Narrator: Gary Libby

Interviewer: Joshua Wrigley

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Project Description: Through the support of the Maine Humanities Council and the Island Institute, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association was able to collect hours of oral histories from fishermen throughout Maine.

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Affiliation: Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, The Island Institute, Maine Humanities Council

Transcript Team: Fantastic Transcripts

Abstract: The interview with Gary Libby, conducted on August 22, 2013, is part of the Maine Coast Oral History Initiative and provides an in-depth look into the life and career of a long-time fisherman from Port Clyde, Maine. Gary Libby, aged fifty-five at the time, discusses his beginnings in the fishing industry, changes in the Gulf of Maine, and his family's fishing heritage. Growing up in Thomaston, his first job at twelve was digging softshell clams, and by fourteen, he was earning more than many adults working uptown. Libby transitioned from clamming to fishing at eighteen when his father bought a boat, marking the start of his career in dragging and lobstering. He describes the lucrative years from 1978 to 1995, followed by a decline in the mid-90s due to lower fish allocations and a decrease in shrimping and lobstering profitability. Despite these challenges, the rising price of scallops offers some optimism. The discussion touches on the economic ups and downs of the fishing industry, the importance of diversification for survival, and the impact of government regulations, such as the Magnuson Act and the implementation of a catch share system. Libby expresses concern over the changes in the Gulf of Maine's ecosystem, attributing them partly to global warming, and the shift in fish populations and availability. Finally, he reflects on the evolution of the community's support and involvement in fishing, the generational differences in approaches to the industry, and his involvement with the New England Fishery Management Council.

Joshua Wrigley: This is an interview for the Maine Coast Oral History Initiative to be shared jointly by the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association and the Island Institute. The date is August 22, 2013. I'm Josh Wrigley with Scott Sell of the Island Institute, and we are at the home of Gary Libby, age fifty-five, who has fished out of Port Clyde all his career. Our interview today will focus on his start in the fishing industry, the changes that he has seen in the Gulf of Maine, and his family's fishing heritage.

Scott Sell: Okay, I'm rolling.

JW: Your name is Gary Libby?

GL: Yeah, that's correct. I'm Gary Libby, the fisherman from Port Clyde.

JW: Have you lived in Port Clyde all your life?

GL: No. When I was growing up as a kid, I lived up in Thomaston, upriver from here. My first fishing job, so to speak, was digging softshell clams out of the river. I started at twelve years old. So, I've really never had a job that you go to in the morning and come home at night. It's always been something that I go and collect, or whatever I can find around the shore, I guess.

JW: How much money did clamming bring in?

GL: Well, in the early years, it wasn't a lot of money, but by the time I was fourteen years old, I was making more than folks were making working uptown for minimum wage, which was my other option. I'd make fifty dollars. Back then, people that worked all day, eight hours a day, was making probably thirty-five or forty, and I was working two hours. So, it was more appealing.

JW: Were there other people when you were a kid who were clamming as well?

GL: Oh, yeah. Most of our friends all through high school – we'd go together downriver, and two or three of us would have a boat. We'd go down. It was a little enterprise. We'd find a market, sell our clams to the buyer. It was a pretty good life for us. We had money in our pocket all the time. Fishing seemed like the greatest thing since sliced bread.

JW: How did you make your transition from clamming to dragging eventually?

GL: Well, how that came about was when I was right around 18, my father had bought a boat a couple of years earlier because he was driving a truck at Martin Marietta, who owned the cement plant at the time. He was always interested in fishing, and he wanted to have something to have a tax write-off. Well, he picked a good thing for a tax write-off. When I turned eighteen, I wanted to try fishing so I wasn't bent over all the time. So I did. I got to go on the boat, and we had a captain on there who was experienced. It was Lee Cushman, Randy Cushman's father. He showed me the ropes, and after a few years, my brother joined after getting out of EMBTI for diesel mechanics. We went fishing together for quite a few years – I'd say twenty-five – and we clammed together before that. Plus, I did some lobstering. I learned how to lobster with Lee

Cushman, too. So we connected that way to the community, almost like most of the family that lives down here. We were part of the extended family, even though we're not related to all of them. So that's how I started out fishing. We owned the boat. I had interest in doing it. For a lot of years, it was very lucrative. We did good. We got new boats. We ended up getting three boats at one time. Things were going great. We were making decent money, though, it was going to keep going. But it has changed over the last fifteen years, I'm going to say. Because in the mid-'90s, it was still going strong. But then it went downhill for us.

JW: What years were we talking about here?

GL: I started fishing in '78 and probably went to '95 doing real well. Then it went up a little in 2000. Plus, we did shrimping in winters, and that's been up and down. So, our income source was quite good, but right now, we've hit a bad spot where the fish allocations are low. The shrimp is on a down cycle. The only thing that we got going possibly prosperous right now in the fishing business outside of maybe some lobster, which the price has dumped on that, so that's not as good as it should be, is the scallop price is through the roof. Even though we have a permit for the northern Gulf of Maine, and we're only allowed two hundred pounds per day or per trip, at the price of the scallops, it's worth going after them. My nephew started doing that with one of our boats. I think we're going to end up getting our boat fixed that we just blew the engine in. But I may have to go fishing with him for a little while. My brother called this morning because he's running Port Clyde Fresh Catch right now, which is another story. We'll talk about scallop right now. I may end up going with him for a little bit. That will help the income source for myself. The way I started scalloping was in state waters. We always fished scallops in state waters. But the state came up with a rule when we was in another rough spot – because you go up and down in fishing. There's no steady income.

