

Interview with Tommy Testaverde, commercial fisherman

Occupation: Commercial fisherman

Port Community: Gloucester, Massachusetts

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

Date and year: May 10, 2019

Location: Gloucester, Massachusetts

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]: The voice recorder is starting. My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is May 10, 2019. I'm in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Could you please state your full name for the record?

Tommy Testaverde [TT]: My full name is Thomas Joseph Testaverde.

SS: Do you go by Tom or Tommy?

TT: Tommy, usually.

SS: Tommy, what is your occupation?

TT: Commercial fisherman.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

TR: Fulltime.

SS: Fulltime commercial fisherman. What's your homeport?

TT: Gloucester, Mass.

SS: What's the name of your vessel?

TT: The Midnight Sun.

SS: The Midnight Sun. How old are you, Tommy?

TT: I'm thirty-four.

SS: What's your educational background?

TT: I dropped out of school in eleventh grade. Basically, I wanted to go fishing. I wasn't learning anything about fishing in school. That was that.

SS: How did you first get involved in fishing?

TT: I'm a fifth generation fisherman, so I've just been around it all my life, ever since I was born and a young kid. Down at the wharf. My father, my uncles on both sides of my family were fishermen. It goes back to Sicily. I can't remember exactly what they were fishing for over there. My great grandfather came over here in 1910. He built it up over here.

SS: He came to Gloucester?

TT: To Boston. My grandfather. Then they moved over here to Gloucester. This was a port that they heard about. They wanted to come over here.

SS: You said you grew up with it on both sides of your family, from a very young age. At what age did you first start actively fishing?

TT: My first trip was when I was eight years old. I went to Georges Bank.

SS: Wow, as an eight year old?

[01:58]

TT: As an eight year old. We went whiting fishing with my father and I had my ninth birthday on Georges. From then on, I would fish summers. I just fell in love with it. It's all I've ever done.

SS: I'm on the Midnight Sun right now, so I can see it's a dragger. Have you been involved in other gear types?

TT: We did try scalloping, a while back, on the old Midnight Sun. It didn't pan out too good. We're not scallopers. Then the regulations changed, and they took that away from us, so we didn't have a quota anymore. We do dragging, but we also do whiting, a little bit of squid. Whiting is our thing.

SS: How many days are your trips? Do you do day trips as well?

TT: One day, you mean?

SS: Yeah, are you in and out the same day, or do you do trips?

TT: If we're whiting fishing, we'll do two- or three-day trips. Groundfishing is two- to five-, six-, seven-day trips.

SS: That was the same when you were an eight or nine year old?

TT: Yeah.

SS: Were you homesick at all or did you love it?

TT: No, I loved it.

SS: What was it about it that you loved so much at that age?

TT: It's just second nature to me. I've been around it. I've been around the wharfs. I used to help my dad unload the boat even younger—fish boxes, stuff like that. Just always wanted to go do and actually become a fisherman.

SS: You said that when you were in eleventh grade, it sounds like all you could think about was fishing?

TT: Well, yeah. I didn't want to be a carpenter. I didn't want to be a mechanic. That was all they taught there. I was making good money in the summers, so I said, "Why am I here? I don't want to do anything here." So I went fishing. My first year fishing I made ninety thousand dollars for the full year. I was like, "I'm not going back."

SS: Some children of fishermen say that their parents have discouraged them from entering the industry, and others say they've felt encouraged. How would you describe your experience?

TT: It was a bit of both. My dad wanted to see me graduate, at least. But once you get the bug, it's hard to deter you. But he loved it, because that's how he grew up, with his brothers and his father. His father wanted him to be a fisherman. They all fished on one boat, and then they got their own boat. It was like a little fleet. He kind of wanted to see that happen, put some of his work values into me.

SS: Do you have siblings, too?

TT: I have three sisters. I don't have any brothers.

[05:08]

SS: Are they involved in fishing?

TT: No. It's just me, basically. That's kind of the reason why he enjoys it, is because he doesn't have any other sons doing it. He saw my passion for it, and it reminded him of his when he was younger.

SS: The Midnight Sun is your family's boat?

TT: Yes.

SS: You run it?

TT: Yeah.

SS: Do you own it?

TT: No, I don't. I'm just the captain on it.

SS: When did you start running it?

TT: We bought this boat ten years ago in Palacios, Texas. The old Midnight Sun, my dad bought that in ninety-two. He used to have a boat called the Sea Fox. He was running it, and silver hake was kind of scarce at the time, in their cycle. He was almost thinking about selling it. One day, he was going to go to Vegas with my mom, on vacation. I had a little plan in my head: as soon as he's gone, I'm going to take the boat. As soon as he landed in Vegas, he called me. "Just landed, everything's fine." "Ok, I'm taking the boat and going fishing tonight." It's like, "Well, just be safe and give me a call."

