Nancy Egloff: It is October 26, 1981. This is another monthly noon conversation of the Woods Hole Library's historical collection. Today, Warren E. Bailey, "Ski" Bailey, talks about Sam Cahoon's fish market and the early history of the fishing industry in Woods Hole. Elsa Sichel is taping the talk. Nancy Egloff is introducing Ski Bailey as follows. Mr. Bailey was born on North Street in Woods Hole and attended school in the village. He worked for Sam Cahoon until the age of seventeen. He then enlisted in the Navy during World War II. He … [RECORDING PAUSED] – fish market in Falmouth, where he still carries on with the help of his wife, Elizabeth.

F: He returned to the market after the war and worked there for twenty years and has since been manager of the Harbor View Fish Market on Falmouth Harbor. Mrs. Bailey is with us too. We encourage you all to interrupt, ask questions, and reminisce out loud with Ski so that we can have this for our oral history collection. We are very happy that you could come and take time to do this for us, Ski.

Warren Bailey: Very nice of you to ask me. If you don't mind, I'll stay seated. I don't want to detach my umbilical cord here. [laughter] As Nancy said, my first association with the fish business was when I went to work for Sam Cahoon in April of 1942. The war was, what, four or five months old then. Pardon me. I had left high school. I had credits enough to graduate. I left with the idea I was going immediately into the service. It didn't work out that way. I went to Boston, had preliminary physicals, and whatnot. They had such a huge backlog of people to be processed that [to] a lot of us, they said, "You go home, and we'll call you." I thought it would be a matter of a week, ten days, something like that. As it happened, it wasn't until the following October that they got in touch. So, I was always rather proud of the fact that Sam Cahoon asked me if I'd like to come to work for him. When I left school, as I said, it was with the intention of going immediately into the service. So, I didn't look around for a job. He asked me one day if I thought I'd like to go to work for him. I told him what the circumstances were. He said, "That's all right. We'll go on that basis and see what happens." Well, as it happened, I stayed all that summer. It was not only a job; it was like joining a family to work there. They're awfully close, tight-knit bunch of people. Outsiders were tolerated, but they weren't accepted. [laughter] For a long time after I first went there – because I was the youngest one there. The other people were all married, had families, and – well, not too much older than I am. Some of them were in their late twenties, early thirties. But they'd worked together for quite some time. I was an interloper. I was the butt of all the jokes. Anything that came up, I was the fall guy. I got so frustrated one day that I blew up. I said, "You can take your job and do what you think best with it. I quit." So, one of the men, [inaudible] Chase, who later became the best friend I think I had, took me to one side. He said, "Look, if we take the time and have the interest to give you a bad time, don't worry about it." [laughter] He said, "But if we leave you to your own devices, then you better go ahead and quit." So, many things that are unique or, I think, are unique to the fish business may be commonplace in other industries, but I have no basis for comparison because other than my military service, summer jobs, or after-school jobs while growing up, I never worked in any other industry. I, like I suppose many people, over the years, have thought of other things I might have done or might have liked better. But I never did find anything that I liked better than what I did or what I'm doing. When I say things I thought were unique to the fish business, I think Frances Cahoon Shepherd can testify to this. When I first went to work for her father, almost all business was done on a cash basis. The fishermen, particularly the older men, seemed

to have an inherent dislike of checks. They wanted to see the cash. Consequently, the business was run pretty much on a cash basis until Frances took over that end of it and set it up on a business-like check-working basis. They just could not see a piece of paper representing a week's work. They had to have the money. Quite often, one of us would be sent to Falmouth. There was no local branch bank then. We'd be given a bank bag. Two or three times, it was my lot to go. I didn't know what was in the bag. I assumed a few deposit slips, an order for whatever cash or coins they needed to conduct daily business. One of the men said to me one time, "Have you ever stopped to think about what's in that bag?" I said, "No, not really." He said, "Well, sometimes, there's many thousands of dollars." So, the next time the boss told me I should go to the bank, I said, "Cap, what happens if somebody is serious in saying they want this?" He says, "Bub, give it to them." I said, "I'll look rather foolish coming back here and telling you I was held up and don't have the money." He said, "Well, you'll look a lot more foolish if you get hit in the head and don't come back." [laughter] So, he didn't seem to be too worried about it. The pictures on the tables here, this one in particular, pretty much representative of the type of boats that were in use at that time. Some of them were what were called Nantucket sloops. There were a couple, as I remember, that dated back to the old salt fishing days on the Grand Banks. They had been kept in service, old as they were, engines put in them. They were nowhere near as sophisticated as today's boats. Those of you who have been down by the town dock have seen the big steel, stern trawlers, all their sophisticated equipment. These boats had very little of that. As I remember it, there were very few, if any, radios on the boats before the war. Radar, LORAN, depth finders – those came, a lot of them, as developments of the war. It was quite a while before they were cut down to size that a fishing boat could accommodate because, in the beginning, they were pretty cumbersome things and required a lot of room, which they didn't have. With all the sophistication, I think we lose something because these boats did exactly what they were intended to do. They were small. They didn't carry a lot of ice, a lot of fuel. They were intended to fish the shoals around Nantucket, out behind the Vineyard, and off Nomans Land. There were usually two, three-day trips. Consequently, the fish, when it arrived at the market, some of it was still flapping on deck from the last tow they'd made. Now, the boats, to pay off a million, million and a half mortgages, have to go to Georges Banks. They have to stay a week or ten days. So, I do think, in that sense, we've lost something. The bigger and newer boats that you see now with all the up-to-date gear, the electronics [and] equipment alone costs many thousands of dollars. There's a picture of it here, both the boats I'm familiar with. One is Henry Klimm's. The other one was Jared Vincent's. I think Jerry told me, at the time, he had her built – well, he had one built. It was just about to go fishing, and the Navy took it. After the war, he had the second one built. I think he told me, at the time, it was somewhere just over forty thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. But with interest rates at five or six percent, it was much different than a million, a million and a half steel-hulled stern trawlers they have today, with interest rates at eighteen or twenty percent. I mean, things are not in proportion. There were relatively few new boats built or came into the fleet. There were one, two, maybe three or four. Some years, none, for two or three years. So, it was a long time before the fishing industry got updated. In fact, some of them are still using boats that are fifty and sixty years old. I saw someone come into the meeting here a few minutes ago, that I have known for many, many years, Loretta Doucette. Her brother, Louis Doucette, was for many years captain of one of Sam Cahoon's scallopers. I was quite pleased the other morning. I listen to the fish news on the way to work every morning. Among other things, they mentioned that Captain Louis Doucette and his wife were celebrating,

I believe it was their 51st wedding anniversary.