JW: Are those bay scallops?

GL: No, they're sea scallops.

JW: How large are they?

GL: Anywhere from U10 to probably twenty-five per pound. Those are the smaller ones. I think he's working on 20/30s right now down there. I haven't been with him yet, but my brother called this morning. The guy that's going with him wants to go camping. And right now is when we have to make money. So I called him up and left a message on his phone – we call him – Buzz is his nickname. I said, "Buzz, I'll go with you. Tell the guy if he wants to go camping to stay camping." That'll put the pressure on. So now, he's got me with a broken boat who can scallop as good as anybody out there, and he can tell those guys, "If you want to go, that's fine. See you. I'm good. We'll see you later. Good luck." You know? Put the pressure on them a little bit, too, to know that their job isn't just locked in [and] they can just walk off any time they want. Because if I start going with him, I'll stay going with him until I get the boat fixed. They'll just be out of work.

JW: Who is Buzz again?

GL: Buzz is my nephew. His name is Justin Libby. He's captain of the *Captain Lee* (sp?), which is our other boat at this time. We had another one that we just sold that my brother was taking, but we can go to Port Clyde Fresh Catch now. We started Port Clyde Fresh Catch about six, seven years ago. That's a rough guess. Anyway, it started out real rough, but now, we have an actual plant. We process, we filet fish. It's owned by fishermen. He's in charge down there. He's the manager. He does the filleting, the selling, the marketing, some of the delivering. So he's real drove up doing that, which has helped some. We have sold fish to him every time we go out. He can handle some of the scallops we catch. It's local fish. A lot of it's local restaurant market. We don't do a lot in the winter. If there's shrimp, we do shrimp picking and freezing. And we're able to move all the shrimp we can catch. The scallops – I think he can move quite a few.

JW: So there's some versatility between species?

GL: Yeah, there has to be. That's what the Maine coast fishermen's fisheries has always been. If we're not diversified, we go away. We've got to be able to do more than one thing. We can't just say, well, we're a groundfisherman and then take a 50-foot boat offshore in January and February when it's blowing 40 all the time. We can't do that and live. What we ended up doing when we got bigger boats was doing it for safety. For instance, we'll go back to groundfish. This is a thing that sticks in my craw a little bit, and this has to do with the state of Maine. They have a Maine Permit Bank. They bought some permits up. The guys that sold them at first got good prices for them, so good for them. But they attached a rule to it – I didn't think it was through the state, but it's through the feds – that you had to be forty-five feet or under to qualify to get fish. Well, that's okay. We did that for a few years. Now, they just upped it again to fifty-five, which expanded it more to the fleet. The only trouble that I have with that is my boat's fifty-seven feet long. It has a single permit. It takes two people out. Even though it's fifty-seven feet, it's a small boat. It should be looked at horsepower or baseline like they used to in the days of sea leasing, not in the size of a boat. Because you can have a long, small boat and not qualify, like me. Or you can have a big, shorter boat, more tonnage, that qualifies.

JW: Going back to what you were saying before, when your father initially invested in his vessel, was he optimistic about entering the fishery?

GL: Yeah, he always wanted to retire from driving the trucks and go into fishing, and he did fish a little bit. He fished scallops on the shore in state waters. And I went groundfishing a little bit, and he went shrimping with us a little bit. But by the time he started going, he was getting older, so he went with me and my brother a bit. So he went with us. It was probably quite gratifying for him, probably thought it was well worth the money. Now, he's getting older. He's just turned eighty. He still has thoughts of the way it used to be and wants to know why we're not out there fishing all the time. But we can't be because of government regulation. That's some of the changes we've seen. Actually, the changes in the Gulf of Maine – I know you wanted to hear about that. Throughout my lifetime – my fishing lifetime – we started out where there was no shrimp license. You wanted to go shrimping, you got a shrimp net, put it on your boat, and you went. Scallop license, it was –

JW: So, it was an open-access fishery?

GL: It still is. You can get a license. You guys could buy a license this next year because it hasn't been cut off yet. It's one of the last open-access fisheries there is. But there is a license attached to it in the state of Maine. The scallops, you had to have a license, and the groundfish, you had to have a license. It was a nominal fee. There was no reporting, no observers, which we have now. Right now, I have electronic logbook on my boat. I just got done with at-sea observer cameras. We have to give twenty-four-hour notice before we make a trip – not twenty-four, forty-eight. They have to decide whether an observer's going to pick it up and come out fishing with us. Next year, it's supposed to be industry-funded, which we can't afford. So we're pretty much getting kicked out of the fishery because of economics and lack of fish. It's all economics.

JW: In 1978, when you started fishing, what was your thinking about the Magnuson Act and federal fisheries management in the early years?

GL: Well, in the early years, we had lots of fish to catch on the shore, and by doing the two-hundred-mile limit, we were told by the same people that tell us we can't go now – not the same people, but the same National Marine Fisheries Service. They said there was more fish than we could ever catch in the Gulf of Maine. Well, I don't really put it on fishing anyway. Some of it's on environmental changes. I believe in global warming myself. I think we've seen a change in the environment because there never were as many lobsters as there are now. Guys didn't fish lobster as far out as they do now. There was more fish on the shore. The fish don't come in on the shore anymore. I went to an MREP [Marine Resource Education Program] meeting where I had training for management and stuff. One of the scientists made sense to me. He said the pH levels have changed in the Gulf of Maine. There's a higher pH level. Finfish do worse, and they stay farther out. And the crustaceans, such as crab, lobster, shrimp do better, and they stay in closer. That's just exactly what's happening. I contribute that to global warming, maybe too many cars driving up and down the road. People don't carpool enough. So, they've hurt the ocean. It's hurting everybody, because the fish actually is a public resource, and fishermen are hired to go out in the ocean and harvest those fish for the public. They're your fish. They're not my fish. I'm just paid to go get them. We did a movie. We can go into the movie now. We did a movie *The Fish Belong to the People*, and that was the premise of that movie. We had Walter and Will Hyler – Walter went to school with me and my brother, and his son went to film school.

