

Interview with Matthew Peabody, commercial fisherman

Occupation: commercial fisherman

Port Community: Newport News, Virginia

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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Location: Newport News, Virginia

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]: Ok, the recording is on. My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is January 17, 2019. I'm in Newport News, Virginia. I'm here talking with Matthew Peabody. Is that correct?

Matthew Peabody [MP]: Yeah, that's correct.

SS: Could you state your occupation?

MP: I'm a commercial fisherman. I'm a captain of two fulltime scallop boats, a little bit of flounder dragging, scup, sea bass, stuff like that.

SS: What is your homeport?

MP: Newport News, more or less.

SS: More or less?

MP: More or less. We travel around a bit. We do a lot of scalloping in New Bedford.

SS: What's your age?

MP: Just turned thirty.

SS: And did you say the name of your vessels?

MP: The Blue Canyon and the Blue Cove.

SS: What is your educational background?

MP: Graduated from high school, a technical high school.

SS: Ok, that's it for the biographical details that I wanted to capture, so now you're free to ramble, if you have a starting point. Otherwise I can prompt you.

[01:12]

MP: Ok, let's see. Fourth generation fisherman, third generation scalloper, flounder dragger, stuff like that. My family owned a fleet of boats at one time. We had eight full time scallop boats, did a little fishing here and there in the wintertimes. I started right out of high school, made my first trip when I was sixteen, but I couldn't really stay with that because the insurance purposes weren't covered, so we weren't allowed to do that until I graduated. When I graduated, I went to work with my uncle. He ran one of the family boats. I just kind of bounced around the fleet, as far as the family boats.

SS: How many boats were they?

MP: Eight fulltime boats. Let's see. Where do I go from there? First time I went as boat captain, I was twenty-three. Started running mate at twenty. It's been real good to me, anyway. As far as starting out early, I started working around the docks, just packing the boats out in summertime, for summer vacation. Just learning little things on how to fix the boats. My dad's done maintenance on the whole fleet, so he had a lot to teach. I would just stick around and watch. With eight boats, you see all kinds of different breakdowns and how to fix things. I don't know, that just kind of opened the door to an earlier career running boats. I was pretty much ready by the time I was at a younger age. With the fishery being so limited on days, you don't get the learning like the guys did in the generations before, when they had more time on the ocean, and did more fishing.

SS: Can you go into a little more detail on that?

MP: I guess, probably before my time, the fishery was on the verge of collapsing. They'd overfished it. Then the regulations came in and kind of slowed everything down, and then just over the years, we got less days, less trips. But it ain't all a bad thing, because the price has shot up. The price is higher than it's ever been.

SS: You think that makes it harder to learn for somebody who's starting out?

MP: It does. It makes it harder to learn because you're not spending time out there. It's all hands-on learning—watching things, and how to run the boat, working on gear, and just working in different weather conditions and all that stuff.

[04:08]

SS: Does your family still have the eight-boat fleet?

MP: No. We sold out probably about four years ago. Blue Harvest bought us. They ended up buying another fleet out of New Bedford a year or so later. We've turned into a big fleet. I think it's like sixteen boats—fifteen fulltime scallop boats, and they recently purchased four or five, maybe even seven draggers. I'm not sure on the number. They're more or less based

out of Maine—a couple that they bought out of New Bedford, and then the Maine fleet up there. It's turning into a pretty big company real quick.

SS: How has that changed things for you?

MP: For me, we do more scalloping up north. We land more up there. Before, the family, they owned the eight boats and a fish house, so we'd catch our trips and come home. We'd keep the fish house running, keep the employees going, and all that stuff. Now it's just a place for maintenance, painting the boats, and all that stuff—a place for the southern fleet to tie up in the wintertime, most of the time. We unload once in a while, periodically.

SS: Here?

MP: Yeah, here.

SS: But most of the time, it's in New Bedford?

MP: Yeah, most of the time it's up there. Most of the fishing's been up there the last couple years too. So that makes a big difference. You really got to go to where you're closest to, so you're not wasting your time steaming. Makes it more efficient. Let's see. What else? I met my wife on boats. I met her flounder dragging in the wintertime. She was an observer. All that good stuff.

SS: Oh, wow. Where is she from?

MP: She's originally from California, and she moved to Kansas, moved around for college, all that stuff. She's got a master degree in marine science, a lot of schooling. She's very smart.

SS: Does she still observe?

MP: No. No, that's a conflict of interest. She did for a little while, and then it all kind of came out, so she had to give that job up. She works for VMRC now. She's on the wetlands thing. She does all the permitting for waterfront bulkheads and docks and all that stuff. She was in fisheries when she first moved over there. She did the permitting and some of the regulations for the state. I think she'd like to be back into that, because she really likes being on boats. She likes fishing. But that's just kind of where it led to. Had a baby about eight months ago. So now she's still doing that, taking care of the baby and all. I guess, what's the next thing?