SS: That was your first time?

TT: That was it. I went out, just with me and a couple other guys. In my first trip, we did pretty good. In two days, we had twenty-five thousand pounds of fish. It was a successful trip. That was that. Ever since then, I've been taking the boat. I first started taking the boat just groundfishing. My dad would take it whiting fishing. Then the past three years, I've been taking it fulltime. Because he enjoys whiting fishing. Shorter trips.

SS: What's his involvement now?

[07:13]

TT: He does a lot of the shore work. The boat comes in, he'll do a lot of mechanical work, check on the engines, make sure everything's good, this and that, and a lot of the paperwork, the sharing up, the quotas. Buying up the quota is like a fulltime job in itself, right there.

SS: The fisheries you do, the whiting and groundfish, is that pretty typical of this area around Gloucester?

TT: There's whiting, groundfish, and shrimp. Shrimp's gone. We've been whiting fishing for years. It's kind of our tradition. My dad did a lot of whiting fishing year-round in the late nineties. When regulations pushed for quotas, it went by catch history for groundfish. We didn't have a lot, because my dad was whiting fishing. The government was trying to kind of relieve the pressure on the groundfish and do other fisheries. My dad did a lot of that. He fished down in Southern New England. He fished out of New Bedford for a long time. He got kind of screwed out of the groundfish quota, because he didn't focus on it as much. He just focused on whiting to relieve some of the pressure on the groundfish. Something to do. Other guys just said, "Fuck it," and pounded away on groundfish. They made out. We kind of got screwed on the quota system, on our quota.

SS: But the whiting has given you enough to keep going?

TT: Yeah. We kind of split it up: half the year whiting fishing, half the year groundfishing. It helps.

SS: You mentioned some quota changes. How else have you seen the industry change in your twenty-six years of fishing?

TT: Well, mainly, if you look around, you don't see any boats. The boats are all gone. There's already two more boats that might be sold. It'll be two more boats going.

[09:35]

SS: What did it look like around here when you were eight or nine, and just starting out?

TT: There was work everywhere. People everywhere. Everybody used to know me. When I first started down at Fishermen's Wharf, before it burned down, there were at least ten boats just at that one wharf. Before, when I was younger, there were probably twenty or thirty boats there. And just all the familiar faces. Everybody's getting older, retiring out of it, and there ain't many newcomers coming in. There's one kid younger than me, Lenny, who's been running a boat. I know the Captain Domenic, his son. I don't know if he's thinking about running a boat, but he fishes.

SS: So you're one of the youngest guys around here?

TT: Other than Lenny.

SS: Yeah. How does that make you feel?

[10:33]

TT: It makes me feel good and weird, kind of. I mean, good, because at least somebody's coming up behind it. And weird, because what's going to happen in ten or fifteen years from now? Am I going to be, not the only one, but how many people are going to be around? It's the fact that once the boats go, the infrastructure goes. You can already see that. This used to be a wharf. Now it's some marine genomics or something like that. A lot of the wharfs are gone. The fleet's getting a lot older. You don't see any new boats. One just got built, but it was a Maine boat. Around here, I think this is the newest dragger in this town. Everything else is the seventies, the eighties. This one was built in '97. This one is getting old too.

SS: What do you think are the reasons that you don't see more young people in fisheries around here?

TT: I think a lot of the other guys just wanted their kids to do something else. They didn't want their kids in the lifestyle, in the fisheries, with the regulations, the way they turned out. Can't really blame them. Other people did other things. It's not that easy of a lifestyle.

SS: What about your crew? Who's on your crew? Are they family members? Are there some younger ones?

TT: They're not family members, but I usually hire people I know or people my friends know, because at least I can know their background. There's a lot of drug use in the industry. I don't really tolerate that on this boat. I like to at least know the background of who they are, where they come from. So I do hire my friends and friends of friends.

[12:43]

SS: How many crewmembers do you have?

TT: I have four right now.

SS: Are they typically from around here?

TT: Yeah.

SS: Younger? Older?

TT: Younger. And we have an old-timer on the boat. We got to have them. Got to have somebody who knows how to work old school. A lot of these younger kids—let's just say they're from a different era. They don't know their fishing.

SS: What do you mean by that?

TT: Well, they don't know fishing. Nowadays, you got cutting machines, conveyors, ice machines. You ain't got to shovel. I'm not going to say easier, but it is a lot easier from before. It's a lot different from when I first started to what it is now. You try to make your boat more efficient. We got a machine that cuts the fish. Then it drops it right into the wash box. It automatically washes it, automatically drops it down the fish hold. There's not that much work involved.

SS: Do you have freezers on board?