JW: I've seen that movie.

GL: Yeah. We did that whole documentary on Port Clyde and fishing, and it's tied to what you're doing right here. It basically tells the story of how it started when gasoline engines come along, which was before my time. I picked up in 1978. That was right after they enacted the two-hundred-mile limit. It was supposed to make it better, and it really hasn't. In the long run, it's actually a lot worse than it's been in my lifetime.

JW: So, during your early fishing career, was that the primary view of the fisherman whom you knew, that the fish you were catching were a public resource? Has that maintained itself as the dominant perspective?

GL: I don't think everybody's view is that way. I think people think they own the fish because they own a permit. I don't think that view even came into play then because there was lots of fish. So, it wasn't a fish fight, I like to call it. Who gets the fish? Who gets to catch the fish? That's a fish fight. I've been to plenty of fish fights at council meetings because I spent a tenure of almost being a council member. My brother did get to be a council member for a three-year term. But I spent a lot of time in the audience, and I still belong to a groundfish AP [advisory panel] temporarily until they redo it. I told them I didn't want to do another term. I am the chair of the shrimp AP for the Atlantic States Commission, which I do like to do, and I'll stay on doing that because I think shrimp's a great resource for the state of Maine, and I think it helps Maine more than it helps anyone else. I'm for helping Maine. I want to see the Maine guys surviving. We're getting the worst cuts in the groundfish of anybody. We're getting beat back really bad. It's going to the larger boats, and we're not larger. We've always been a small community boat. The larger boats are even getting hurt now because the quotas are too low, and their fuel expense is too high. It's the same thing on a larger scale. So, that's what's hurting. And it's not just – because you hear of codfish. Well, we don't catch that many cod up here. But the problem with us is we catch flounders – not blackbacks, but the plaice and the witch. Those got cuts, and yellowtails got cuts. Blackbacks are doing a little better, but that was already cut to pieces. So, you can't have that type of fish, so you can't target that. And then cod run with haddock, which there's a lot of. Redfish swim through the net because they're smaller than the mesh. That leaves pollock, which there's a lot of, but not worth a lot of money. Hake are doing well, which are worth less money. You got all you lower-value fish that you can have. And anything with any value, you can't. So, we're seeing something really bad forming, and I think it's just beginning. I think you're going to see the small fleet lose out and not be fishermen anymore, and then it's going to be more difficult to get fresh fish on the shore because you're going to be just dealing with those few guys that fish Georges Bank and the longer trips. You're not going to see the little communities like this. They right now are going to stick with lobster. There's going to be some lobstering. If we can keep the day boat scallop thing going, actually, that could get all right. But it's ups and downs. Fishing's ups and downs. That's the way it is.

JW: How has the regulatory process changed since you became involved with the New England Fishery Management Council and the advisory panels?

GL: Well, we've changed from an import system where we had days-at-sea, trip quotas, a lot on cod and stuff, and limited that way with the hope that we didn't exceed the overfishing limits, to a catch share system, which you get a quota each year, and sometimes it's terribly low in some species. The biggest thing that kills us on that is you have to have other fish to catch the fish that you have. For instance, this year, I did fifteen-hundred pounds of cod. Okay? The most expensive fish in the ocean, I had to go out and try to not catch, so I could catch – I mainly try to target the gray sole, which is a fairly decent priced fish, but not the highest. I ended up catching all mine – catching half what was on the cap and lease permit because my nephew went scalloping, almost catching all my cod and the other fish – I still have some fish left there. I only fished like fourteen days all year, and I've caught them all up. You can't make a living in fourteen days. So what we've seen is we've seen eighty-eight days at sea. Well, actually, when they first put the days at sea in – because originally, there was no days at sea. In 1978, you went fishing. You bought a license. You fished. Whatever you caught, you didn't really have a good handle on what was happening. But then we went to days at sea, and then once we had the days

at sea, it got down to eighty-eight, then fifty-two, then thirty-nine, and then was the call for twenty-five, and people went nuts and said that's way not enough – twenty-five days out of 365 to make a living. No, it wasn't, and it isn't. So, we adopted this catch share, which has its merits, but it also – if the science is flawed like we've seen in the cod fish this last year – we had cod almost rebuilt in 2007. Then, a poor stock assessment came in. Whether there was a mistake in 2007 – I think there was, and we overfished because the science said it was okay. So, the fishermen didn't do anything bad. They followed the rules. And now, the cod are in such bad shape they may never recover. Other fish are in poor shape because they didn't get the science right. So, fishermen blamed science and management, and management said fishermen did it. But fishermen followed the rules. So, as a fisherman, I think it's more on science and management under that. If you take the catch share [and] science is perfect, everyone stays within limits. You're guaranteed to grow fish in the ocean. It's almost like farming them. So, you would have it recover, and everything would be great, and it would come up as the model says it should. But in real life, that's not what happens. We've seen through the system that we've done so far that there is flaws. There's choked stocks. There's ups. There's downs. If we can just say – there's been talk of this. We take the whole fish stock as a whole. Is this fish stock healthy? Whether cod is down and something's down – well, we catch a few too many of one, but we're targeting the healthy ones so that everyone's making a living, and you're bringing more in. It may take a little longer, say, for cod to recover, but in the meantime, you're not killing the fishing industry. That may be a better system. Who knows? I can't say. I don't think I'm going to be around to see the recovery. I haven't in a few years. But it went from wide-open to super-restricted. We was fishing two hundred days a year in '78, and this year – I basically fish twenty-five to thirty days in a normal year, but this year, I put in fourteen or fifteen, and the engine's gone, so I won't be fishing.