F: Can she stand up?

WB: Beg your pardon?

F: Mrs. Doucette.

WB: Loretta, would you stand up so they can see –?

Loretta Doucette: I think 51st or 52nd.

WB: As I said, I wasn't too sure. Another captain of Sam Cahoon's boat, the *B & E*, Eli Pothier, who I knew well for many years, his daughter, or one of his daughters, lives here in town. I'm not sure just where. She came into the market and made herself known a few months ago. She said that she had seen her father, and he was asking about me. It tends to leave you with some pretty good feelings. As a personal opinion, I don't think that Woods Hole will ever again see what existed in those days. There isn't room for it. With transportation methods and particularly energy costs what they are today, the closer you can get to the scene, such as New Bedford, Boston, Gloucester, the closer the boats are going to go. Right now, New Bedford or parts of the industry have been on strike. I think this is the fourteenth week. Many of the local boats that tie up here in Woods Hole have been going to Provincetown, Sandwich. Some of the bigger boats have been going as far as Portland, Maine, to take their fish out. Everyone loses in a case like that. The boats that go far afield to sell their trips, quite often, will leave from that same port and go back out fishing and stay away from home for two or three trips. Consequently, they buy their fuel, their ice, their groceries, all in the port where they've taken their fish out. So, it's like a domino game. It trickles down through to even the smallest individual connected with the business. Hopefully, it'll soon be settled, but it hasn't been as yet. Are there any questions? The reason I ask is I may overlook some things that you might be interested in. I said to my wife this morning, "After spending almost forty years in the business, I wonder what I can find to talk about that will fill up an hour." [laughter]

F: Ski, could you mention for us some of the people that you worked with?

WB: Yes. There was Leslie Chase, whose family, for many years, lived in the house which the society or the association now owns right next door here. Bill Miles – he still lives in Falmouth. Harold (Crocker?) died. George (Fraley?), Marty (Rogers?) – those were all people – some of whom were with Sam long before I went to work with him. People named Coombs owned it originally. I'm not sure that I'm right, but I think the Prince Crowell, who many of you knew, had some business association with him. John Nagel company in Boston later bought the business from Coombs. Sam Cahoon, in turn, bought it from John Nagel.

F: What year was that?

WB: Oh, good lord. It was before I went there.

F: My sister would know. [inaudible] What year?

M: 1907 about?

WB: I really don't know.

F: No, it was 19 –

F: ’13?

M: 1914 was when it started.

F: Oh, I see.

F: Are the kinds of fish that were taken changed over the years?

WB: Not so much changed, as some of them are nowhere near as abundant as they used to be. They still catch flounders, cod, haddock, that sort of thing. But many things like halibut that used to be a daily offering, sometimes, now, if you see it three or four times a year, you're fortunate.

F: Used to sell a lot of mackerel.

WB: Yes. Well, many years ago, the market for mackerel became nonexistent, mostly because of the fact that the seiners out of Gloucester who were most active in that fishery, the mackerel just disappeared. For a long time, in any quantity, they were absent from the market. Many of the boats that they had used were old, converted hundred-and-ten-foot World War I submarine chasers. They weren't built for the fishing industry. People who owned them, when the mackerel disappeared, tried to convert them to dragging or scalloping. But they just were not built for that kind of use. They have gradually disappeared. We had two or three that used to come into Woods Hole. In fact, the Vadala family, one of whom still lives here in town, in Falmouth, he and his brothers had a hundred-and-ten-foot mackerel seiner. But they had to divert it to dragging. Finally, she sank. She was on a fishing trip. Just so old that she just outlived her usefulness.

F: Could you tell us something about the ice that you used, where you got it?

WB: Yes. Well, allied with the fishing business, Sam Cahoon also owned his own ice plant, which was on Miles Pond in Sippewissett that burned down several years ago. But to my knowledge, it was one of the very few, if not the only one, in this area that was totally self-contained. All the power, electricity, and otherwise that was necessary to make ice was manufactured right there in the plant. Didn't rely on any outside utility source. During one of the hurricanes – I can't remember which one it was, possibly ‘54 – we were the only plant from here to Plymouth on one side and to Providence, Rhode Island, on the other, that could still manufacture ice. Consequently, I guess for ten days, maybe two weeks, there were trailer trucks from the length of the coast coming down to buy ice because they had none. It was a relatively

small plant. We couldn't continue that indefinitely because we had to have enough for our own needs. When I first started working for the boss, all our fish was trucked from Woods Hole either to Providence, New Bedford, or Boston. I can remember the first time I ever went to Providence. The last train for New York left Providence freight yard at 10:30 at night. I think it was around seven o'clock. I don't know whether the other drivers were ill or what the story was, but he said, "Bub, I guess you're elected. You ever been to Providence?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, you'll find it." I did. Before I left, he said, "Don't forget, that train leaves at 10:30. The fish has to be on it so it could be in New York for market the next morning." He said, "If you get a ticket going over, I'll see what I can do. If you get one coming back, you're on your own." That was the way he did things. I never knew a finer man.

F: Can I go from fish to pills?

WB: Sure.

F: Do you remember Dr. Jones [inaudible]?

WB: I certainly do. I certainly do.

