done. I didn't go with him for like a year. Now I'm back with him. It's been like six months.

SS: Have you worked on other boats too, as a sternman?

CK: Yeah. That's like what I do.

SS: What makes this one a good boat?

CK: He goes steady. It doesn't matter if it's blowing forty. He's going to go. We're going to go out, haul traps, and make money. He knows what he's doing. He's been doing it forever. He's got a big, fast boat, brand new gear. Everything's brand new. It's nice working on. It's easy working on. At this point, I just know him really well too. I gaffe the buoys, put them in the hauler for him, he hauls it up. He's in the back. He does the bait. He stacks the traps. We just do that all day, every day. That's what makes a good boat is—I'm having a brain cramp.

SS: Just going consistently?

CK: Yeah, consistency. Consistency is where you're going to make money. There's a lot of guys that will go and haul four hundred traps and make a few grand, and then they don't go. On a good boat, they go every day. That's the difference. Going in weather, crazy weather. Some guys won't leave the dock if it's blowing fifteen or twenty. That's like all fall, so you have to go or you're not going to make money.

SS: Are you guys fishing inshore or offshore?

CK: We have some inshore and some offshore.

[05:51]

SS: Are you able to go year-round?

CK: Yeah. We're still fishing right now, actually. We just took all our pairs up and now all that's left is our trawls. We haul fifteen-trap trawls. That's standard around here, fifteen-trap trawls.

SS: You had pairs too?

CK: Yeah, pairs and singles up inside. Singles are long-gone. That's summertime, fishing up inside the rocks, because you can get one up in there, in some crazy rock, but if you have another one, with sixty feet of rope, and then another trap, it's like an anchor holding it down.

SS: In the summertime when they're real close inshore, you use singles, pairs for when they're a little bit further off, and then trawls when they're out in an area where nothing's around and it's not going to tangle up with other stuff?

[06:48]

CK: Yeah, but this year, the trawls are looking like shit for us.

SS: Why is that? Do you have a theory?

CK: I don't know. We had a hell of a year offshore. We're still going. They're actually looking a little bit better now. I heard of guys going way down below. They were smashing them.

SS: How far out are you guys fishing?

CK: We don't go that far. We just go a little bit past Matinicus Rock. He fishes Matinicus. That's where he goes. He's a little bit older now, so he doesn't want to go way far out, lug all this gear a couple hours away. We do just fine, not going as far, anyways.

SS: Do you have any other family members your age, like siblings or cousins, that are also lobstermen?

[07:56]

CK: Yeah. My little cousin Christopher, he just got his own boat last year. My brother, he never had anything to do with it. My uncle Chris, my uncle Andy, my father. Other than that, my grandfather—both grandfathers. That's it. My mom didn't really do it. For my generation, it's just me and Christopher, from my family, anyways.

SS: Friend and classmates?

CK: Oh, yeah.

SS: Lots of fishermen?

CK: Oh, yeah. It's not like there's going to be any shortage of fishermen anytime soon. No way.

SS: You mentioned earlier that there aren't that many opportunities in this area where you could make as much money. Other than that, what is it that motivates you to be a lobsterman?

CK: I just love it. I love going out. It sucks this time of year. You get up at four o'clock in the morning. It's cold as hell. You're making ice out there. It's not fun. In the summertime, when it's beautiful out, you got the tunes jamming, you're cranking out. That's what we live for. Seeing those traps come up full. It's like drinking a cup of coffee. You're all of a sudden ready to go again. That's why we do it. And it's good money when you're catching them.

SS: Have you done any other kind of fishing besides lobstering?

CK: I went on a lobster boat once at Shafmaster, and we had a little scallop drag and a gillnet. Other than that, I've never really done anything but lobstering.

SS: Ok. If that incident hadn't happened with the fire and the paperwork—how old were you when that happened?

CK: Fourteen or fifteen.

SS: If that hadn't happened at that point, where do you think you would be in your career right now? You mentioned earlier that you think you'd be a captain?

CK: I'd be a lot further than I am now. Instead of making fifteen percent, I'd be making the rest—eighty-five percent.

SS: Are you on a waiting list to get a license? Is that still something you're hoping to do, eventually?

[11:00]

CK: I was going to get on the waiting list, and when they told me I had to go on the waiting list, I was eighteen and I freaked out. "Screw this!" I never really pursued it until a couple years ago. Now, of course, I don't have any of the hours that I had logged, so I had to start over. Now I've got like four hundred hours logged.