TT: Yes. The next thing we're going to be investing in is a slurry ice machine. It's a liquid ice, so you don't even have to shovel it. You just pump it. It's like a garden hose and you just pump it into the tubs. You don't even have to shovel ice. That's just technology, trying to make things more efficient. A lot of these younger kids, they don't know how to mend. I think my dad just send a couple kids to that class, just for them to learn, to start anyways. A lot of them think they're big and bad, but they can't even tie a knot or mend. "You ain't shit. You call yourself a fisherman? Yeah, you go fishing. You're a worker. But you're not a true and true fisherman." When you hire these kids and there's only one person on the boat who knows how to mend, out of four or five, everybody's just standing around.

SS: What's the impact of that on the boat, when you're out there fishing?

TT: Time loss and the experience.

SS: Because you're relying on one person to mend?

TT: There's a couple of boats where no one, not even the captain, knew how to mend. If they do damage, they have to come back.

SS: That's sort of a lost art in a lot of ways.

TT: It's sad. Joe Sanfilippo is trying to revive it with that class.

SS: Are there other skills like that, that have been lost?

TT: Splicing. Splicing, a lot of kids don't know how to do that.

SS: What's the reason that that knowledge hasn't been passed on?

TT: They're not from fishing families, or some kids don't want to learn. It is what it is.

SS: I take it that you know how to do that stuff.

TT: Well, yeah.

SS: How did you learn?

TT: Being shown by my grandfather and my father. I was kind of forced into it. Before I started taking the boat, I could mend. I could mend holes and small damage but nothing big. Then, when I started taking the boat as the only one who knew how to mend, I needed to fix the big holes too, so I learned real quick so I wouldn't have to come home with my tail between my legs from a broken trip. It's also good to have another guy who can mend, just to, for one, help you, because sometimes it takes a long time, but to oversee things too, because four eyes are better than two. That, and mechanical work. There's not too many kids who know shit about engines or refrigeration or anything, how to fix things. Tools—you tell them to go get a certain tool, and they don't know what you're talking about. I got one kid who's a welder, he's worked at a shipyard and stuff, so he knows and he helps out a lot.

[17:12]

SS: What would be some ways for people to learn that stuff, so that they can be more of an asset on a boat?

TT: The same way I learned. I wouldn't just go to bed after I got done on deck. I'd come up and ask questions, watch how things are done. If there's something to be fixed, watch. Help out, not just wait for the guy to fix it. Hands-on is the best way. You could tell me how to do something that I don't know how to do, and I'm going to go do it, and probably not know how to do it. But hands-on, if you show me, and I sit there and watch you, I'll learn. For me—some people are different—hands-on, I think, is the best way. I know mending's hard when we're out fishing, because I don't want to teach someone when we're out fishing. I'll just do it, but when we get back to the dock, they don't want to mend. They just want to go home. If you want it, you'll do it. If you want it, you're going to do it. That's how you tell the good help from the people who just want a paycheck. If you want to be a fisherman, want to do this, want to be in this industry, want to be on a boat, versus for some people who just want a paycheck.

SS: You see some of each?

TT: Yeah.

[18:47]

SS: But there are enough people who want to be fishermen and are serious about it?

TT: There are. I have a lot of people messaging me wanting to come out on the boat. They say they got this experience and that experience, and they might. They might be good. But like I said, I kind of stick to people I know, which could be a good thing, could be a bad thing. One time I had one random person who I didn't know. He was from New Jersey. He kept hounding me, so I was like, "Alright, let's go." His first trip, he didn't even show up. It's like, "What happened?" "Oh, I slipped in the rain and hurt my back." "You didn't even call me, or answer my calls or anything like that?" He lasted like four trips, basically. Never again. There's not too many. A lot of people went scalloping. A lot of the good guys are on good groundfish boats or went scalloping or something else. Big money in scalloping. You don't want to mess around with fucking pennies groundfishing. You can mess around with hundred dollar bills out there.

[20:06]

SS: I asked you about yourself earlier, but when you look at other young people, what do you think the draw is for them, in getting into fishing?

TT: I guess the adventure. The excitement. I don't know if they see it on TV or just hear the stories or this and that, and they want to give it a shot. Some of them don't realize how much work is actually involved in it. Not just fishing, but at the dock, too, just to get the boat ready to go fishing. That's a job in itself. It's a lot of work just to get the boat ready. Fixing nets, fixing gear, getting ice, getting groceries, something breaks. It's a nightmare itself. Then I got to wait forty-eight hours for the government, just to get the government thing. Checking the quota, making sure we got quota. Back and forth.

SS: You said your dad handles a lot of that?

TT: He does, but I'm in on it, too. I get emails on quota available, and I'm always checking how much we use and how much we got available. I need to see that too, so I can know what to chase and what not to chase, and what the prices are, so that if something comes up, I can jump on it before someone else buys it. We lease probably seventy or seventy five percent of our fish, which is a big

burden, financially. I think this year alone, we spent probably close to ninety thousand dollars in just quota. You got to do it, though.