F: The beginning of placebo. [laughter] I'm not exactly – but do you remember at ten – you remember [inaudible] ten o'clock, Dr. Jones would appear at the market. Everybody would [inaudible] went down there rather than have a house call. It was two dollars for a house call. Then, he would bring out the old pills. They were taken for a variety of purposes. They cured more ailments. Now, I look back, they made me believe in [inaudible]. Years later, I found out what the main ingredient was. It was quinine. But you took them for all kinds of things, and it worked. So, there must've been something in it. [laughter] I can see the people going down there now. Everybody could walk. It wasn't just –

F: In that little office on the side?

WB: Yes.

F: Right [inaudible] by the fish counter. Right in the main room. You met new friends, got your medicine, and went home.

WB: Yes, it was Dr. Jones and –

F: Tom has a question.

WB: Oh, I'm sorry.

M: Excuse me. Going back to the ice pond, did they ever harvest ice off the pond?

WB: Yes. That was what the plant was originally built for.

M: But then [inaudible]?

WB: They did for a couple of winters. But after that, the winters never were severe enough to be able to rely on it. Consequently, the boss built – if I keep calling him the boss, it's out of habit. [laughter] Except for a very few old-timers that were there and went into the business originally with Sam, there were two or three that called him Sam because they were of an age and they'd been together for quite a while. Most of the rest of us, in referring to him amongst ourselves, called him the boss. If we went to talk to him personally, it was Cap. I've always remembered him that way.

F: Ski?

WB: Yes.

F: Maybe you'd like to tell them about the day you were going to get married. But you did get married.

WB: Yes. I can't remember the reason now, but for some reason, we were being married at eight o'clock in the evening. So, that morning, I said to the boss, "Could I possibly have the day off?" That was unheard of. He said, "For what?" I said, "Well, I'm getting married." "Well, what time?" I said, "Eight o'clock tonight." He said, "Well, it doesn't take all day to get married." [laughter] That was the end of that conversation. [laughter] Yes?

F: I have a question and a comment. The question is, we used to like best the bonitos. We were always told that it wasn't a marketable fish because it perished quickly. We could get it at the market. It was wonderful. Were you selling it then?

WB: It's very much marketable, but there isn't a great call for it. Yes, they were selling it then. Many of the fish that we were able to handle here in Woods Hole came because of the fact there were traps out in Buzzards Bay. A lot of those fish were caught commercially only in traps. Bonito. Early years – porgies or scup, butterfish – those were caught in abundance by those methods. There were some caught with nets, dragging, but not to that extent. Plus, the fact, from the time they left the trap in Buzzards Bay until they hit the dock at the market, ninety percent of them were still alive. And mackerel on a seasonal basis.

F: The comment I have is that the fish market was originally owned by a man named Isaiah Spindel.

WB: Yes, you're right.

F: Azariah Crowell, who was his partner. Prince Crowell never had any interest in it. He was his son.

WB: Oh, I was just going under that assumption. I know Prince –

F: No, I don't think so because it was sold so far [inaudible].

WB: Well, possibly not, but there were some parts of the Crowell family that were involved.

F: They were the two that had the fish [inaudible].

WB: I know Prince, when I first went to work in Falmouth, brought in an old ledger sheet showing some of the prices over the retail counter at that time, such as seventeen cents a pound for salmon, forty-five cents a pound for lobsters, that sort of thing. Yes.

M: Could you say something about –? Where did the boats come from [inaudible]?

WB: Most of ours were predominantly from Nantucket, the Vineyard, [and] a few from Woods Hole. Like Sam's two scallopers, the *B & E* and the *3 & 1 & 1*, they were home-ported in New Bedford because their crews lived in New Bedford. There weren't very many people here that were interested or involved in sea scalloping. To get a knowledgeable crew, they had to come from New Bedford. These people made up the crews of those boats. Something that might be of interest, the *B & E* – I'm not sure, but I think that's her there – was named after Bertha Salvador and Elsie Cahoon, who was Cynthia and Frances' mother. Bertha Salvador was John Salvador's wife from the Vineyard, who, at least for a time, was in ownership with Sam on the boat. I do remember an incident that I don't have firsthand knowledge of, but I heard many times from the older men that John Salvador had a boat of his own before they got involved in this one. A lot of people said he was a hard man. I don't think he was. He had a boat to pay for and a lot of money at stake. Many of his crew, as they are today, belonged to the union. In the ports like New Bedford and Boston, you pretty much had to. Many of the skippers and owners didn't. John went out on a trip one time, so the story goes. His men were all union people. They got out on Georges Bank, scalloping. I don't know whether the weather was bad, the scallops weren't plentiful, or what, but the men got disgruntled. They said they thought they should go home. John said no, they weren't going home. So, they got together and threw the shovels overboard. Those were quite necessary because of all the debris that came up in the scallop dredge on deck. Everything but the scallops had to be shoveled back overboard. So, they went and said, "Cap, we've thrown the shovels overboard. We can't work. So, we have to go home." John looked at them – so the story goes – and he said, "Well, you fellows are such staunch union men." He said, "Just reach in your back pocket and get your union books and start shoveling with them because we're not going home." But as I say, I don't think he was a hard man. He was in a business, and he had his boat to pay for. The bank wanted their money on time. Yes?

M: Ski, excuse me. I've talked to a number of people about Sam Cahoon. I did not know him personally. But everybody I talked to always refers to Sam calling everybody "Bub," which is a very friendly way to deal with a guy who's working for you. You haven't mentioned the word Bub.

F: Yeah, he did. He called himself.

M: Oh, he did?

WB: Yes.

M: I guess I missed it.

M: Did the other [inaudible] that name?

WB: Oh, yes.

F: – by that name?

WB: No, I mean, that was his name for whoever he was talking to.

F: Yes.

F: Can you tell us a little about swordfish? What is the future? We used to have so much swordfish.