SS: How many do you need, a thousand?

CK: A thousand. But you have to get them in a certain zone. I'm Zone D. That's where I would be able to fish, because that's where I'm from. I fish Zone C. My captain fishes Zone C. I can't log Zone D hours. I wouldn't be able to fish Zone C, just because of where I'm from.

SS: It's complicated.

CK: Some of the lines are a little lopsided. I don't know who made the lines up, but some people definitely got way bigger pieces than others. They've always been around, as far as I know. I don't know who made them up or when, but that's just how it goes.

SS: How would you say that you learned to be a lobsterman? Where did you acquire your skills?

CK: My grandfather. My father. My grandfather would take me out when I was five or six, just throw me in the back with a crate of lobsters, and be like, "Band those, kid." Then when I was done, he would give me another one. "There you go." He would pay me, though, and I saved up money. One year when I was in kindergarten, I remember I had money to buy sneaks and stuff. That was definitely a draw. Then I got a little older and I would go sternman with my dad a little bit and sternman with my grandfather. Once in a while, I would go sternman with my uncle Jeremy. He's from Matinicus. He's not really my uncle. I always called him Uncle Jeremy. I didn't really pursue it, but then I saw my buddy Todd, he had his own traps and his own boat. He showed me one day that he made like five hundred bucks. I was like [facial expression of amazement].

SS: What age were you at that point?

[13:59]

CK: We were like eight or nine. We were young. We were going to the lobster festival and he was like, "Check this out. I got all kinds of money for games."

SS: [laughter] That's a lot of spending money for an eight-year old.

CK: I was like, "Woah. I got to jump on that train." I started going to sternman for him.

SS: He was running his own boat at eight years old?

CK: Oh, yeah.

SS: That's unbelievable to me that such a young child—

CK: Yeah. He got Maine's Youngest Lobsterman.

SS: Wow.

CK: Actually, my grandfather got it too, way, way back. They do that, Maine's Youngest Lobsterman.

SS: It was just the two of you out in a skiff or something?

CK: Just the two of us. He started in a little outboard. Then he got another bigger little outboard, with a cabin on it. Then he got this piece of—you know, an old lemon of a boat, dockwolloper-type thing. We started using that for a while. No, actually, he got another. It was like a mini-boat. It was an inboard, but it was really small. It was only like twenty-two feet long, but it has a gas engine. It was called Next Generation. We went on that for a while. Then he got a bigger boat. Then I got done with him, started going with another kid out on Matinicus.

SS: I'm still having trouble wrapping my head around it. I can't even imagine such young kids out there. Didn't your parents worry?

CK: He'd been doing this since he was like five. He was well trained.

SS: Still, the water is a dangerous place.

CK: That's just the way it was.

SS: You must have felt encouraged by your family? Or did you feel discouraged?

CK: At times, I definitely did. But I also felt encouraged. Before we figured out I was going to have to go on the waiting list, my grandfather was like, "Yeah!" I had my own traps and stuff. But then afterwards, they were like, "You should go to college."

SS: Oh. That was sort of a game-changer.

CK: Yeah.

SS: Did you think about going to college at that point?

CK: I did, but I just had so much stuff going on that I wasn't doing it. I just had a wild early twenties.

SS: Do you think this is what you're going to keep doing for the long haul?

CK: Yeah, for the foreseeable future. At least the next ten years. I don't always want to be a sternman. It's just hell on your body. Banging around out there all day sucks. You're making this guy all this money, and it's like, "Man, I only get a little chunk of it." I guess that's the same wherever you go. The guy doing the most work gets paid the least. The guy who's doing the least amount of work makes the most money. That's just the way it goes. I plan on getting my captain's license and getting my own traps. I might fish Green Island. That's where my grandfather and my uncle fish.

SS: Green Island? Where's that? I'm not from around here.

CK: Ok, do you know where Matinicus is?

SS: I looked at it on a map the other day when you told me you were from there.

CK: Ok, do you know where Spruce Head is?

SS: No.

CK: In between Matinicus and Spruce Head, you got Metinic, and then you got Little Green and Big Green, or it might be the other way around, but the Green Islands are in between there. My grandfather fishes Big Green.

SS: What makes you think you would want to fish there, of all places?

CK: It's nice. It's nice bottom. There's not a lot of fishermen around there right now.

SS: Because your grandfather fishes there right now, would you have an in?