SS: Making it work.

TT: Barely. It's hard, but I'm trying to.

[22:14]

SS: What are some of your most favorite and least favorite things about being the captain of the Midnight Sun?

TT: Most favorite, I'm not going to say freedom, because it's not totally free. But the fact that you're out there catching fish, because that's what you're doing—you're hunting, basically. You're providing natural, wild-caught protein for people to eat, and you take some pride in that. It's almost like the last of it. You go to the grocery market, and you see farm-raised shit. You see a lot of beef and stuff like that, and you don't know what's in it and how they treat their animals and this and that. It's not wild-caught. We take some pride in that. Like I said, the chase, the hunt, trying different things and different areas. The tradition—like I said, I'm fifth generation. I want to keep it going. Twenty years from now, I still want to be here, maybe with a new boat, hopefully. Least favorite, the regulations hurt. They hurt. But you got to adapt to it. A lot of boats do different things. Weather always sucks, but you can't change that. Another thing that's been hurting us worse than regulations is the markets, lately. Really, where they've usually been in the past, especially around Lent, Good Friday, you're usually making big money. It hasn't been that the past few years.

SS: What kind of fish, specifically?

TT: Across the board. Now, they got the snapper haddock market that was made. You don't see any good prices come out of that. Once in great a while, you might hit it right, but you bring any good volume in, they're always trying to stick it to you. A few trips back, we had beautiful, beautiful fish. They were Gulf of Maine fish. They weren't Georges Bank. They weren't slinky. They weren't spawned out. They were beautiful fish. No boats unloading at this auction. I was the only boat to unload. We got shitty prices. Why? What's wrong with the fish? Nothing wrong with the fish. The fish are beautiful. What is it? There were no boats in New Bedford, no boats up in Gloucester. It's got to be imports, I guess.

[25:19]

SS: What's a snapper haddock? Small haddock?

TT: A snapper haddock is a sixteen-inch haddock, because the legal limit got changed from eighteen inches to sixteen inches, because the haddock weren't growing to the size they should be. They think it's such a volume of fish, that there isn't enough food for them to eat, or water temperature or whatever it is. They're not growing as fast as they should. A lot of boats were catching big sets of haddock and having to throw them away, because they were sixteen-inch, seventeen-inch haddock. They weren't eighteen-inch. So the government changed it to sixteen-inch. What happened was that just brought the prices down on them smaller fish. You think of it one way, you'd just be throwing them over, so at least you're getting something for them. But the other way, a lot of boats that don't have cutting machines, they got to cut them by hand. You're talking twenty, thirty hours on deck, constant working, if not more, for thirty cents or forty cents sometimes. It's not worth it. That's the reason I got a cutting machine, because I spent forty hours on deck one time and we got screwed on the prices. I said, "I ain't doing this again," and I got this machine. That's that. Imports. Imports. Canada. Even with the whiting, they do that. I hear a lot of the fish dealers talking about that. You're

not getting the return for your product after you've spent a lot of money and the quota, just to buy it. I didn't make any money on codfish last year or this year. But I have to buy it at two-fifty or three dollars a pound just to go fishing. So I'll buy it at two-fifty and get a dollar-fifty, two dollars. I lose money on it, but I need it. Otherwise, I can't go. Dabs, flounders, grey sole, all that stuff, it's the same. The prices just haven't been where they should be, traditionally. I'm not seeing those trends that you could count on, kind of bank on out there. That's a whole other side of it. I think the downfall of this industry, if it keeps going the way it's going, will be that.

SS: The markets? The imports?

TT: The imports. The markets. Because you can't compete with Iceland and Norway, when they got three hundred foot boats. They're building new boats left and right, three hundred foot boats. They got the biggest cod quota in the world—eight hundred thousand metric tons or whatever it is—versus us. They ship a lot of the fish this way and into other markets. When they get a product, they can have it whole, head-on, tail, fillet, skin-on, frozen, this and that. They have such a variety of products that come off the boats. All the companies do over here is just buy the vats. [With Icelandic fish] they buy a container and it's already filleted. Just defrost it and put it in the thing. At the seafood show, I talked to one company in Massachusetts, and they had in the display case redfish, cod, haddock, this and that. So I went up to introduce them. "Maybe we can make a deal. We can sell some fish to them." So I asked them, "Where does your product come from?" "We get it from China." "Where do they get it from?" "They get it from Norway." China buys it. It's shipped over there, defrosted, processed over there, whatever, frozen again, shipped over to these guys, and all they do is defrost it, portion it, and ship it out again. It's like, what the fuck? Seriously. You're in Massachusetts. You don't want to deal with fresh, local fish. That's the way it's going, I think.

SS: Who do you sell your fish to?

TT: Fishermen's Wharf in Gloucester. They're affiliated with the Whaling City Seafood Auction, BASE. It's generally the same buyers.