F: I can tell you only what I know about it from first hand observation. There's a lot of difference of opinion. When I first got involved with the fish business, the only method they had of catching swordfish was by harpoon. Consequently, for every fish they ironed, there were many more that they never saw. Today, they use long lines, and anything that takes the bait on the hook is caught regardless of size. I mean, they have no control over what takes the hook. Now, whether that depletes the source, I don't know. I've heard pro and con on the issue. Some people say that the swordfish they catch on long lines are not the same ones that they would be harpooning. Others take the opposite side of the story. I really don't know. I do know, from people that I talk to almost every day, that up until the big mother ships and factory ships of other nations appeared on Georges Banks, swordfish in the summertime, from about the first of July until possibly the middle of September, were caught relatively close inshore. I mean, thirty or forty miles out behind the Vineyard. When those boats were working on Georges Banks, the bait fish that the swordfish had come inshore after began to be very scarce. Consequently, the swordfish weren't found as close to home. I do know from people who have been swordfishing this past summer by harpoon method that the swordfish are appearing again in areas where they haven't been for many years and that the bait fish have also come back in there. Now, whether it's coincidental or whether the two go hand in hand, I don't know. I can only conjecture.

F: Speaking of swordfish, I remember in the ’30s, we would like to watch the big swordfish being hauled out of the boat. We could know ahead how many of the swordfish would be in the boat because it was a habit for a while to leave the sword on the deck. You could count the number of swords, and then you would know how many great huge swordfish would be hauled out. They were packed in ice, and regular derricks used to pull them out. Is that a custom to leave the swords on the deck?

WB: No. Quite often, the boat owner will save some for his own personal use, or friends ask him to save one or something. But by and large, when they're dressed at sea, the sword, along with the rest of the unusable fish, goes over the side. Yes?

F: I have two memories of Sam Cahoon as a kid, going there with my mother to buy fish almost every day. One is of getting swords to take home and bury in the backyard, so they were clean

and dig them up and hang them on the garage [laughter] door. The other one is with all Sam Cahoon's cats with about twenty toes.

All: [laughter]

WB: Those cats, I believe, have got to the point where they were pretty much like the Woods Hole black dog is now. There always were cats around the market. When I said that there were things I thought unique to the fish business in all the years that I've been in it – and there again, I don't have much of any basis for comparison. But, to my knowledge, it's one of the few where you can do business with people on the telephone for years at a time and never meet them except on the telephone. I did in the past, and I still do. Many of the people that I talk to almost every day I have never met. Sometimes, it's a little difficult to reconcile yourself to the fact that you're entrusting money and fish to someone that you don't – it seems to me if you can meet them on a personal level, you get a lot more insight into the person. But that's not always possible. I know I've talked to people in Virginia, New York, Philadelphia that I have never met. I guess it's the same throughout the fish business. But quite often, when I worked at Sam Cahoon's – because part of the business I'm in now is quite a bit different in the respect that it's only a retail business. We do some business with people like the Coast Guard or the fisheries vessels or that sort of thing. But we don't take out boats and ships as was the primary business in those days. I know many times I've talked to people in Norfolk, Virginia. You'd send a trailer load of fish that was worth anywhere from – depending on the species of fish – ten, twenty-thousand dollars' worth of fish to a man you knew only on the telephone. In the back of your mind, you often wondered, "Well, am I on safe ground?" But the business has been conducted for many more years than I've been in it on that basis. Pretty much, the industry has a way of policing itself. I know if you do business with suppliers, you naturally give them credit references/character references, and you do business on that basis. But if for some reason you want to do business with someone new, not necessarily new in the industry, but new to me perhaps, you ask people who you are doing business with if they know anything about it or about the business. It's odd and sometimes humorous about the way they will avoid the issue if they don't think too much of that particular person or business, and hem and haw. "Well, I really don't know too much about them." So, you rather instinctively learn that you had better not try and do business with those particular people because it might not work out too well. So, they do have some sort of control over each other. Yes, Frannie?

Frances Cahoon Shepherd: Ski, I have a letter here that would be fun – I could read it. My father tells him – what? I think he joined maybe some organization. So, he told about the fishing industry. So, I think –

WB: I wish I'd brought my glasses.

FCS: Oh, come on now.

WB: I didn't.

F: You want to head over to the front and read it?

FCS: It's got places where it's – oh, simply if I could [inaudible] nervous.

F: Somebody hand her some glasses. [laughter]

FCS: It's got one of Johnny Nagel [inaudible].

WB: They seem to work all right.

F: All right?

WB: Yes.

F: He's got glasses now.

FCS: [inaudible]

F: Oh, that's great.

FCS: You have to skip the places that are chewed out.

F: You want to read it out loud?

FCS: It's all right.

WB: No, no.

All: [laughter]

WB: This was written by your father?

FCS: Yes, I guess [inaudible] Hammond must have [inaudible].

WB: "Born in Woods Hole in the middle chamber of the farmhouse owned by Mr. F.C."
– Doster?

F: Foster.

WB: Foster. "In the year 1878, I attended grammar school in Woods Hole and later went to the Lawrence High School. During the spring and fall terms, I walked from Woods Hole to Falmouth, both morning and night. During the winter months, I went on the train, leaving Woods Hole at 7:15 in the morning, returning on the train at 6:35 at night. At that time, there were only two teachers in the high school, Pa [Lane?) and Ma (Gardner?). My father was not able to buy extra clothes for me nor to provide the means for me going to dances. Therefore, I had to earn the money for them myself. I earned this money by shoveling coal for the senator." I assume that was Walter Luscombe. No. Was it?

F: Yes, it was.