SS: Wherever you'd like to go. Let me ask you, who else is on your boat? Who do you have for crew?

MP: I've got quite a few younger guys. They're all pretty much from here. I've got one guy from Delaware who works with me, but the rest are mostly from the Newport News area, Gloucester, places like that.

SS: Did they grow up in fishing or did they come to it as adults?

MP: I would say a lot of the older guys, they started out in the eighties and they've stuck with it. The younger guys, they see the money that we make. They want to work. If you want

to work and make some money, this is the perfect thing to get into. It's hard for newer guys to get into it nowadays though, because the days are limited. You need to have the best guys you can have all the time.

SS: Is the crew specific to each boat, or does the crew move around? Like if you're running two boats, do you have a separate crew for each of them?

MP: No, I keep the same crew for both boats. Crews can move around if they're not happy where they're at or if they've got to coordinate—if the boat needs to go, we'll need to leave them behind.

SS: How many crewmembers do you take at a time?

[08:37]

MP: Seven to eight on a boat, including me. If you're in a closed area, you're allowed eight guys. Open bottom, you're only allowed seven. The closed areas, taking that extra guy, they really make it possible for a younger person to come up and try their hand at it.

SS: That's in the closed areas that you can take an extra guy? So that's a good training opportunity?

MP: Yes. It is a good training opportunity. A lot of times, you find new guys and it's just not their thing and they just can't handle it.

SS: What is it about it that makes it not work for those guys?

MP: It's more or less the hours. Some people get seasick. That takes it out of you. A lot of guys can't do it with being sick. We're out a week, ten days a lot of times, sometimes a little bit quicker in the closed areas, to get the eighteen thousand. It all depends.

SS: Are people coming to you looking for jobs or do you have to find them?

[09:47]

MP: A lot of people are looking for jobs, because the fleet's limited, and like I said, you're limited to the best guys, so you want your best guys all the time. Some guys are ok, but if you can, you try to find a better person.

SS: What does it take to be really good? Just practice?

MP: Just speed. If you're fast at cutting. The faster cutters you got, the more meat you're going to put down.

SS: How long does it take for somebody to get really good at it?

MP: Nowadays, if you were to break somebody new, I've seen people do pretty decent after a full season. A lot of times, it takes three years to get somebody seasoned real well—three or four seasons, you know. By then, they just about got it. There's always room for

improvement. I'd say after six years, you're doing good. If you want to be able to cut fast, be able to bag up enough, do everything, it takes four to six years, I'd say, a lot of times.

SS: Is this something a lot of people try to make a career out of?

MP: A lot of people do try to make a career. Especially right now, the money's really good with it. We're doing really well. The fishery's doing well. But there's no retirement, nothing like that. You've got to really put your money away and be smart with it, if you intend on when it comes to lay down, you don't have to go find anything else. There's guys I know who do it that are sixty-five, but they're more or less running boats, most of them are. Come fifty-five, you're really feeling it. You're hurting. I don't want to be doing it after fifty-five. They got to be ready to retire. At least scalloping. See if there's any fishing in the future.

[12:00]

SS: Do you have anyone else in your family in your generation who's fishing? Cousins or siblings?

MP: Yeah, I have cousins. Yeah, mostly just cousins. I got cousins in Carolina that do it, and they're all young, around my same age if not younger. One cousin, his son's just getting started. It seems like the newer generation is from people that have done it before, as far as the people coming up in it.

SS: What do you mean, people who have done it before?

MP: You know, like the families that have been doing it for years.

SS: Ok, so they have a family history in it?

MP: Yeah. They're usually the ones that do the best at it, because they've got people to help them along. I wouldn't say help them along, but if they've got questions or whatever, it helps having somebody that can sit down and explain it to you. A lot of people won't, just ain't got time to. We get down to our boat, we do our gear work, get everything ready to go, we leave, and then when we get home, we figure out what needs to get fixed, we usually give a list to somebody, they fix it, and then when we get back, we just get ready to go again.

SS: Do you know of any people who don't come from fishing families who are making it?

MP: Yeah. I've got a guy on the boat. He's not going to be able to make the next trip with us because he's got some stuff he's got to take care of. He was landscaping. Seems like people from labor jobs do the best at it. If they want to do it, they can do it, once they get over being seasick and all. You know, like roofers and landscapers and people that are used to doing physical labor. It doesn't really work for people that ain't really done none of that, just because of the physical demand on you. A lot of lifting, a lot of pulling.

[14:12]

SS: Tell me a bit about your community here.

MP: I don't know.

SS: Would you say it's a fishing community?