SS: It's an auction? All kinds of buyers come in?

TT: Yeah. Some of our fish will go down to New Bedford to be processed, or up here, or up to Maine. It goes all over. After that, I don't know where it goes.

[30:00]

SS: When you think about the future, what are your dreams and aspirations? What are the things that keep you up at night when you think about the future?

TT: I hope there will still be an industry. There'll be some people coming up at it. Like I said, there's plenty. My son, I'm kind of at that point right now, because I have a five year old. He loves the boat, loves fishing. I'm kind of on the fence about what to do with that, too. What's this industry going to be in fifteen years? Do I want him to go down the same path I did? I didn't mind it. I loved it. But, you know, we were kind of hoping when the government was saying that the cod are coming back—I think it was 2008 when they did the surveys—something to do with them having false tows or whatever happened. They did the industry surveys with Russell Sherman. They were catching codfish. The government said there was a fluke. An anomaly, I think they called it. They discredited all that information and they started cutting quotas on it. We were hoping on that. That's half the reason we bought this boat, because we were seeing a lot of uptrends in it. But that didn't happen. So, I'm on the fence on what I want to do with him. I want to take him fishing this year. I want to take him on a trip. He's only five, but I don't know if I want him to get into it just yet. We'll see how time goes.

[32:00]

SS: How does he feel?

TT: How does he feel? He loves it. He wants to go. He's always coming down to help unload. I had him driving the boat, even come and dock the boat. I was controlling the throttle, but he was controlling the steering. He docked the boat pretty good.

SS: It's in his blood.

TT: I said, "Make sure you tell all your friends at school that you can dock a ninety-foot boat." We'll see how that goes. Least favorite—what was it?

SS: Things that keep you up at night.

TT: Just the financial situation of it. Everything's getting more expensive. If I can't make the money on this end, it's hard. We used to always paint the boat every year. Now, it's every two years. Prices of everything are going up. Fuel's going up. Quota, that's another thing. What's going to happen with that. They went up on some quotas a little bit. They opened up a couple closed areas, which is good, I guess. That's a good start. But they didn't go up enough on the quotas. We got some back, a little breathing room at least. That brought some of the prices on quota down, like gray sole. Gray sole were selling for a dollar a pound two years ago. Now they're thirty cents, because they upped the quota. The reason they upped the quota was because of the guy with the Karen Elizabeth, down in Rhode Island, who did the twin trawl survey.

SS: Chris Roebuck?

TT: Yeah, Chris Roebuck proved the government wrong when they did that twin trawl survey. That was beautiful. They should do more of that. Both government nets. One had the rock hopper sweep, one of the government trawls, and one was rigged up for flounders, like it should be. If you're going to hunt flounders, then set it up for that. He proved them wrong. That helped out a lot. There should be more industry-based surveys. Hopefully, in the future, they'll do that, and we can maybe work with the Bigelow, doing side-by-side tows. I think there was some talk about that possibly happening. As far as that's going to go, I don't know. There's been instances where I've been on Middle Bank, on top of the bank, catching nothing but haddock. At nighttime, there was codfish. I would just shut down, because I wouldn't even bother. During the daytime, it was all haddock. Nighttime, it was cod. I saw the Bigelow come, when I was on Middle Bank. It was outside of the bank, doing their tows where there wasn't shit. Not once touched where the fish would be. You can't get accurate assessments like that, because fish are night and day, different times of the night and day, different depths. That whole random thing—random tows, picking spots—that doesn't really work. Maybe there will be a little more collaboration and we can get past this whole bullshit. I just hope there's something at least left, so I can do another twenty years. I'm young, but I've been doing this a long time. This year, I actually got fed up with a lot of stuff, just because there was a lot of bullshit this year. I don't know if it's all just piling up and piling up, but we'll see how it goes.

[36:21]

SS: You said you don't own the Midnight Sun. Your dad owns it. At some point in the future, are you planning to be the owner?

TT: Maybe when he passes. Other than that, I'd rather have him. It's his boat. Until he's ready. I'm happy with what I'm doing. He's happy with the way everything's going. That's that. Besides, I'd

rather have him still own it, come down here, stay moving. He's sixty-five, I think, sixty-six. The other guy I've got, he's sixty-seven. Got to keep them old guys active. Once they stop, they don't know what to do with themselves. That's when they fall apart. Besides, this is all he's done all his life. He wouldn't stop, anyways. I mean, eventually, it will get to that point, but not yet.

SS: Are there any things we haven't talked about yet that are important to understanding your experience as a young fisherman?

TT: I can't really think of much right now.

[37:45]

SS: Let me ask, if you fast forward a little bit and you were training your son or someone like him—a younger person—to enter this industry, what are some words of wisdom that you would offer them?

