Maine Coast Oral History Initiative
Brian Bichrest Oral History
Date of Interview: September 12, 2013
Location: Harpswell, Maine
Length of Interview: 00:58:12
Interviewer: JW – Josh Wrigley
Transcriber: NCC

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 September 12, 2013. My name is Josh Wrigley. Today, I'm interviewing Brian Bichrest, 54, of Harpswell, Maine, about his gillnetting career.

Brian Bichrest: What do you want to know? When I was born?

JW: Yes.

BB: I was born 1958, I guess, Brunswick. I don't really remember it that much [laughter]. I guess my mother might remember. Really, I've been growing up right in this small town. I think I grew up probably two miles from this house, so I've been here my whole life.

JW: How many siblings do you have?

BB: I've got four brothers and no sisters.

JW: Are they all in the area here?

BB: Yes. They're all fishermen, yes. Two of them just go lobstering. There's two of us that go gillnetting groundfish. One goes purse seining for herring.

JW: He's out in Portland, right?

BB: That's right. I fish out of Portland too. It's just so much easier to keep my boat there in the summer, just take it out of the fish exchange.

JW: So, you land your catch in Portland –

BB: I land my catch in Portland.

JW: – at the exchange?

BB: Yes, the fish exchange. It's a lot easier to do business, drive back and forth. We used to track the fish, but you do better job tracking yourself and bringing the fish in by boat. You get better product.

JW: What was it like growing up here in Harpswell?

BB: It's different. I mean, years ago, your mother said, "Get out of the house. Find something to do. [laughter] Quit hanging around the house, playing games. Get out of the house." So, we always found something to do. We played around in skiffs. Grew up, like I said, you find something to do, make a dollar, because there wasn't any money back when I was young. If you wanted a pair of sneakers, you went and made some money, bought a pair of sneakers. Now, basically, everything is a lot different nowadays. Nobody had anything back then. Then the generation before that, people had less.

JW: What was the town like back then, in terms of how many people lived here?

BB: Small town, everybody knew everybody. They looked out for each other. Now, it's different. You don't know the people. But years ago, everybody knew everybody. You knew your neighbor. Everybody watched out for each other. I think it was a lot better in that way.

JW: Is that a big summer population now?

BB: I think so. Well, it's a population from everywhere, not just summer. They've basically moved in because this used to be mostly a fishing community. I mean, it's a small percentage fishing now, because they come, especially the people on the ocean. There's people away that can afford the property. So, there's not many fishermen who live on the coast anymore.

JW: So, when did you begin fishing? When was the first time you went out?

BB: I think about 5 years old, I started working with my father on his boat every day in the summer. I'd get $1 a day, baiting [unintelligible]. We used to plug lobsters. Now they banned them. But years ago, we used to put wooden plugs in them.

JW: Was that plugs in the claws?

BB: Yes, plugs in the claws. People don't – yes. But I think I started about 5. I haven't had any summer off since [laughter]. Someday, I can have a summer off, probably when I'm dead and planted. [laughter] I always go. Yes, we did. That's what it did. I started younger than some of my brothers. But we all started about the time we were 8 or 9, started working on boats a little bit to make a little money. But that's what you did. You got up. You went out and helped. Yes.

JW: So, was your father a lobsterman and also a dragger as well?

BB: Yes. He mostly was lobstering. He did a little longlining, which is with hooks, in the winter, and a little bit of shrimping, but mostly lobster fishing, yes. He went and worked on other people's draggers some too, scalloping. He did a little bay scalloping, whatever it took to make a living. Yes.

JW: Had he grown up on the peninsula here?

BB: Oh, yes. He was born in the town, right in the house in the town. Yes, he was born a mile from here, in a house. Yes, he didn't make it to the hospital [laughter]. So, he hasn't gone far. He lives about probably 300 yards from the house he was born in. So, he didn't go far. [laughter] Yes.

JW: What was the first thing that he taught you about lobstering?