JW: What was your average day like in 1978?

GL: Let's see. When we first went with Lee, we were day fishing, coming in every night, towing nine hours a day – three tows, nine hours. Not like twenty-one hours a day around the clock now. The big days were six thousand pounds of fish. The poor days was three thousand pounds of fish. Now, I go put in twenty-one hours, and I catch anywhere from a thousand to fifteen hundred pounds of fish. So, we've seen a definite fall. They tell me that stocks have recovered. I don't see stocks recovered. I see less fish all the way around, every species. It doesn't matter. We'd get five hundred pounds an hour towing. If we didn't do that, we'd leave. Now, if someone catches a hundred pounds an hour of, say, a high-value fish, they get all excited and keep it a secret. So, we haven't recovered. I don't care what the scientists say. They've done a poor job.

JW: What was your catch composition like back then?

GL: Oh, we would catch everything. We'd catch all the regulated species. We'd throw monks back because monks were like junk.

JW: No market?

GL: No market. No one wanted them. Why would they want them when they could have all the haddock they wanted? We had haddock, we had dabs, we had gray sole. I remember going out the first year I went fishing in July, and a large gray sole was worth fifty cents a pound – the ones that was as long as a fish tow. We'd go make two tows in the upper end of the western tow and have a thousand pounds of them. We'd stock five hundred dollars back in the late '70s. Fuel was 40 cents a gallon. We'd use fifty gallons of fuel to do it, maybe. You could buy a boatload of groceries for a hundred-dollar bill. It was decent money, and it was right here. You could just do that, and there was no other boats fishing on it. There was no lobster there, so guys didn't set lobster traps. Now, you couldn't even do it because it's full of lobster gear. That's the environmental change. So, we've seen the fish go down, the lobsters go up, the water warm up, pH levels possibly changing – a lot of changes.

JW: I had a question, and I just forgot what it was.

GL: I'm sorry. [inaudible] We could go back and talk about fresh catch a little more because, in the early years, we ended up – my wife was more involved than she is now, and we ended up starting the first community-supported fishery [CSF] – I think in the world; I know in the United States, where it's like a farm CSA [community-supported agriculture], where people pre-buy shares of fish. We supply them fish in a twelve-week program. We started out with five to ten pounds of shrimp, and we had a lot of half-shares of the five pounds. We had, I think, thirty-five people on the first one, and we brought them shrimp every week through the shrimp season. Then it went into fish, and we couldn't filet because we didn't have a cutting house, and we weren't HACCP [Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point] approved. So, we brought them whole fish. We sold whole pollock, which the market price was thirty cents then; we were selling them for three dollars a pound. So, that was helping. It wasn't a huge market, but the boat that got the CSF that week a lot of times paid for most of their fuel bill with it, which helped. Now, it's evolved. They still do a CSF, but it's more like a buying club, and they pick up. We don't have people go out on the road and sit in the back of the truck and hand out bags of fish. They filet and drop off at, say, food co-ops and things like that, and people in their leisure during the week can come in and pick up their fish. So it's changed.

JW: In the late 1970s, how did you sell your catch?

GL: Late '70s? They all went to independent buyers because there was no fish auction. Usually, we had to wait three to four weeks for money. A lot of times, we'd have to drive around and knock on doors to get paid so we could buy fuel and go again. The auction, even with all its flaws, at least we get paid within days of the selling of the fish, so we can actually operate. I remember one time we first had the boat – before I fished – they brought in a bunch of fish. I helped take them off the boat and load the truck. The truck left [and] went to sell the fish. The trucking guy came back and handed us a bill. We didn't have enough valuable fish to cover the trucking.

JW: What year was that?

GL: That was in the late '70s.

SS: Got to pause.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

JW: Should we pick up there?

GL: We'll go back to where we sell the fish in the '70s.

JW: Yeah. Now, we're knocking on individual doors.

GL: Well, there was buyers out there, and there still is, but they have to deal with the exchange now.

JW: Were the buyers from all over?

GL: Yeah. We did usually hook up with one or two. There was always a guy with a better deal. I remember this one individual in from Boothbay. I won't forget that because we caught quite a few haddock, and haddock would bring in around fifty cents a pound then, which was a good price back then, fifty cents a pound. We went three weeks with no money, and it got to the point where we couldn't afford to go anymore until we got paid. He owed us for a lot of haddock. We were expecting fifty cents, and by the time they tracked him down in the bar room down then – my father and Lee – he ended up paying us eighteen cents a pound for them, which was almost a breakeven price. So we didn't make much money for all that work that we did catching the haddock, which hasn't changed much. Now, we look at the plaice lately down at the Fish Exchange, where the bids on the plaice aren't high enough to cover the wharfage, the trucking, and fish handling fees, and the broker fees because it costs us about twenty-six cents to get fish to auction right now. I had some bids of fifteen cents a few weeks ago.