WB: “In the summer, I went fishing.” Part of it's been torn out because of age, I guess. Well, he went fishing in the summer. This was about the same as – oh, it evidently had said what he made money-wise. In 1894, he was sixteen years old and about – no, it's been deleted again. Now, down here, “Mr. A.C. Harrison moved to Woods Hole, and the senator came to my rescue and procured a job, [inaudible] for me with the Harrisons, who at first thought I was too young. The senator recommended me so highly I received a trial and proved satisfactory. I was with this family about nineteen years. My first wages were a hundred dollars a month, which at that time was very good wages. My duties with the Harrisons were largely racing. This was done anywhere from Cape May to Bar Harbor, Maine. We had extremely fast boats and won many races. I could tell you of many interesting races if the time was not so limited. I continued here until about 1912, when the races dropped off. My only duties were afternoon sailing, rowing the grandchildren around. This proved too tame for me after the racing I'd done. I began to get a little uneasy. About 1913, there was an opening to procure the fish market at Woods Hole. Again, the senator came to my rescue. Mr. Nagel, who at that time owned the market, intended to give it to [inaudible] of Newport. The senator owned the land. He politely told Mr. Nagel to either let Sam have the business or take his buildings off the land. What little I can tell you, with the fish business, it is very …”. There's something about stock market. “Well, I can attest to that. I think it's worse than the stock market. There are some stocks that at least maintain their value for a short period of time. The fish business, the prices change every day in the week. You may lose a thousand dollars today, and if you're lucky, you get it back.” Well, that's true. “The time may come when you lose, and vice versa.” I guess he meant there are times when you win. “Since the first of November to now, I have handled and trucked to Boston and Providence eight thousand barrels of yellowtail flounders. I had the fishermen take barrels and pack the fish as they caught them. Some of them are doing that again today, only though, not in barrels, in plastic containers. This has turned out to be a success as the fish keep very much better when iced alive. It just worked out so well that New Bedford dealers bought fish down on the islands and trucked them from Woods Hole so they could call them Woods Hole flounders.” You know, the fish that left here in the early days was of a quality that was very, very hard to find any place else because, as I mentioned, those small boats fishing two, three days at a time, and the bigger offshore boats, the few that there were of them, they were a week, ten days. So, there was a decided difference. All the buyers in New York and Philadelphia were quite eager to get Sam Cahoon's fish. “Mr. Nagel, my agent in Boston, was a commission man, and the company still is, soon put a stop to this. For now, my fish are listed on the board as Sam Cahoon's flounders and not Woods Hall flounders.” By the board, at the exchange in Boston, they list the landings, not only from the boats but that has been trucked over the road from various points. That's what he was referring to. “I want to tell you that there is little profit in the retail fish business. For instance, a thousand pounds of fish would be a good average for nine months with an allowance of six cents per pound gross profit. Out of this, you have labor, rent, et cetera, to pay. This leaves a very small profit – more often, a loss. So, I think it compares with other businesses on the Cape, leaving three months out of the year to make a year's profit.” It still pretty much holds true of, I think, most businesses on the Cape, regardless of what they are – whoever these [glasses] are, thank you. At times, we say we're not particularly fond of seeing the tourists come, but I think Cape Cod is pretty much tourist-oriented as far as economics are concerned. You still work – well, maybe now, the season's been extended quite a bit – four or five months to try and

make a living that will carry you through the other seven or eight. Quite often, getting back to the fish market, as far as I know, at least for Woods Hole, that was the single biggest – or Sam was the single biggest private employer in town. The MBL [Marine Biological Laboratory], of course, was here. In 1931, the oceanographic [Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute] started to build and grow. But as far as individuals owning a business, I think he was just about the largest in Woods Hole. There were times, from memory, anywhere from fifteen to twenty families represented as their husbands being on the payroll. In all the years that I worked there, I can't remember anyone ever being let go or laid off because of lack of work. I have heard people ask the boss at times why, when things were tough in the wintertime – there used to be – some of you may remember – why he didn't let some of the people go so that he could survive. His idea was that they all had families. They had to live twelve months out of the year, not just five or six. Plus the fact, while a lot of the work wasn't what you would call skilled, there were people who were used to working together in a particular kind of business. You just couldn't go out on any street corner and replace them when it did get busy. [RECORDING PAUSED] When there were no fish in because of the weather or some other reason, we'd maintain and repair things around the market. Or we'd paint the boss's house or do any number of things which weren't bringing any money into the market. But there were things which did get done that needed doing. Businessmen on Cape Cod, I think, are still in that position. Quite often, paper hangers, painters, electricians – they can't work because of the weather. I know we've been waiting for a man for about four months now to paper our living room. But we wanted him to do it. It was with the understanding when he couldn't work outside or when he had time to spare, he would do it at his convenience. A lot of business is conducted on the Cape in that fashion. Because people who have people working for them want to keep them and not just operate with transient labor. Sam Cahoon did that in all the years that I worked there and in all the things that I've ever heard. Sometimes, there were a time it got pretty tough. Although I don't think I ever heard him complain about the economics of the business. He probably thought plenty to himself. As he got older, I think he's like a lot of us. He didn't sleep as well at night as he did when he was a younger man. I know when I first got married, we lived on Stewart Lane, which is now, I think, Cricket Lane. That was well represented by the fish business. Al Chase, who later went with Henry Klimm to own the Woods Hole Garage, lived on one side. We lived in the middle. [Donald] "Marshy" Cross, who worked for Sam for years, lived on the other side of me. Down at the foot of the lane, Jared Vincent, who owned the *Priscilla V* – he lived there. But quite often, in the busy months, particularly when the out-of-state scup/porgy fleet used to come from Stonington, Point Judith, Noank – they'd all congregate here in Vineyard Sound and fish down around Hedge Fence and Cotuit and come into Sam Cahoon's to take their fish out. Quite often, the ice plant we had wasn't capable of keeping up with the big demand imposed on it. So, Bill Miles and I, two, three times a week, used to have to go down the Red River ice plant in Harwich Port, which meant that we had to leave home at two, 2:30 in the morning. I'd walk back and forth to work. It was close. Many times, I've walked down the street at 2:30 in the morning. and looked over and see the boss's pipe blowing in the window. [laughter] He'd look out. "Where you going, Bub?" I'd say, "You told me to go to Red River." "Oh, so I did." [laughter] We'd get back in North Falmouth and give (Burt Landers?) – that was one of the boss's old cronies. He was in the retail ice business at that time. We'd drop off his ice for him. His wife, no matter what time of morning it was, 5:30 six o'clock, she'd be up and have hot apple pie and coffee. [laughter] Then we get back to the market, six or 6:30 in time to start business for the day. We never were unionized. I think that's one of the reasons the business was a success.