TT: That's a good question. Kind of, "Don't give up." A lot of people don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. You just got to kind of keep your head down and keep going. That's how I did it. Just kept working, kept busy, and hoped the best for the future. That's all you can do, really.

SS: Is there an example of that, from your own story? A time when things were tough but you kept going?

TT: Well, yeah. My dad was thinking about selling the boat. I told him, "No, you don't. It's going to get better." I figured he was just getting fed up with stuff, with the way this was going.

SS: When was that?

TT: About ten years ago, when we first got the boat. That first year was kind of tough for us. The silver hake kind of played out. That's when I kind of decided, maybe I should just jump into it and take the boat and see what happens. "I'm young. I'm ambitious, ready to go, ready to do it." He was kind of getting older. It seemed like he wanted to slow down a bit. I figured I would do it and see how the future comes about. It all worked out.

SS: So, "Don't give up"?

TT: I guess so. That's it. You got bad trips and good trips. You just got to kind of keep going. You learn. Always be aware of what's going on, and learn. I'm glad I learned from my grandfather—my mother's father. My father's father died before I started fishing. He used to go hand-lining, long-lining. I wish he was still around just to see the boat, see where we've come. Yeah, learn what you can from the older guys around you, because they ain't always going to be around. Like I said, I'm glad I learned when I was younger. I messed around, fucked around a lot. I also tried to learn a lot, too. Because once that's gone, that's it. You ain't going to have them old-school people who know a lot of the fishing areas—even just the fishing areas that my father would tell me about, and this and that.

[41:12]

[unrelated conversation between Tommy and his father]

[41:46]

SS: Do you have any reflections on the social aspects of being a fisherman?

TT: As far as home life?

SS: Yeah, home life, friendships.

TT: Being down here a lot kind of ruins your home life. Some people are different, but when you're responsible for things and you're the one of the only ones who can fix things, you're down here a lot more than other people. You tell them to go home, because they're just standing around. Case in point, that cutting machine. One time we had to go fishing at three. I had a bunch of stuff to do, and nobody else knows how to fix it. It was eleven o'clock. I stayed down here all the way to until three, and even on the steam out, just to get it working for those guys so they're not cutting by hand. Cutting into my time at home with my family. I'm just constantly not making money, just spending money, so I got to constantly be fishing. It takes a toll on family life. We get all our calls from home, and now that my son's getting older and older, he's realizing that I'm not there as much. "Dad, don't go fishing anymore." He wants to be with me, and it's starting to rip at the heart. Before, when he was younger, he couldn't talk. Yeah, it takes a big toll. A lot of hardship. You got to be with somebody who's strong and independent.

SS: As a partner, you mean?

TT: Yeah. It's not for every girl.

SS: You have a significant other?

TT: Yeah. Like I said, a lot of calls from home. She doesn't really have anyone. Her mother died when she was young. Her father died just recently. She only has my family, really. It's harder on her because of that. Me, it was always kind of, my father was a fisherman. He started off on day boats. He'd be one a day, two days. But he would fish nearly every day. There were a lot of baseball games and things he missed. It's part of the business, part of the job.

SS: I would call Gloucester a fishing community. Would you agree?

TT: Yeah.

SS: How does your community view what you do?

TT: A lot of people love it and respect it. You got some people—environmentalists—I've had some conversations with people who don't agree with what I do. You've got those people, but a lot of them respect it and love it. We're still here, with everything that's happening. They read a lot in the paper about all the regulations. They know what's going on. I think the best thing to do is get more awareness out there about what actually goes on in the fishing industry. The regulations, they don't understand. They hear about it, but they don't understand.

SS: It's complicated.

TT: You can sit there and tell them about it. They're like, "What the fuck? How do you deal with that?" We're one of the most regulated industries. It's constantly changing, and sometimes we don't even understand it. A lot of people don't know how we deal with it. It's all I know. It's all I have. Recently, I was thinking, "What would I do if I didn't have this?" I couldn't imagine myself doing something else. Not even money wise, just actually doing it. An office job. I'm not a hundred percent a people person. I get agitated easily. I mean, I guess I could adapt and go do tugboating. A lot of people do tugboating now. I'd have to be on the water or something. Or I'll go all the way to Iceland and get on some factory boat. Alaska. Or scalloping, it's close enough. To find one of those jobs is kind of slim.

[47:00]

SS: What would you miss the most about it?

TT: Just the ocean. Not too many people do it.

SS: That makes it special?

TT: Yeah. It's got its ups and downs, fifty-fifty ups and downs. Like I said, when you're just getting into it like some of these kids, it's different from when you're born into it.

SS: How so?

TT: It's just whatever to me. It's just another day. It's just what I do. To them, it's more of an adventure, more exciting. To me, it's just a job. When you do something year after year after year, it's still special, but you see all different sides of it—the expenses, this and that. It makes it a little less glamorous.