JW: When you sold the haddock back then, was that price difference because of his negotiating skills or because of the market?

GL: I think the difference was he was a crook, and he drank most of the money up in the bar room. [laughter] That's where it was. He made money off the fish. We didn't. That's how it works. There's some shady characters out there. You've got to be real careful who you sell to, and you can't get into somebody for too much. You get a bunch of new guys that's going to make a killing, and they offer you more money. You have to be careful. There is a guy in Portland that still owes one or two of our guys that used to fish. They used to sell to him. They called him (Cash Kent?) because he liked to pay in cash because they liked that for undisclosed reasons. [laughter] The only thing is, at the tail end of the shrimp season or the tail end of catching some cod fish or whatever, he'd come up missing, and they're still owed some money. So they gave him fish.

JW: Difficult to track him down, I guess.

GL: He disappeared into the woodwork. I think he lost his dealer permit for non-reporting. [laughter] Like I said, shady characters.

SS: Shifty.

GL: So you have to deal with that along with everything else. That's why the auction is better now because they deal with that, and they don't let buyers in there unless they put down the chunk of change that the auction can just. I think they have to have 100 grand upfront to sit and bid on fish. What happens is they make their bids. They don't have to worry about exchanging money. They just have to put their money back in because they have to have that that the auction can pull out the day after the fish sell. That's how the auction works. It's helped as far as getting paid. We got legitimate buyers that actually pay for their fish. I know Hannaford and Shaw's and a few other of the big food chains buy fish through them, and there's others that buy fish through the Fish Exchange. Actually, my brother ends up – because we don't have a hundred thousand to have a seat, but he's met up with a guy that runs North Atlantic Seafood.

[TELEPHONE RINGS]

SS: I can turn this off for a minute.
[RECORDING PAUSED]

GL: We was talking about the Fish Exchange and the buyers then and now and how the auction helps us because they deal with the lowlife scum. [laughter]

JW: Who did the lowlife scum consist of?

GL: Well, you never know. Actually, the guy that gave us a bill lived in town here, and he had problems – not drinking so much, but you'd get drinkers and druggers and all kinds of stuff like that, same way as you do with men on boats that you got to cull out, and you don't know until after they take your fish away. Back in them days, you just pretty much gave them your fish, and you hoped that they gave you something. "Here's my fish. Do the best you can." With the auction, at least you have the broker involved, and if it's a poor bid, she scratches them, and she has markets outside of the auction where she deals with them and not you because you have to concentrate on fishing, taking care of your boat, and doing that work. To have to stop and turn around and try to collect money was a pain. That's how it used to be.

JW: How often does it come to that?

GL: Well, we hooked up with a pretty good guy in Kennebunk, and I can't remember his name now, for quite a few years. He was good. Money came. Fish went, money came. Lots of fish. A lot of them ended up going down through New York. Because of the consistency of our catch, where we have the gray sole, and we have some codfish, the New York market is good on that, and the Massachusetts market is good on dabs because dabs replace yellowtail. So, if yellowtail are down, dabs are worth money. That's what's going to happen later on. The yellowtail quota will get cut, and the dab that's worthless now will go up in price. But that's not going to do me any good because I got to lease my fish out to fix my boat at this point. So, I don't know if I'm going to be able to get back into groundfish or not. We will see. I want to see it so I make money. I hate going fishing – I don't care what it is – and not make money.

JW: In your early career, were your markets primarily local, then, and they have expanded regionally?

GL: They were more regional then, too. The same type of people that end up in the auction – like I say, they deal with it. It was larger buyers who would turn it over, middlemen, stuff like that. I wasn't real involved with the marketing side when I was younger – only when I got in charge of the boat that I was. Then it was the auction. We did the auction, you know? The auction's actually probably been good overall. At times, we complain because of the crap price you get for some of the stuff. But overall, it's better than chasing it down yourself because that's the alternative. It's too bad that you can bring in a super-fresh, nice fish, and they can turn around and tell you it's only worth 15 cents a pound, where people are really hollering. I know at Fresh Catch, as far as the dabs go or the plaice, my brother's been buying quite a few because he's got a restaurant down in Bar Harbor, the Jordan Pond House, which is a fairly big market, and he's running hundreds of pounds of filets of them through that restaurant, which has helped us out on that a little bit. But people love to eat those. They're a lot like the yellowtail. The gray sole is a little bit different-textured, and it's probably a higher-value thing, and we do get a little bit more money for it. But the yellowtail and the dab are real close cousins. If you get one filleted out and someone tells you it's a yellowtail, you probably wouldn't be able to tell. So you're probably going to get some of these buyers buying dabs for fifteen cents, filleting them out, selling the racks for lobster bait, getting their money back, and selling them on the yellowtail market, and nobody knows the difference. Of course, that's illegal. You got to label the stuff. But what's to stop the –

JW: Seafood traceability.

GL: Yeah, it goes back to traceability. I think more traceability would be better. I think it would add value to our products. I think traceability is a better way to spend money than, say, MSC [Marine Stewardship Council] certification because traceability helps the fishermen. MSC certification, in my mind, helps the fish buyers. It doesn't do anything for the fishermen. You can say your product's sustainable, but you don't get a return on that sustainability.

JW: One of the things that I wanted to ask before was what sort of generational differences have you seen between the way your generation and your father's generation approached fishing?