BB: Boy, I don't know. You just learn a lot of things over the years, just watching and doing, just work [laughter]. You've got to work, got to survive, right? You've got to put your time in,

and it'll pay off. Yes.

JW: Was he still making his own traps when you were –

BB: Oh, yes.

JW: – going out with him?

BB: Yes. We all made our own traps. I just started a few years ago. We even saw our own. We'd cut the trees down, saw the lumber up the trees into boards, and then turn them into traps. We made our own traps years ago. We then netted the heads. Oh, yes, because, like I said, you couldn't borrow money. No one will give you any money. So, you had to do what you could to get stuff together.

JW: But how many traps could you get out of one tree?

BB: I don't know. He'd know more about that. But I remember cutting them up, going through all that work, saw them up and saw them into (logs?), and making the bows, bending the bows. We'd steam the bows or boil them, so we could bend the bows, make round traps. We did that for years. Like I said, these people nowadays are wire trap. Then you patch all spring because wooden traps is a lot of work. Nowadays, there's no work. People think there's a lot of work to a wire trap, not compared to a wood trap.

JW: How much maintenance did they require?

BB: There was a lot of maintenance to a wooden trap. I have five hundred traps. You'd spend two months in the spring getting them ready. Now, I can get them ready in two days. Back then, you'd spend two months. That's the difference.

JW: How many did you fish then?

BB: Jeez, I used to have nine hundred. When I got into probably 23, 24 years old, I would fish quite a few. Because about years ago, my grandfather – my father used to go with him. I think he used to fish 220. They called him a hog because he fished too many. But it's funny. This is back in probably the fifties. But he was a hog because he fished over two hundred. Most guys fished a hundred.

JW: So, when did the numbers start to increase?

BB: I'm guessing in the – jeez, it must have been the sixties. Let me see. Yes, middle sixties, seventies. I think then the people really started to come up. They started getting hydraulic haulers. That made a big difference. We used to have the old-style haulers. He went to the hydraulic haulers, and that made a big difference.

JW: How did the old-style hauler work?

BB: The head, they called nigger head. You wrap the rope around, haul it that way, by hand, basically, but he just do it with a winch. It was a big difference. You did a lot of handwork. When they come up with those hydraulics, big difference. It saved a lot of work for everybody, yes.

JW: So, when did you begin groundfish fishing?

BB: I dabbled with – jeez, ever since I was a kid. I used to work on boats in the winter as soon as I got out of high school. When I was young, I used to go with my father tub trawling, which is longlining, tub trawling. We used to do that some with him in the spring. We'd go haul-up fishing and cod fishing. But I didn't make any money. I just went along. They let me do the work. I baited hooks and whatever you did. But I was happy to just go along. Then when I got out of high school, in the winter, I'd got on some of the draggers and worked on draggers a little bit and make a little extra money. I started doing it on my own probably, jeez, when I was 25 or so, a little bit. I started shrimping, mostly. Probably – no, 22 or something when I started. Let me try to think. Maybe I was 20. Yes, 21, 22, I started shrimping in the winter, which was a good fill-in. We'd go right from lobstering into shrimping. We did pretty good at that. We've been doing it ever since.

JW: What was the seasonal transition there? When would you switch from one fishery to another?

BB: December, we wouldn't do too much usually. Like I said, I'd haul traps [unintelligible 00:09:28] boat for us in December, take my traps out, get stuff ready. Around Christmas, New Year's, we'd get ready for shrimping. We'd go shrimping for three months through the winter months. That would (sharpen?) the winter up.

JW: When did the shrimp season usually end?

BB: Sometimes we'd go right into May if it happened to be a good year, and they give us a season. Some years you go right into May. Because years ago, they used to have a summer season. That's basically what ruined it because they overfished it. A few years, we went right into May. But I'd go some of the years, April, May. But a lot of years, I'd go until April and start getting my traps ready until I got into gillnetting. About, probably fifteen, twenty years ago, I got into gillnetting.

JW: So, when you began dragging, did you have your own vessel at that point or were you crewing on another person's vessel?