CK: I'd have an in, yeah. I could fish Ash Point. That's where my dad fished. It would actually be a tossup between the two. I might end up going to Ash Point, because Green Island hasn't been doing as hot as they used to do. They used to do really well. They don't have much deep water, so they haven't been doing as well the past five or six years. They're not doing bad, by any means. But they're not getting these couple thousand pound days, consistently, like they were. That's all I really know how to do is fish. Other than that, I plan on probably working on boats. My father paints boats and restores boats and stuff like that, so I'll probably end up doing that, eventually. I already dabble a little bit.

SS: In order to make the move to captain and owner of your own boat, it's just a waiting game right now? Just waiting for those days?

CK: Basically. You have to log the hours. You have to get in the right zone. You have to go with somebody. I log my hours for Zone D. So I would have to go with somebody in Zone D and get six hundred more hours, and then I'd get on the waiting list and wait God knows how long. They're talking about people that have been on there for ten years, they might let them have their licenses. I know one guy, he's been up for it two times and declined it, so they put him back on the bottom of the list. It's like, "Get off the list if you don't want it." It can't be too long.

SS: Is that your plan?

CK: Yeah.

SS: Other than getting the permit, how do you see the financial aspect of that playing out, to buy the boat and the gear and all that?

CK: I'd have to get a loan from the bank or something like that.

[21:48]

SS: Is that something that's relatively straightforward to do?

CK: Probably you would have to have really good credit. I don't know, actually. I would definitely have to have a huge lump sum and really, really good credit, probably. Or I could buy my grandfather out when he gets ready to retire, something like that. Maybe he would be a lot easier to work with than the bank. That's an option, maybe. But that's the thing—most people, starting out, it's hard to make it. It really is, if you're just starting out right now, especially if you're older, above the age of twenty-five and you just start being a captain. You need at least twenty or thirty thousand to get a boat, and that's like a dockwolloper, old eyesore. Then you're going to need forty thousand at least for some traps—probably more than that. Then rope, buoys, paint. It's a lot of money. Once you get all that, then you have to spend a few hundred bucks in bait and fuel.

SS: So the financial aspect is definitely a hill that you have to climb to get in?

CK: Yeah, it's a huge mountain you have to climb. It's hard for a lot of people to overcome that. That's why you don't see a lot of people, unless they've been doing it since they were a kid.

SS: So you don't see people starting it in their twenties? It's something you really have to start much earlier?

CK: Yeah, or else you're just not going to be set up. It's possible, it's just a lot harder, because it takes years to build it up and figure it out.

SS: Financially, but also knowledge base?

CK: Yeah. Because it's a lot different setting the traps than it is just back there hauling them, not paying attention to the bottom machine or anything like that. That's a big thing, and then you have to worry about the tide. Sometimes the tide can be going on top and coming on bottom, so it's really tricky. It's kind of tricky.

SS: Do you feel like you confidently have all of that knowledge to run a boat, even though you're currently working as a sternman?

CK: Yes.

SS: Because of your family and your younger experience?

[25:11]

CK: And I have done it. When I had my own traps, we would take my dad's boat. He had a thirty-eight foot boat. He'd let me drive it and he'd be my sternman.

SS: Why did he do that? Just to give you that experience?

CK: Yeah.

SS: Or he felt like doing something simple and being a sternman for a change [laughter]? Just kidding.

CK: No, I think it was more to teach me. So he could watch how I did it. "Oh no, don't do that. Don't put your fingers there."

SS: Yeah, and if you don't have that kind of mentor investing that knowledge in you, you're starting way further back.

CK: Yeah. There's a lot to it. You can't just go out there and seriously injure yourself and start winging traps around, trying to do whatever, especially offshore. Stuff happens quick and you never know. The rope could pop out of the hauler, and if you can't get it quick enough, there's traps coming at you might have to cut the line. Crazy stuff can happen.

SS: Do you know any other people who are starting as young as eleven these days?

CK: Yes.

[26:41]

SS: You know some little kids that are fishing [laughter]?

CK: Yeah. My buddy's little brother is getting into it. I'm not sure how old he is, but he's just a little squirt. Keeping it going. There's kids everywhere. A bunch of kids from Vinalhaven.

SS: Do you have any words of advice for kids that age?

CK: I would say, "Spend your money wisely, and be very, very considerate of what you do spend your money on—what you need versus what you want, what's going to help you out in the long run. Make good choices." That's what I would say. "Be safe. Safety is key. Always think about that. And just go hard. Show up every morning. Just keep going."