GL: My generation was – we look at it open-mindedly, where we're kind of ready to try something like a catch share or a different type of way to preserve a fish. And back when I started on my father's generation, it goes back to the – there's more fish than we'll ever catch, so you just go out and try to be most effective at fishing as you can and land just as many as you can. I had a guy one time, one of the old council members, say the way to do fishing is catch as many as you can and sell them less than the next guy and put him out of business. That's the old model. In the new model, it's try to get sustainability, maybe traceability, and there's certification in there, and try to raise value of fish so you don't have to take so many to make a living. Leave more in the water. I think that's our generation right there. We kind of think that it's better to take out what we need to survive on and leave the smaller ones to grow big, maybe land bigger fish. I don't really like the idea of what they did this last time to help save the

fishing fleet. We just shrank the fish sizes back down. What it does do is moves us into an area where we're not discarding fish because we don't hardly get any discards anymore with the flounder size and the cod size and everything dropping back. So we're almost to a full-retention fishery now – not quite, but all the regulated species get kept that we catch with a six and a half inch cod end.

JW: What were discards like back then, in the late 1970s?

GL: Oh, we towed smaller mesh than that, so we didn't discard. We sold it for lobster bait. We would get ten, fifteen, twenty fish totes a day of bait, and that's in a nine-hour day, and we'd keep all that stuff because there was no size. We didn't throw stuff back. We brought it in [and] sold it for lower cost, obviously, but locally to local lobstermen. They got a bait supply, which put less pressure on herring and things like that. It probably depleted the juvenile stock some over the course of years. It probably wasn't good for groundfish. It probably helped a little on herring. But now, it's switched. Groundfish has gotten low enough stock, so we ended up measuring and rising the fish nets, making a mandatory mesh size, and herring's turned from purse-seining into single midwater trawl and moved into pair-trawled. All of that's due to less fish in the ocean, the way I see it. I see it as those changes like that are – we need bigger boats and bigger nets so we can make the same, which is a real bad model because we're actually damaging the natural resource when we do that. So, I feel that we should step back – reverse our technologies a little bit. When we reverse our technologies, we'll have some rough years, and then we're going to have – someone – not me – may benefit from that.

JW: When fisheries came under federal management in the early part of your career, what was the immediate impact on the fishing industry?

GL: Actually, everyone thought it was going to be a great thing. We ended up thinking that there was going to be lots of fish to catch and lots of this. But one of the flaws in that when they first enacted the two-hundred-mile limit, which was when I was first going, is the government also, on top of putting the limit in – which was a government mistake once again because they make mistakes – was they gave out low-interest or almost no-interest loans to lawyers and bankers and all kinds of different people to invest in this great business that was going to last forever and ever, and it was going to be a good return on their money to buy a fishing boat and reap the benefits of the bounty of the sea, thinking it was unlimited bounty and finding out that it's not.

JW: Why did they subsidize the fishing industry so heavily?

GL: Because they got rid of the foreign fleet, and they figured that once they got rid of them, fishing would get so good that there was just no way you could deplete that resource. You could just take all you wanted and not have to worry about it. I remember them saying that – you can't catch them all. I guess we proved them wrong. [laughter)]

JW: So, when you became involved in fisheries management, what were the salient issues that you were dealing with at that time?

GL: Oh, I've been involved in it a while. One of the things that really got people's attention was Amendment 5, where they reduced the days at sea down to next to nothing so no one could make a living. Of course, it got readjusted and moved up. I think we settled in on the eighty-eight days. I was actually more involved with the days at sea program when I first was involved, and then we had all those input measures, like eight hundred pounds of cod, a thousand pounds of this, a thousand pounds of that. The only thing that stayed open was – hake was one of the things that stayed open. Most of the flounder species were fine except yellowtail. That went on a quota – not quota-quota, but a trip limit. So, as long as you trip-limited and you stayed within your days, you was legal. What happened with trip limits – which I thought was a flaw, and I still do – you go out fishing, and you fish for three days and one minute. That's counted as four. So there's eight hundred pounds more of cod fish. Or you're a gill netter, which this happened – not to all gill netters, but just a few – they went out, and they'd land their cod in eight hours, and they'd come in and clock out. And they'd clock back in, and in eight more hours, they'd land eight hundred more, and a third time, they'd do it. So they got twenty-four hours off their clock for three eight-hundred-pounds.

JW: So, they're maximizing their time.

GL: Yeah, which wasn't the purpose of the trip limit. Trip boats like us who went out for three days could only land in a twenty-four-hour period eight hundred. They could land twenty-four [hundred]. [laughter] So, that was a flaw in the system. It wasn't the fishermen's fault, really. The government did that. They didn't cover all their bases. Because fishermen are good at manipulating. They know how to get the last fish.

JW: In what year was Amendment 5 being considered?

GL: The late '80s, I think. Could be wrong. Stuff started going – I know Amendment nine ended up – was a sustainable fisheries act, and that was the mid-'90s. So, 5 was before that, and they did a bunch right in a row there. I don't know what we're up to now, 18, 17? No, we got 18. 18 is the fleet diversity amendment, where they want to make sure that they protect the small boats, and it won't go into effect until roughly 2018. If we have any small boats left in 2018 to keep in the fishery, we'll probably be doing well. I think that's a flaw of Amendment 18. We're going to have a diverse fleet of what's left of it. Diversification, when it comes to that, which is a new thing – to me, when I hear diversification, it doesn't mean you're going to protect the small boats. What it means is you're going to protect all the boats. Diversified means big and little. We got to protect the big boats right along with the small boats, because they're getting hit just as hard as anybody. It's a tough situation right now. It's hard to make a living. It's like us. We're struggling to make house payments. That's what happens – boat payments, house payments. You lose your boat, you lose your house, you lose everything. Point you to the soup kitchen, basically. [laughter] It's getting tough. You got to be able to move around, and you got to be able to – in Maine, if we don't move around, we're in trouble. I got the lobster. I'm lucky with that. Now, we have the scallop that we've moved one of the boats into. The groundfish is pretty much – we got to lay off the groundfish. And then if they reallocate or redo it, say in five or six years, and we don't land groundfish for five or six years, and they change the baseline, we're going to be out anyway. We're getting pushed pretty hard.