BB: Me and my father bought a boat together, and we went dragging. Like I said, I went shrimping. For a few years, we went – me and my father – together. We used his boat. I bought the gear for the boat, the seine nets, and the winches. Then we decided to buy a bigger boat together. We worked together for like 10 years. We went groundfishing with that boat, along with shrimping, for six months in a year.

JW: How does the nest size for shrimp differ from groundfish?

BB: Oh, it's only a two-inch mesh on shrimp because years ago, there wasn't a Nordmore grate. Now, there's a Nordmore grate to separate everything, which turned out to be a good thing. People fought it when they first came out with it, but it turned out to be a great thing, really. We used to get an awful lot of bycatch, especially when you're a spring fisher. Not so bad in the summer – I mean, in the dead of winter because there's not much bycatch in. But in the spring and early winter, you had a lot of bycatch. The Nordmore grate helps a lot.

JW: What kind of species in the spring?

BB: You get a lot of white and small flounders. I guess a lot of hake. I guess it's basically what you'd get. Yes.

JW: Was that because they were feeding on the shrimp or –

BB: Yes. The hake do, yes. Yes, everything feeds on shrimp. So, if you find shrimp, you usually find fish with them.

JW: I had a question, and then I just lost it.

BB: I mean, I hope it's a good one. [laughter] It'll come back.

JW: What was the experience like going dragging for shrimp and the groundfish early on?

BB: I never liked the groundfish dragging. It was too boring. You sat there for five hours and then hauled it back. You worked for a half hour or an hour to clean up. Then you wait around for another four or five hours. So, I like shrimping because you make [inaudible] . It isn't too bad. That's how I happened to get into gillnetting because it's just busy. It isn't such a boring day. You're either working or doing nothing. Nothing's in between. In dragging, you spend a lot of time doing nothing. I didn't like that part of it.

JW: So, with gillnetting, how does the equipment differ?

BB: Oh, just with dragging, you tow a net along behind you for five hours and haul back. Like I said, it takes you an hour or two to clean it. Where in gillnetting, you set it out. Usually, let it set twenty-four hours and haul it back. But the time you're hauling it back, you're working, clearing the nets out and picking your fish out. So, you're busy for six, eight hours of the day, then you head back in. It usually takes us about six to eight hours to go through our nets. Then we head back in.

JW: So, it's a day trip then.

BB: It's a day trip when your day tripping. If you stay the night, you basically stay six to eight hours. You shut down and just put on an anchor and wait for the next day a lot of times. Yes.

JW: Is your soak time sort of a standard length of time or –

BB: Twenty-four hours. You get too much time, you waste fish, and the quality of the fish isn't so good. Jeez, you can go a day and a half, thirty-five, forty hours. But you get up to forty-eight hours, the fish – you could tell they're not as good. Their eyes will go bad. When the eyes go bad, they just don't look good, as if their eyes – and then the insides of them don't look – if you can keep it twenty-four hours, you really have a quality fish. It helps with the market.

JW: So, when you're setting, how far offshore do you normally go?

BB: I usually fish around 30- to 40-mile range. That's about where I usually fish. That's where I do most of it. I do okay there. I always can find some fish somewhere in that range. Basically, you get in too close, the dogfish gets too thick. There's an awful lot of dogfish out there. You kind of try to stay on the line with the dogfish and the fish, so you can stay sane [laughter]. Dogfish will drive you foolish. You do a lot of work, and they ruin your nets too.

JW: When did the dogfish population begin to rise?

BB: Boy, I don't think it ever went away. I mean, they kept saying it was. But I kept having observers on the boat, and I kept trying to tell them, "I mean, you got your numbers wrong. You got your numbers wrong." But now it's gone mental. But there was dogfish. They kept saying there wasn't, but they weren't picking them. We knew what they would say.

JW: When was this?