SS: When you imagine what the lobster industry is going to look like around here in ten or fifteen years, what do you picture?

CK: Well, it's definitely going to be a lot smaller. There's not going to be as many boats. It's going to be less people. I feel like that's because they've made it so hard to get a license, that people are just like, "Nope." Then, once you do get it, people need all this money to get the stuff. It's hard. Now, come to think of it, there's only a few young guys that are out there. But I don't feel like there's going to be any shortage of fishermen. I think there will be plenty of fishermen.

SS: Ok. But you think it will be a smaller fleet?

CK: Maybe, for a period. I don't know. It's hard to say. Some of these guys are like, "Oh, man, he's going to be done this year," and then he'll go for another twenty years. Some guys stick it out until they're eighty.

SS: If you were going to describe the type of people who do well in this industry, versus the type of people who aren't cut out for it, what would you say is the difference?

CK: Somebody who's going to show up every morning on time, and somebody who isn't afraid to be critiqued heavily and heavily micro-managed.

SS: What would you say are the things that draw people to this industry? Is there a common denominator that everyone who winds up here has in common?

CK: Money.

SS: The desire for money, you mean?

CK: Yeah. If you talk to people out of state, they're like, "Oh, lobstering? Those guys are millionaires!"

SS: This is for people outside the industry coming into it?

CK: Yeah. We wish. But we're not like super crazy rich. If you get on the right boat, you can make eighty or a hundred thousand dollars a year as a sternman. But that's before taxes, so if you're lucky, you make eighty grand a year, and that's if you're on a good boat. There's not as many of those these days, but there's starting to be a lot more, because there's a lot more people going offshore these days. A lot more.

SS: What's driving that?

CK: More money. People were having these really crazy, insane hauls down there and they were continuing to make money all year long. Sometimes in the winter the price gets really high, so if you can catch a decent amount, you can go out and make some serious money. Guys would go out and haul all eight hundred in twenty-four hours, do that once a week. Six years ago, offshore permits were like ten thousand dollars. Now they're like thirty or forty. In the last ten years, there are a lot more people out there. You used to not find any gear anywhere. Now you have to look for a spot where there's no gear.

SS: Is an offshore permit just a federal Area 1 permit?

CK: It's federal.

SS: So is anything outside of three miles considered offshore?

CK: Yeah. Well, depending on where you are. Because Matinicus isn't considered offshore.

SS: Because it's part of the state?

CK Yeah. So you could be way out and it's still not federal waters. Then there's areas in between where it is. I don't know if it's a law or what, but further inside, guys fish triples in federal waters, and further out, they fish trawls. It's smaller boat guys that will fish triples, and bigger boats that will go out and do trawls. That's the one you want to be on, is the one hauling the trawls. You're going to make more money, so everybody wants to do it.

SS: Are there any stressful parts of your job?

CK: Stressful?

SS: Yeah.

[33:53]

CK: Oh yeah.

SS: What are those?

CK: Everything. Just waking up so early gets pretty stressful. And sometimes you feel like you do nothing but work. In the summertime, you have to be done there by four, so you're waking up at like three o'clock. Then you're working until four or five. Then you get home, eat dinner, take a shower, and it's like six thirty. Then you're ready to just go to bed. It's like, "Shit," after you do that for like forty-seven days straight. That gets kind of stressful. Sometimes it gets kind of stressful when my captain, he just likes to crank on the hauler, so everything gets going really fast. It's like, "Oh." He figures out exactly how fast you can go, and then he goes just a little bit faster, just so you're almost backed up but not quite. That can get kind of stressful if you're not used to it, because sometimes he'll do it out of nowhere. We usually haul like that anyways, so we can get in quicker. It's like any other job. There's stressful things. There's a lot of good things about it, too.

SS: What are some of the good things?

[35:32]

CK: The view is awesome. You get a great view all day. It's like a camaraderie thing. You and these guys are out there jamming and you're working hard and you're making money. You form a bond. You're with them twenty-four seven, so it's kind of hard not to. There's that. It's kind of gratifying. I find it really gratifying.

SS: Are there any topics that we haven't covered yet that you think are important to discuss?

CK: I can't think of any.

SS: Any closing thoughts, before we wrap up?

CK: No. Just keep going. Keep hauling. That's it.

SS: Alright, thank you.

CK: Awesome.

[end of interview]

[36:37]