People from New Bedford tried once to unionize the people at the market. They came down with all kinds of promises and how we'd benefit if we were in the union. So, some of the men entertained the idea. They sent delegates down to talk to us. Well, shortly after they first approached us, there was a strike in New Bedford. So, right away, we were supposed to go on strike and picket the market. We didn't have anything to go on strike about. They possibly were a strong union, but I don't think they took Yankee ingenuity into consideration. So, the next day, they were back again, saying we had to picket. So, the boss said – he talked to the union delegate – "I wanted to know if there were any exceptions to the picketing rule." They said, "Yes. Anybody that's in management naturally is not concerned." Well, from then on, everybody there was in management.

All: [laughter]

WB: There were heads of departments we didn't even know we had.

All: [laughter]

WB: But it worked. We kept on working. Some of the men, I understood in later years, did get a union book and kept it for the sake of the fact that in later years, if they were to take a union job, it was a necessary thing to have. But at that time, I don't remember whether you just kept your dues paid or whether you could take a demit and still be a member in good standing. The delegate, shortly after two or three of the fellows did join, they'd come down. It would seem like every few weeks, they'd want a donation for flowers for somebody that died in New Bedford that we never heard of.

All: [laughter]

WB: Or they'd want an assessment for some particular thing or other. One day, there was a man named Hans Haram. He was a Norwegian. He'd been with Sam for a long time. He was in the process of cutting the heads off of big codfish. The union delegate came in. He was adamant in his demands. Finally, I guess – Hans was a very moderate, easygoing man. But I guess he'd had enough. He had a knife about that long that he was cutting the heads off the codfish with. Well, he started waving it around in front of the delegate's nose. He said, "I think you better leave before you go the same way those codfish went."

All: [laughter]

WB: That was, to the best of my recollection, the end of any problem we had with the union.

All: [laughter]

F: There is a hand up.

WB: Oh, I'm sorry.

F: I seem to remember sometime, maybe the late ’30s or early ‘40s – and this is the other side of

the coin – some of the fishermen, I think that was my source, were saying that they could get a better price if they didn't go to Sam Cahoon, but they went to New Bedford. But they were afraid to because if they did, then they would be blackballed. Is there anything in that rumor, or is this just the other side of the coin?

WB: No. That was partly true. The prices that Sam paid were, first of all, taken from the prices paid at the auction. But behind that was the willingness to pay a particular price by the bigger buyers in New York and Philadelphia where a great amount of the fish in those days were shipped. Today, they have many filet houses in New Bedford. They use a lot of it right there. But in those days, a lot of it was either railroad freight or truck freight over the road into those two principal places. The price that the buyers there would say, well, I'll give you so much a pound for flounders delivered in New York, or so much a pound for fluke FOB Philadelphia. That trickled back down through the industry. Naturally, he was in business to try and make money. I think everyone is. He had to take the price that he was offered, figure his overhead that had to come out of that, and a small profit. In those days, the profit, I mean, was small. It was a matter of sometimes half a cent or a cent a pound. You had to do a tremendous volume to make anything at all. Consequently, there were periods when there would be a cent or two cents a pound difference between the auction price and what Sam paid. But by the same token, these people from the Vineyard, Nantucket, and locally, and even some of the New Bedford boats, they avoided an awful lot of unnecessary and expensive hassle by taking their fish out here. The ones in Nantucket and the Vineyard were three to five hours closer to home and the fishing grounds. Anything and everything they needed to go fishing was available here. It was another hour and a half with some of those real old slow boats, two and a half hours across the bay in New Bedford. When you got there, if you were not union, you were very well out to receive a lower price than if you were a union boat. If you were a union boat – I don't know if any of you have ever seen New Bedford Harbor. When the final bid from the auction is in the morning, the boat – it's a big, quite long harbor. The boats, sometimes a hundred or a hundred and fifty of them with fish waiting to sell, are spread the length and width, some on the Fairhaven side of New Bedford Harbor. They were all over the place. When the captain or the mate gets back to the boat and said, "Well, we have sold a so and so," they look like a bunch of water bugs skittering around jockeying for position, trying to get to be first to take the fish out so they can have the rest of the day off rather than wait until 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

F: That is interesting. You had a question over here before, did you?

F: Yes.

NE: Oh, that man behind you? Excuse me. [laughter]

M: Could you describe the composition of the Cahoon business? I am not sure –

WB: In what respect?

M: How many people, what they did, how much was wholesale, how much was retail?

WB: It was predominantly wholesale. By that, I mean taking fish from the boats and shipping

over the road. The retail business was confined to a small area of the market. It dealt pretty much with local people or people who owned summer homes and property here. But it was predominantly a wholesale business.

M: How many pounds a week were [inaudible]?

WB: I wouldn't dare guess.

M: Well, I would not expect an accurate answer, but [inaudible].

WB: I can tell you that everyone involved seemed to think it was some sort of a record. In one day, with one species of fish, we had taken out 130,000 pounds of scup. That was confined to a relatively small part of the year. Because, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, the boats from out of state – and some of them were fairly good-sized boats – they would all come down here in the spring. For one thing, scup were plentiful. It meant you didn't have to go offshore to Georges Banks or down around Nantucket Shoals, which should be treacherous if you don't know them. They're treacherous if you do know them. They could fish right here in Vineyard Sound. I do remember one day that fish were plentiful enough that we had a boat that came from Newport, Rhode Island, the *Dorothy and Mary*, I believe it was. He was in when we got to work in the morning. He had thirty-five or forty-thousand pounds of scup. They were about the fastest fish to get out of the boats of any. They required no culling [and] relatively little processing. They weighed into a box and on the truck. He took out his fish, got ice and fuel, [and] went back out again. We thought, "Well, we won't see him for a couple of days." He was back in at 3:00 o'clock that afternoon with another fifty thousand. So, that's the way it went. That didn't happen every day, of course. But in the scup season, it was not unusual to have eighty, hundred, or 150,000 pounds of fish sitting at the dock when you got to work in the morning.

F: Mrs. Elsmith has a question.

WB: Yes, Ms. Elsmith?