BB: Jeez, fifteen years ago. They finally admitted there's a lot of dogfish, but it took him fifteen years to figure it out. I mean, they had observers on the boat seeing it, but they wouldn't listen to me, I guess. I don't know. I kept saying. I figured, with them observers, at least they'll see that their science is wrong on the dogfish. But they didn't pay no attention to them until now. I mean, they finally admit there's a few dogfish.

JW: How have other species responded to the increase in dogfish population?

BB: I think it's really hurting the fisheries. I mean, they eat everything. I mean, they got to eat something, right? So, they eat all the small cod, the small flounders. I mean, they eat shrimp. I mean, they got to. I mean, if they don't get the dogfish under control – because they keep blaming commercial fishermen, but there's nobody left, especially fishing inside down east. Nobody fishes there. So, they can't blame a commercial fisherman because there hasn't been one there in years. So, the only thing it could be is the dogfish. That's the only thing that's there.

JW: Is that from the east side of Penobscot Bay on up?

BB: No, even from here. I'm guessing from Casco Bay over, the inside. You can't fish inside because the dogfish is too thick anymore. They basically took it over. I mean, everything needs a number, but the dogfish they let get out of control. I think it's got way ahead of everything else, and nothing else can fight its way back into it.

JW: So, how many dogfish would you normally encounter now in one lift?

BB: Oh, we get a lot – 15, 20,000 days. If we go inside it all, we'll pick dogs. I mean, like I said, it's not uncommon to get 15, 20,000 dogfish. They do a lot of damage to nets. The sad thing is, I really think they could make a real fishery out of it if they opened it up, so guys could make a real market out of it. The way they micromanage it, they don't let them catch anything. So, I don't think no one can really ever set up a good market. So, I think they've got to open that up and really let people do something with it. All sharks. I mean, porbeagle is the same thing. Them foolish things are everywhere. They can't get it in their stupid head. They are out there. But we're seeing more porbeagles. I talked to a guy from New Jersey. He's a shark fisherman from down there. They're allowed to keep sharks down there quite a bit. So, I said, "Why aren't the porbeagles? You can't keep porbeagles." He said, "Just because they don't want them." I guess they're only in the northeast, the porbeagles, the way I understand it. So, they didn't worry about none of the quota. So, they didn't give any quota to anybody up here. Because them guys down there, they're the ones they listen to. So, I'm one of the people with the shark permit. You get porbeagles in your nets, which you don't try to get because they ruin your net. But they're good eating fish. They're worth good money. They took all the quota away. So, if you do get one incidental, you have to throw it away, which could be used if they would get their act together and let people keep one here and now.

JW: What other species do you encounter on a regular basis?

BB: Boy, I'll tell you, there's not a lot of fish out there right now [laughter]. With 6.5- inch nets, we see it. There's a lot of waiting out there. I think there's a lot of waiting now. There's a lot of, jeez, dogfish. I can see where there's a lot more sharks, all kinds of sharks. But everything else, basically, you have to fight. I'm fishing seventy nets to catch half the fish I did back what we used at sea. It was working. I mean, we were getting more and more fish every year and fishing less net to catch more fish, which made sense. Now we're fishing twice as many nets to catch half as many fish, with the sector thing. So, they get a fine-tune something. I think this can work after a while. But boy, so far, it hasn't been very good.

JW: So, what's the process like when you're lifting a net?

BB: Well, you just go up to the buoy and haul it up. We got fifteen nets to a string. I run four strings usually, so sixty to sixty-five now. It takes us about an hour to an hour and a half. If it's a messy net, it'll take an hour and a half. But about an hour to haul a string. I usually fish – keep them about a mile or two apart, so you steam in between the nets. Like I said, I got probably 120 of them in line, with an anchor on each end. That's about what it takes. But anywhere from an hour and a half to a string.

JW: How large is your crew?

BB: I run three guys. Sometimes there's four of us, two plus me or three plus me, but on the average, two guys plus me.

JW: How do they work the deck?