JW: Just as a point of clarification, was Amendment 5 to the multi-species groundfish plan?

GL: Yeah, that's correct. That was some of the first multi-species plans that really had an effect. The early amendments were almost not in effect because there was no cuts in it. The cuts were so high that people weren't fishing anyway. They weren't coming to the limits. Say you got a cod fish limit of ten thousand pounds a trip, and you go out, and the best you can catch is five [thousand]. You don't worry about that amendment. This is like it was in the early days. Once they finally got to the point where it was costing people, and they were able to catch more than that, then you got into the 2,400 in a twenty-four-hour period, little things like that that added up in multiple boats in multiple days; that was small boats that did that. Right now, where they were fishing has turned into a sanctuary and a closed area. They just got that done. That's one of the problems with the council if you want to talk about the council or the process. Two years is fast, and two years in the ocean is an eternity. So, they don't match. If there was some way to get more real-time data out, and they could change every six months, then you'd probably start – some real effective changes would happen, and you probably would see some recovery. But the way it is now, there's no way it can recover with the time lag in between regulation and what's actually happening on the water.

JW: What was the council process like when you first started?

GL: It was similar. You had a chair, you had some council members, who really thought they were doing the right thing when they'd make those votes, and you still have that. Issues are different. Most of the issues were nonstarters because there was lots of fish. People didn't want to change nothing, because they were making money. Once they stopped making money, they wanted it changed and fixed, and they wanted help, and they wanted to know what happened. And what happened was regulation didn't meet up with what was actually happening on the water, whether it be through government saying it's okay, and fishermen going out and taking them, it's still a form of overfishing, I guess. So, fishermen did what they were supposed to, but they still overfished the ocean. But not intentionally.

JW: What role did science play when the council was still young?

GL: Not as much as now. They was just advisors at one point. Now, the SSC, the Science and Statistical Committee, pretty much tells the council what's going to happen, and the council has to form the way they do business around the SSC report. Now, that just happened. I think it was Amendment 13. No, that was 16. I don't know. It was one of those between 13 and 16. Anyway, they changed that, so the science pretty much rules the council is what it amounts to. The council has to take what the science gives them and form a fisheries management plan around that. Before, the science would advise the council, and the council was free to make the plan as they saw fit. Do you understand that one?

JW: So, science has become more mandatory, so to speak, in the council process as driven by law.

GL: That's right. It is. Science is law, pretty much. People yelled for years they wanted fisheries management based on science, and that's what they have now. If the science is correct,

like I said before, it's good. Fish will rebuild. The model's going to be right. Everything's going to come up roses. But science is done by people, and people make mistakes. Mistakes have been made through that. I think they have a little bit too much power now. I think there should be some common sense, and I think advisors should have more say in what happens. Because advisors – the thing of advisors, and I've been on a couple panels, is they go in, they bring the on-hand, at sea – they tell you what's happening on the water. You go in there, and you say, "I see this, I see that," and then if they could use that more than just science to form their fisheries management plans, which they do use some of it, but I don't think in enough capacity at this point. I think when it got changed to science rules, that's the law, this is it, there's hardly any wiggle room whatsoever, you have to follow science, period, it ties the hands of the council, and it ties the hands of the service. They can only do stuff the way they perceive science relation to the law. So, it makes it quite difficult to actually change anything or move anything in a different direction than what it's doing right now. That's your council education. [laughter] It's really quite frustrating as a fisherman to go to council and know what's happening on the water and see the mistakes people are making, try to advise them of those mistakes, and have them not really pay any attention to you. A lot of guys – fishermen get frustrated and don't go back. If I had the money and the time or if someone paid me, I could go there and sit in the audience. And the council does listen to me because I've been involved for a while, and I know, well, it's getting – I haven't been for a while, so there's a few new members. But I got a lot of the members of the council, state directors, and stuff that know me really well because I was an advisor. I think they respected my opinion – at least, I hope they did – because I was trying to do the right thing and tell them the truth so they could form a better plan. I think you get a lot of fishermen – they got a handful of fishermen that go, and that really helps to help them make the right decision. Because they have to hash it over and make motions and vote on it. They follow Robert's rules. They're all sincere people that get on the council. They want to make fishing better. Sometimes, what they do doesn't make it better. Sometimes, their hands are tied – more so now than years ago, I think, because of the way the law is written, where science rules. Maybe a little bit more stuff thrown in there from the old days, where they can form an opinion a little bit away from science if they get the advisors telling them that that's really not true. This is what's really happening. There might be a flaw in that science. Maybe you want to have it relooked at. They do that some through the Plan Development Team. The PDT analyzes the science. Science comes out with their report. PDT analyzes it. They give it to the council. The council hashes it over. If the council doesn't understand it, they send it back to PDT to be reanalyzed. PDT contacts the SSC – "What did you mean?" Comes back to them, goes back to council – see why it takes two years?