MP: I guess it's a fishing community. You got more watermen around. That's more the fishing community. Us, a lot of people come from elsewhere, like North Carolina and other places. You got a handful of guys that are still from down there that do it. But as far as the fishing community up and down the coast, a lot of people work with each other. Everybody talks to everybody. Not everybody talks to everybody, but you have your own little network you can be talking to.

SS: And they might be from other ports?

MP: Yeah, they'll be from other ports. We do so much traveling. We're not home everyday.

SS: Yeah, that's the picture I'm getting, that you may technically be based here but you're really very mobile.

MP: Yeah, exactly. It all depends on where you're closest to, a lot of times. You'll see somebody up north that's from down here, or you'll see people from Cape May up in New Bedford or people in New Bedford in Cape May. Like I said, it travels coastwide, more or less, from what I've gathered. Like I said, it helps if you're brought up in it from a young age and your family's done it before. Like my father, he knows a lot of people or my grandfather knew a lot of people. That helps me meet people, talk to people.

SS: If you hadn't come from a fishing family, where do you think you'd be right now?

MP: I don't know. I'd probably be in Delaware or New Jersey or something, doing something else. I've actually done really well with this. This has been really good to me so far. Got lucky. Got real lucky [laughter]. Not everybody can get that lucky. Usually it takes people a lot more years than what it took for me. I got my foot in the door early.

SS: So that really made a big difference?

MP: Big difference.

SS: You mentioned the relationships up and down the coast, even if you're not from the same port. How do you form those relationships and that trust with people who aren't from your same community?

MP: Like I said, just over time. You meet a lot of people. You fish around people. You'll see them at the dock, and you'll go down there and talk to them. That's pretty much how you form most of those relationships. Even if you don't work together, as far as working spots together and letting everybody in on your information, you're still friendly. You don't want to be an asshole or nothing. Nobody really likes that. At least, I find it easier just to be nice to people. Sit there and talk. I'd rather be out at town talking to people and having a good time than to just be sitting on the boat [laughter].

SS: Yeah. So it's part of the whole enjoyability factor of being in different places?

MP: Exactly. Especially me, I run the boat, you kind of circulate through crew, and you meet guys, and then you see a guy on another boat. You see the guy, you meet the guy who's running the boat. It all just turns into a tight network. Word travels fast in the community, as far as when things happen or whatever. It all gets out.

SS: So there's a good camaraderie, would you say?

MP: Yeah, good camaraderie.

SS: Social network.

MP: Yeah.

SS: Cool. Interesting. Can you think of any struggles? Like, what was maybe the low point of your fishing career so far, if there was a time when you weren't feeling so positive about things?

MP: I don't know. I haven't really had one. I mean, everybody has that negative feeling once in a while. The only negatives I get out of it is just sometimes you get in a bad mood, you get tired, you just get in a shitty mood. But that ain't nothing. It passes.

SS: What about a high point? Can you think of a time when you felt particularly positive about things?

MP: Right now is a pretty good high point.

SS: What's making it so good right now?

MP: I don't know. Just working. Just working and making a ton of money. That's where it is right now, and always getting better. I'm still in the younger age of always getting better. Still learning. And from what I understand, you're always learning. That'll be interesting to see, in terms of what the next ten years looks like.

SS: What's your prediction?

[19:27]

MP: I think it'll be fine, at least as far as the scallop fishery goes. It'll probably be fine. They got the science, I wouldn't say nailed down, but it's there. They do a lot of surveying and a lot of that stuff so they can get a good idea of what's going on. It helps us along.

SS: Do you participate in any research or management stuff?

MP: I don't, but I know a lot of people who do. I like to keep up on it. Sometimes I'll listen in on meetings or something once in a while.

SS: So that's scalloping. You said you also do some flounder, sea bass, and scup.

MP: Yeah, we do a little bit of that in the wintertime after scallop season is over. Fishing is a lot more complicated than what scallops are. Everybody wants the fish. You got your recreational guys. You got different states that want to reallocate the quota and all that good stuff. Scallops, you can't really do none of that. Rec guys, they can't really go down there and scoop scallops, so basically it's just a large-scale commercial thing. It makes it a lot easier. And the surveying on fish is a lot harder because they're harder to pin down because they move around so much. A lot more factors come into play. Scallops, they move, but they don't move like fish move. I think they've got a lot of their science straight on fish and I think they'll get it. They're getting better at it all the time. They've got mesh sizes figured out to get rid of the small stuff. All that stuff works real well. It's mostly just bycatch problems with fishing. Scallops, you don't really have too much bycatch. You catch a little bit of fish here and there, but not so much. Seems like the fishing, you set the net out on something that you think might be right, and then you haul back and it's not right. It's something you don't want [laughter]. That seems to be the big problem, with fishing anyway, at least I think.