F: I'd like to interject a very personal indebtedness to Sam Cahoon for saving a son of mine. I had a telephone call from the market one day saying that my son had been so absorbed in watching the boats that he'd fallen right into the water. He was knocked unconscious. Two of the men on the pier jumped right in after him, put their arms under him, and lifted him up. But he was knocked unconscious. He was lying on Sam's leather couch in his back office. So, that I've always been very – that was all good. He was then twelve years old. He spent most of his life down on those piers, watching those boats coming in and out. [laughter] So, I've always been very indebted to somebody at that market for resuscitating our son.

WB: Yes.

F: When did Cahoon's close?

WB: To the best of my knowledge – I might be mistaken – I think it was in 1962 that it finally closed. Wasn't it, Frances?

FCS: I think so. [inaudible]

WB: I know because I went from there in a matter of two or three days to the job that I have now. I have been there nineteen years this month, so I'm quite sure that it was 1962. Yes, Dr. [inaudible]?

M: I wonder roughly how many boats a day would come in with fish.

WB: At Sam's?

MS: Yes. What sort of a –?

WB: Well, there again, it's hard to put an average on it because, as I said, during the scup season, or fluke, which was reasonably plentiful in those days, but they only fished for them inshore in the warmer months. It wasn't unusual to see anywhere from six to ten boats any morning in the week waiting to take out fish. Some had rather large trips, some not so much. But they all had to be handled.

F: His fish market also sold sou'westers and a few other things.

WB: Everything and anything the fisherman needed was either available immediately or within three or four hours. One of the trucks would pick it up wherever they happened to be and bring it back. So, it was almost readily available most of the time.

F: Did the fishermen have sort of an unwritten law about standing in line? Or how do you –?

WB: You mean to get their fish taken out of the boat?

F: Yes.

WB: Oh, yes. The first one at the dock is the first one to take out unless –

F: [inaudible]

WB: Each man knows what position he's in. He also knows, unless there are circumstances that make it otherwise, that he better stay in his position.

F: Fran, you had a question.

FS: Ski?

WB: Yes?

F: Did Sam own any boats of his own for fishing?

WB: Yes. He owned the *3 & 1 & 1*, which was named after his three daughters, his one son, and John's and Bertha Salvador's one daughter. He owned the *B & E*, which, as I said before, was named after their two wives. At some point, it was before I went to work there, he had built a small boat, the *3 & 1*, which was named after his three daughters and Sam Junior. That boat, I wouldn't dare guess how old she is now. I would say somewhere close to fifty years old. For a long time, after he sold her, she laid in a marsh up in Duxbury. I saw her once on the way to Boston, laying there, and recognized her. I thought, "Well, all good things have to go." It was summer before last when all these boats were out in Vineyard Sound fishing for squid. What came into the dock were the *3 & 1*. Two men had gotten her out of the marsh, looked her over, and felt that she was worthwhile rebuilding, which they had done. She's still fishing.

F: Sam Cahoon's daughter, Cynthia, is here today. I haven't heard any questions or comments.

Cynthia Cahoon Smith: Oh, he's doing a good job. My sister Frances [inaudible]

All: [laughter]

F: These five pictures, photographs, and enlargements are really worth your investigation and study when you have a chance in front. You can't see it from where you are, I know. But we think they're excellent and hope that you will look at them too.

WB: Excuse me. From my point of view, it's kind of sad to look back at something I was part of that I'm quite sure – I know I never will be part of that same type of thing again. I don't think Woods Hole will see it again. In a way, it's too bad. I suppose we have to have progress.

F: Well, it was a very famous market.

WB: I think some of the happiest times of my life were spent there. The work was hard. The hours were long. When I first went there, we were working seven days a week. It was considered one of the better-paying jobs in town. There again, I'm thankful we didn't belong to the union. A lot of family men were working at various jobs in the town. They were pretty much restricted to a forty-hour week. Consequently, a man with two or three children might be taking home twenty-five/thirty dollars a week in those days. While we, with the hours we were putting in, sometimes we'd take home fifty or sixty. We put the time in to earn that, but we were able to because there was no one that said we couldn't. We were all relatively young and didn't mind it. We used to get tired, but it was healthy tired. I remember someplace at home – I have an old-time book. That's something that you don't see too often now. Our pay was on an honesty basis. Each individual kept track of his own time. At the end of the week, it was turned in to Frances or whoever was responsible at the time, and you were paid accordingly. I have a time book someplace at home. In one week, that particular week, I worked 128 hours. I was a little bit different than some of the other men because I worked the relief shift at the ice plant. One day, you'd go work from 7:00 in the morning until 3:00 in the afternoon. So, at 3:00 in the afternoon, I used to come down to the market and worked until we finished. The next day, you'd go in at 3:00 in the afternoon and work until 11:00 at night. So, I'd work from morning until maybe 2:00 o'clock and then go to the ice plant. The next day, you worked from 11:00 at night to 3:00 in the morning. Well, I'd work part of the day proceeding going to work that night and

part of the day afterward. So, I sometimes had more time than some of the other men, but for that reason. In the busy season, we were always busy. Everybody was necessary.

F: Did the boats continue to come in at night?

WB: Yes. It wasn't uncommon to be still working at 11:00 or 12:00 o'clock at night and finishing up the last boats because the fish had to be in market in the morning. I mean, it wasn't something you would keep until the day after tomorrow and then send it. It was highly perishable.

F: This has been wonderful. [inaudible]

WB: Mrs. Brown?

FS: [inaudible] swordfish for a minute. Years ago, probably very early thirties, I saw – must have been, as you said, early July, the first of the swords coming in. I saw them being unloaded from one of the small boats. I went in and said to [inaudible], "I see you have swordfish coming in." He said, "Well, I'll cut you a piece, Mrs. Brown, but you won't like it. It has to be hung like beef. Not so long, naturally." I don't know whether he said a day or two days, something like that. I've never seen this on paper anywhere. But he obviously didn't want to sell it to me.

WB: I doubt that you will see it anyplace on paper. But he was right in the respect that fish right out of the water – it may look very appetizing; it doesn't cut well at all.