JW: Convoluted process.

GL: Yeah. That's them saying two years is quick. That's when it doesn't go back and forth. Plus, with an amendment, you got to have two public hearings. With an addendum, you can do it with one. So you got to send it to the public, too, and you got to have plenty of chance for public to give input. Even if you don't fish, you got to be out there and say, hey, those are my fish. You better take better care of them. That's what people should do. People should come. The bankers should come. I always thought the bankers holding the notes on everyone's house or everyone's boat has a vested interest in what the council does and the science. But you never see them there.

JW: What was public engagement like with the council process when you started?

GL: There was some. Fishermen would come. I think when they were making money, they ignored it. "Oh, that's no problem. I'm making money. They can't hurt us." And then, when they get to the point where it's hitting them in the pocketbook, then they all start showing up. And with this cod fish rules – I heard the testimony of one guy because I get the GoToMeeting thing on the computer, and he said something about. "I thought you guys had control of it. This is my first council meeting." He'd been fishing for twenty-five years. It's like not voting. He thought the president was going to take care of him, but he didn't vote for him, and then he was complaining. [laughter] In my mind, that's really not good. If you don't go and be part of the process, then you're not going to be part of the solution. There's going to be a solution that you might not like, and if you come back and complain about it, you have no one else to blame but yourself. That was my reason for being involved with the council and trying to give input and advice and all that. I see down the road if I can possibly get back up on my feet to get involved again. But right now, I have to concentrate on keeping my house and keeping my boat.

JW: I think one of the things I meant to ask you before was how – if at all – the meaning of the relationship between fishing and Port Clyde has changed – Port Clyde as the community – during your lifetime and during your career.

GL: I think it's changed quite a bit. Years ago, everybody knew everybody in town. We did have some visitors, but not tons. When someone would go out fishing, and they'd rip their net or they'd have trouble, people in the community would come down and see what was going on. And most of the time, if you had ripped nets, two or three guys would jump aboard, and two hours later, you were all fixed up and ready to go again. Now, if you've got a ripped net, they look down at you and say that's too bad, and they go home. There's only a few of us that will jump aboard or offer to help. That's the old-school way. Most of the young guys go about their own business, and they're all about how much they can make, and they don't worry about their neighbors as much. I think we've lost a little bit of neighborly community. Not all, because when my engine blew last week, Randy was fishing. He was on his first day of fishing. He stopped his trip. He came, and he got me and towed me in. That's what it used to be like. The Coast Guard would have left me hanging there anyway because we weren't in immediate danger. The boat was drifting.

JW: That's Randy Cushman?

GL: Yeah, me and Randy, we worked together. I'd tow him in in a minute. I'd come get him, you know? That's what he's going to lose by being the only fisherman out there. He's not going to have me to be around and talk to. If he's got a problem, you got someone right out there that can come to you and tow you in. You don't get as much of that. There's people in town that don't even know the fishermen. Everybody years ago knew every fisherman, what they were doing, when they were doing it – small town stuff. There's still some of that, where they get into – what's my daughter-in-law say? "They get into your business." Well, in a way, that's good.

JW: Randy mentioned last week that the town used to be a real center of business activity because of the fishing industry.

GL: Yeah. Now, it's not. Fishing industry is a very, very small piece of it now. There's a fairly large lobster industry going here. If you consider that fishing, then it's still going there. But we have a big tourist trade now that we didn't have. Like I said, we had less visitors then. The mail boat has brought a lot in. Now, we have a kayak business in town. That brings tourists down. We have different businesses in town. You have the stores owned by Linda Bean, who is part of the Bean empire. Before, it wasn't like that. There were more locally owned – even though she lives in town, I don't really consider [her] as a local because you can live in this town most of your life, and what happens is you're not considered by some of the locals as a local. You could live here for – "Oh, you're from away. You're just a full-time out-of-stater." [laughter]

JW: [inaudible] identity.

GL: My wife likes to say that she's always going to be a full-time out-of-stater, but that's not true. She's one of the accepted people because she's married to me. She's married into one of the families who's adopted by one of the original families. So, in a roundabout way, she's a local, even though she's from Cincinnati, Ohio.

JW: How long has your family been here on the St. George Peninsula?

GL: Oh, we moved down here, but I lived in Thomaston, and I had relatives living in Warren; they were either fishermen or farmers. I had some of my ancestors back farther that I didn't know, because it was before my life, who were what they call coasters; they ran freighters up and down the coast, those sailboats. They were merchant captains. I had a great-aunt that originally lived in Warren, married a fellow from Deer Isle, [and] ran a store in Deer Isle. I did know her. She was in her nineties when she passed, and I was twelve. She was my favorite great-aunt – my only great-aunt, but she was still my favorite. [laughter] But our family, the Libby family, has been around the Midcoast of Maine for longer than I know. We've lived in Maine for a long time. My mother's side of the family not so much, but three generations ago, they came from Germany over to New England, and they settled more in Mass., but then moved to Maine. My grandfather that I didn't get to know because he died when my mother was twelve – he was second-generation from Germany. So, not so much with my mother's side, but my father's side has been either a farmer, a fisherman, or a carpenter in the Midcoast of Maine since Maine was a state, probably. So, a while.

JW: Well, thank you very much for talking with us today and for lending your voice to the Maine Coast Oral History Initiative. Really appreciate it and wish you all the best.

GL: Yeah.

---END OF INTERVIEW---

Reviewed by Molly Graham 12/31/2023