[21:45]

SS: Yeah. But it sounds like that's not keeping you awake at night. It's just something you just deal with?

MP: No. Yeah. If I were just strictly fishing, like a lot of the guys up north do, it would be more of a big thing for me, because that's what they depend on. Scalloping pretty much makes the year. That's what you make your money on, and then whatever else you go catch is just a little extra. That's a big difference. If I were just fishing, just strictly fishing, I probably wouldn't sleep too much. I'd be too worried. Especially like day trippers and stuff like that, a lot of guys that go out, got to make their whole day quota, come in, do all that. I wouldn't like that too much. I do like fishing, though. I enjoy it. I enjoy it more than scalloping. It's just, the money's not there.

SS: Why do you enjoy it more?

MP: I don't know. It's the hunt, I guess. That, and just not quite as much work, at least as far as the hours. I mean, if you're talking about guys fishing on Georges Bank and stuff, I've never done it, but I imagine they pull a lot of hours doing that, because they got their quotas and they got to go catch them. I'm just an amateur trawl fisherman. That's kind of how I see it. I don't do it full time. And fluke, fluke's not hard to do. Fluke's pretty easy. And sea bass and scup. Lately, sea bass has been real easy to catch, the past few years. It's super easy.

SS: Where do you fish when you're fish fishing?

MP: A lot of times, around Hudson Canyon and stuff. This year, we've been doing pretty good catching fluke down here. Years before, it's just been real spread out. They might show up here or there once in a while, but most of the fish has been staying way up to the north, as far as New Jersey, stuff like that. We're so far offshore when we fish in the wintertime. We're in deep water most of the time. It's not really like a state water thing. You're not like in shoal water or nothing. We travel. Wherever the fish is at, we'll drag and drag and drag. If we get a word on where the fish are, we'll just steam right to it, set out, make a few tows, catch the quota, hunt around for another day or two, and then go unload. It's pretty easy.

[24:31]

SS: One thing I find interesting about you is that you've worked every job on the boat.

MP: Oh yeah, I've done all that. I made sure I did that [laughter].

SS: Yeah, helps to see it firsthand. If you're going to be running a boat, it's helpful to walk in the shoes of everybody else.

MP: You got to know all that. You got to know it all.

SS: What are your most and least favorite parts of each of the roles?

MP: I don't know. The captain's job's great. A lot more stress, mentally, as far as keeping everything running. I'll be running the boat, cutting scallops, shacking the deck, still running around cooking, doing all that stuff, doing the engineer work [editor's note: Matthew defines "shacking the deck" as "when you pick through the piles after you have made a tow to separate scallops from other bottom trash."]. I think as far as the captain's role, it's more or less the mental aspect of everything, trying to keep everything the way it needs to be. Working the deck, it's all physical. You don't really have too much stress on you. It's just physical stress. No mental stress, really, at least on here. I don't know what everybody else does. On here, it's not too bad. Everybody's got it pretty good. At least as good as it can be. The thing with us, we do so much working out of town, we spend a lot of time away from home. That's the only thing we got. Running the two boats, I think last year we spent two hundred days away from home, I think. We'd go up north, stay up there, make a couple trips, and up being about twenty days, come in for about a week, and then go back up and just do the same thing until the boat's done. We got one more trip on here scalloping and we'll be finished. I've kind of been in the middle of moving into a new house, so we would have left earlier, but trying to do all that. Now we're waiting on a storm to go by, which is common for this time of the year.

SS: With an eight-month-old at home, it must be tough to spend that much time away.

MP: Oh, it is. It's terrible. It ain't no worse than what it used to be. You get paid for your trouble, I guess is how you look at it. You're compensated, anyway. At least as far as me, I'm running the boat. The guys on deck, if they want a trip off or decide they've had enough, they can get off. That's the good thing about being down there.

SS: A little more flexibility.

MP: A little more flexibility.

[27:18]

SS: What do you think it takes to succeed in this industry? What makes a good fisherman?

MP: Just really loving it, I guess. The love of it. If you didn't love it, you're not going to do very good at it. You got to really want it. That's the big thing. That and being tough. You got

to be pretty tough to do it. It's a pretty tough job, especially in the wintertime. Summer is still tough, but it's better weather.

SS: So, willing to suffer.

MP: Yeah. That's the biggest thing in succeeding at it. If you've got drive to run boats or run mate or do this or do that, you'll always do better at it. You'll make more money and you'll do better.

SS: Is there anything else you'd like to touch on?

MP: No, not really.

SS: Alright. Well, this has been really great.

MP: Glad I could help you all out, anyway.

SS: Yeah. Thank you. Any closing thoughts before I shut this off?

MP: No.

SS: Ok, I'm going to turn off the interview then.

[end of interview]

[28:41]