SS: The infatuation isn't there.

TT: Before, when I started, I used to love running in rough weather. I used to love it. Then, once you start running the boat and having to catch fish, you don't like it so much. But you just have to deal with it.

SS: Why did you love it, just the excitement?

TT: Yeah. The waves. But when it's rough weather, the fish disappear and you can't work certain areas. The guys' lives are at risk. Someone could get hurt, and stuff like that. You got to take it more seriously. Like, I used to drink a lot more. It was fun, when I was young. I don't do that no more, because I got to keep a clear head. I see some people running the boat who are all fucked up on drugs. I'm like, "How the fuck do they do it, without getting people hurt?" It's good, though, because it straightened me out.

[50:20]

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

TT: I just hope there can be something in the industry where we can be profitable and show a reflection of the product we catch and our hard work. We need more of a market for fresh, local fish. But I don't see the benefit of it to the Port of Gloucester boats. It worked out for a lot of Maine boats. The whole Ninety Nine Restaurant thing. I don't know if you've heard of that.

SS: No, I haven't heard about that.

TT: GSP Mazzetta set up shop in Gloucester.

SS: Who is GSP Mazzetta?

TT: Mazzetta's some big company out of Chicago—lobster, salmon—big, big company. They bought Good Harbor Fillet up in Blackburn. They spent like ten million dollars redoing everything in there. They came down here buying fish, offering set prices, because at the auction, you get a high price and then it's down, down, down, down, down. Instead, with this, you get a set price. You know what you're getting before you even come in. Just talking it up and trying to get a lot of Gloucester boats in

on it. What happened was Jimmy Odlin up in Maine, he's got his fleet of boats, and they contracted with that. He took it out from under everybody. He's got the Harmony, Nobska, Morue, TM IV—one of my buddies is working on that. They just go out and pound haddock and bring in haddock for these contracts. They kind of screwed me over a couple times, when they were like, "We need twenty-five thousand pounds of haddock." I went out, and in two days, I got twenty-five thousand of haddock, and they didn't want it. "But you told me to go out and get you this haddock. I was in in two days." I was like, "Why?" It's like, "Well, we're going to wait for the Harmony to come in." That boat didn't come in for another four days later. That boat had week-old fish versus two-day old fish, after they told me to go out and catch it for them. I was like, "Fuck you. Never again." They ended up shutting down and started back up. There was a whole big thing about it.

SS: So that didn't work. What would work? Do you have any recommendations that people ought to be thinking about?

TT: First, you got to get the market going. The city, the state, whatever it is, needs to get behind it and help out, because I can't. This is my job. Other boats, they can't do it by themselves. It used to be, I guess in the plans of our state fish pier, it was initially supposed to be a processing plant for boats to bring their groundfish to be sold off. The state needs to get involved in something like that and have a state-run processing plant, where they will give us a better price—cut out the middleman, because they're making a lot. I get pissed off. I bring in fifty-cent haddock. I get fifty cents a pound for the small haddock, and I go to market and see it for six dollars, seven dollars a pound. I know everybody needs to make money, but they can adjust their price to cover their cost and their expense, and still make a profit. But when you give me fifty cents a pound, everybody's making money off of me—the oil, the ice, the fucking insurance—and I can't adjust my price. I can't say, "No I won't take fifty cents. I want seventy-five cents." I just have to take what they give me. That's the hurt about it. I can't control the price of my product. If the state got behind something and created some markets and did some promotions, or whatever. I don't know how it would be done. But if they opened up a processing plant and had people working there, boats could go sell their fish there, instead of these auctions. A lot of them, they bid you down big. I've had times when the fishing started out at a dollar twenty, and they had it down to forty cents. It's all the same thing. How do you get from a dollar twenty down to forty? That's a big stretch. It's just crazy. I know there's supply and demand and all that. "Well, you're buying imports. They control the supply and the demand. Don't buy the imports. Buy the fresh, local fish first, and then buy the imports to fill the void." They buy the imports for cheap. Like I said, regulations and the markets.

SS: That's what's going to determine the future of the fishing industry?

TT: That's it. Used to go out before Christmas, to Middle Bank, and get a few thousand pounds of cod. The price used to be sky-high, because everybody wanted codfish. We used to get seven dollars a pound for codfish. I haven't even seen four dollars a pound. The highest I've seen this year was three-twenty. But you pay three dollars, and making twenty cents, so big deal.

SS: That's tough, when you're limited on the quantity and then the prices go down.

[56:39]

TT: Yeah, because nowadays, you have to catch more to make the same, with groundfish.

SS: And there aren't other species you can diversify to?