FS: Even coming in iced wouldn't do the same thing. Now, what about tuna? Some of those are pretty big. Do you suppose that is also handled that way?

WB: I'm not overly familiar with tuna. I have dressed them. I have handled them.

FS: [inaudible]

WB: Of course, now we had something – I don't remember having happened at Sam Cahoon's. I've had occasion to deal with it. We have many people from the labs here in the summertime, from, I guess, almost every country in the world. Many of the people that we do business with like raw fish. The Japanese particularly like sashimi. Consequently, they want the fish, well, swimming if they can get it because the only cooking it gets is chemical. They marinate it in soy sauce and some other chemicals, which I guess chemically cook it. But they do use tuna fish, swordfish, bass, many of those things. A lot of them, even at this time of the year, whose husbands or wives or whatever work at one of the institutes, will come in and see something they would like for sashimi and ask, "Is it right out of the water five minutes ago?" If it was, I'll tell them yes. If it's not something I think they should use for that purpose, I'll tell them that also. But years ago, I never heard of anyone eating raw fish. But it's quite common now, not only with ethnic groups but many people. I know Dr. Allen, a young man at the MBL. I think while they're here in the summertime, he eats fish at least five days a week. I think one course out of every meal is sashimi. So, it's not only ethnic groups that subscribe to that.

F: Are those fish free of parasites?

WB: I don't think that at one time of the year or another, there are any fish that are free of parasites. Many of them are internal. So, you never get to see them. Some, like the swordfish, there are external evidence. But one thing that I was told many years ago, and I've noticed it over the years, any fish, particularly a swordfish that you see that might have a parasite, you will never find it in a sick fish. It's always a healthy one. Someone called me by name. I don't know who –

F: Ski, I wanted to say –

WB: Oh, hi, Tammy.

F: – that you had a very famous whistle. When I used to hang around down there, there was a lot of excitement with the fish coming in and confusion and everything. Everybody telling me to get out of the way. But your whistle, I always felt kept an even [inaudible] –

All: [laughter]

F: – and I still hear it.

WB: That went by the wayside someplace, Tammy.

F: [inaudible]

WB: Not really. Yes. There used to be a lot of confusion, but it was all pretty much organized confusion. Everybody knew what they were doing even though they didn't appear to.

F: I think [inaudible] has a question.

F: Oh, is it [inaudible].

WB: There's time for me. I don't know.

F: I was wondering what happened during the Second World War when there were a lot of naval maneuvers and restrictions in Buzzards Bay and the sound and stuff. What happened to the fishermen coming into Sam Cahoon's? Did it make a big difference at all?

WB: It made a decided difference, yes. Many of the boats, particularly the bigger and better ones – as I mentioned about the *Priscilla V*, they had just finished building her when she was taken by the Navy for yard patrol. Many other boats went the same way. Some came back after the war, and the owner had a chance to buy them back. I can remember Jerry Vincent's boat, the first *Priscilla V*, coming back to Dias's dock in Woods Hole after the Navy got through with her. He had the option to bid on her. At that time, he had the second *Priscilla V*. A friend of his wanted to buy the original one. So, he didn't buy it back. But the fishermen, yes, it made a decided difference during the war. Many of the people who had been in the industry, particularly

the younger people, went into the military. It was declared an essential industry. I'm not too familiar with that part. I do remember when I went to leave in October, the boss said it had been declared an essential industry. If I liked, he would try and get me a deferment. I, as an individual, didn't want to do that. All my friends that were of an age were either going or already had gone. I just felt that I wanted to also. But as a food service industry, they pretty much had to keep it as near intact as possible during the war because it was an essential service.

F: They had OPA [Office of Price Administration], too, which was the price –

WB: Price Administration Office. Yes.

F: They were all –

WB: They came under that.

F: – [inaudible] how much –

WB: Yes.

F: – buy it and [inaudible] produce it.

WB: Yes. They had price ceilings on everything.

F: Not only that, Ski, but a lot of the fishermen, the captains especially, were on the lookout for foreign boats.

WB: That's right.

FS: My brother has a citation from the United States Navy because of having reported seeing foreign ships and some particular thing that happened during the war. I don't know because I was overseas myself at that time. But I know he's got this. He automatically would report any unusual action that he would notice on the sea. Many of the sea captains were given the same information he was to do this. Being good Americans, they certainly kept eyes on what was going on, on the ocean.

WB: I do remember that during the first part of the war – I think I mentioned this earlier – there were very few radios in the fishing fleet, no LORAN or radar, which came later. Many of the boats, for navigational purposes, all they had was a compass and lead line. For those of you who might not know, a lead line is nothing more than a huge eight- or ten-pound lead sinker with an indentation at the bottom, in which they put tallow or grease or some other sticky substance. By using that to find out what kind of bottom they had and referring to the chart for the depth of water and type of bottom, they could pretty well tell, within a wide range, about where they were. I wasn't on the trip, but one of my friends made a swordfishing trip on the (*IB Stinson*?). [laughter] Frank Johnson, some of you might remember. They were gone, I don't know, ten days, two weeks, and it had been thick fog most of the time they were fishing. Consequently, they didn't do too well. So, they decided they'd head for home. Somebody said, "Frank, you

have a pretty good idea of where we are?" "Oh, sure." So, they started to steam for home. When he got about where he thought he wanted to be, they started taking soundings with the lead line. He came up with a particular kind of mud or sand or something in the lead. He said, "I told you I knew where I was." Well, about that time, the fog lifted. They saw a lone man in a lobster boat. Somebody hailed him and wanted to know where they were. He says, "You're off Yarmouth." Frank says, "I told you." The guy said, "Yarmouth, Nova Scotia."

All: [laughter]

WB: So, that was one of the inherent things that they had to put up with, with their crude instruments. But somehow, most of them seemed to get there and back.

F: [laughter] Well, with that wonderful story, unless there is some more just in the last minute, we will – did you have anything? No. Okay. Well, we thank you very much.

---END OF INTERVIEW---

Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/13/2024