TT: There are. You can redfish. We've been doing a lot of redfishing, because that's like a set price, fifty-five cents. With haddock, you have to catch them with a hundred thousand, a hundred and ten thousand just to make eighty thousand dollars or something like that. That's because the snappers—

the fucking snappers. I'm just not seeing the return I used to. I used to go out and get fifteen thousand in a few days and come in and get two fifty, three dollar a pound average. We used to make money on quick trips. Now I got to stay out longer and catch more fish just to make the same. Then you catch too much fish, and they get you. If you don't catch enough fish, it's hard to cover expenses. Sometimes it's five, six, seven, eight thousand just to pay for quota. Then it's five, six, seven, eight thousand dollars to pay for fuel, for two or three thousand gallons of fuel. I think it's two eighty, two sixty a gallon. That's one third if not more of your trip right there, sometimes. Just trying to make everything work. Keep your head down. Keep going.

SS: Are you involved in any marketing councils or even management or science councils?

[58:25]

TT: I would go with my father, but they're going to do what they want to do. They have their agendas. It doesn't matter. They don't really listen to the fisherman. My dad was head of the small mesh whiting council. Recently, we were trying to get it into limited access. Every other fishery has gone into limited access—skate, red crab. There were people for it and people against it. We were for it, because we didn't want a lot of the groundfish boats to come into whiting. The whiting market is a very touchy market. If you get three boats coming in, literally the price will crash. You've got these guys groundfishing with low quotas who want to go. Then you got more boats, more pressure. It happened. There were a lot of small boats going. "Oh, we're a small boat. We can only bring in so much." "But you're crashing the market." It was so bad that the price was ten cents a pound. Then you got to pay twenty cents a pound to pay for wharfage, boxes, and shipping. That just doesn't work. We were trying to get limited access to get those boats out who never went, never had the history, but now showed an interest in it because of what's happening with groundfish. That's what happened is we went whiting fishing to ease the pressure on groundfish because we got screwed on it. So the shoe was kind of on the other foot. It ended up getting shut down. I think there were politics with it. Certain people in this town have more pull than other people and didn't want to see it go that way. Some of the small boats that just started. It is what it is. There was a concern about bycatch with red hake. But then, why would you want more boats to go? Some boats didn't know where they were towing. They were towing in deeper water, catching a lot of groundfish and a lot of flounders. They didn't know how to rig their nets up right, and they had cookie ground cable, which is illegal. They had observers on the boat, and that can get the industry shut down. We're supposed to stay under five to seven percent bycatch. We have to stay clear of everybody else. We're just trying to protect our industry. My dad's been doing this whiting. I've been doing it all my life, too. We don't want to see it shut down. It's a big part of our income. He kind of got fed up with it. Like I said, they can do what they want to do. There's a lot of action against that. It's just agendas. She got it pushed through. Look where it brought us now, after all the promises. "There's going to be so much fish around. The prices are going to go up." If anything, the prices went down. The only time the prices went up was the year after it got implemented. For one, a lot of people didn't know what was going to happen, so a lot of people weren't fishing. And then two, the volcano erupted in Iceland and they couldn't fly their fish over here to supply their imports. Prices for everything went through the roof.

SS: Completely unrelated to the policy change.

TT: Completely unrelated. But as soon as they started shipping again, our fish prices went down. That's how big of an impact. I'm talking, it went up a dollar and a half on everything. That's how much influence the imports have. If the imports weren't affecting this industry, there'd be a lot more money. That's out of our control. Yeah, the council, I kind of lost faith. I mean, there's a lot of people helping out and trying, and a lot of good does get done. But I've seen a lot of times when it should have went the other way, but they knew what they wanted to do, and that was that. Like I'm sure you guys are dealing with that wind thing down there, right?

SS: Yeah.

TT: I don't know if you're for it or against it, but just what I see online in the articles that I read, it looks like they're pushing it through.

SS: It's happening really fast.

TT: Money talks. Anything else?

SS: Not for me. Do you have anything else?

TT: Not really.

SS: Oh, I forgot to ask what the length of the Midnight Sun is?

TT: Eighty-seven foot.

SS: Eighty-seven foot.

TT: Big little boat. We don't have a lot of power. It's a little limitation. We're only five hundred and forty horse. Usually, boats this size are six, seven, eight hundred. But you look at the other hand, we don't burn a lot of fuel. We burn three hundred, three hundred and fifty gallons a day, where a lot of other boats are burning five, six, seven, eight hundred gallons a day. We save a lot there. That was a big part of buying this boat was the compromise, because when you're fishing for whiting and the prices are cheap, you don't want a big fuel bill.

SS: Are you still doing most of the fishing on Georges Bank and the canyons?

TT: We haven't been to the canyons in years. From here, it takes twenty-eight hours to get to Munson's Canyon. Don't want to deal with that. Georges. We've been doing a lot of Gulf of Maine, redfishing way out east. Trying to keep it close. Wherever the fish are.

SS: Alright, sounds good. I'll shut this off. Thank you for your time.

[65:22]

[end of interview]