BB: Good. I got a good crew, yes. They work hard because that's one thing about gillnetting. If you don't want to work, you don't want to be there because it's hard work when you are working. But when you're done, you're done. There's only a few guys. There's a lot of people who think they can take it, but they don't. They quit on me [laughter].

JW: What's the most difficult part of the job?

BB: Dogfish [laughter]. Simple as that, dogfish. Because you just stave the nets up and you work all day long for nothing. But no, that's the big deal. The dogfish is the biggest problem with all gillnetting, yes.

JW: What sort of environmental changes have you seen during the arc of your career?

BB: I think the water is warming up. I know the water's warming up. I've noticed in the last few years. I guess it happened over years. I mean, history – but it is warming up. I think that's what's messing up the shrimp more than anything. They take shrimp away from us. But I don't think it's nothing to do with the fishermen. I always said that nature is eating more of them than we had. All the fish down there are eating on them. Everything eats shrimp down bottom. They keep trying to blame a few of us that's shrimping, cutting us back, and cutting us back. But I don't think we amount to nothing. I think nature, in this warm water, is the worst thing for shrimp. All the biologists always said that.

JW: So, are they moving offshore or moving north?

BB: I'm guessing they're moving more north, I would think. They don't egg out good or something. I remember years ago talking to one of the scientists. He always said fishermen didn't amount to nothing. It was all to do with the water temperatures and how the water temperature was and how the eggs took for the year and what kind of recruitment he was getting. I believe that. I think it's all to do with that. So, I think, the shrimp, they come in cycles. We had some good years a few years back. The price finally got good. Last year, we could have made a little money, but they wouldn't let us go when we could catch them. Then after they were gone, they let us go, which there wasn't a lot out there. But the price is good. We could have made money. But I don't know. They try to manage it too much sometimes, worrying about trying to keep everybody happy. But I just think you've got to let people catch a certain amount and then close it up. They try to spread it out over a long period of time. Nobody makes any money anyway. So, just let people go fishing. When it gets to a certain number, just shut it off. You don't want to overfish it, but there's no sense to stretch it out over nothing. Let the guy that wants to work it, work it.

JW: So, since Harpswell is a fishing town, how has the town itself changed and its relationship with fishing?

BB: I feel it changed because you used to be able to jump fisheries, I think. You went lobstering in the winter. Then you could say I want to go scalloping, and you'd go scalloping. Or you want to go shrimping, and you'd go – with shrimping, it's still an open access. But groundfishing,

you've got to buy a permit, and people can't afford it. But you could jump from fishery to fishery and survive. They took that all away. Basically, you're stuck in a fishery. I've got enough permits, so I'm probably one of the few that's got quite a few permits. There's only a few of us that's got access to a few things. It's too bad. It's been ruined, as far as that goes. A young guy coming up, if you haven't got resources from a family, you're out of luck. That's the sad thing about the fisheries.

JW: How has the value of a permit changed?

BB: I don't know. Boy, I think they've lost value lately [laughter] because they took all that fish away. But I don't think they're ever good. They're always going to be worth money because there's only a few of them out there. [laughter] I don't know. I got a little of everything. How many permits have I got? I've got a swordfish permit and three groundfish permits. I just bought a scallop permit plus a lobster license. So, I got access to stuff where other people don't. But I had to pay to do it. Like I said, you have to buy it. But like I said, I just bought the scallop permit last week because I want to be able to do that. Because I think shrimping will be bad this year, so I want to go be able to do scalloping. Yes.

JW: Is the scallop season the same as the shrimp?

BB: It is. You can go year-round as long as the quota isn't filled. But I'll probably wait until March to go. Go March, April, May. That's what I'm thinking, to sharpen the winter up a little bit. So, that's basically what I'm thinking, yes, yes. But I usually go in June. I've been going swordfishing in the last few years. I do okay at that. So, I've been doing that for like four years and something different to break up the year. Then I would go back to gillnetting again.

JW: Are you harpooning swordfish?

BB: Some harpooning and some longline. But I've had pretty good luck this last year. We did pretty good at it. So, I did real good this year. But I don't know. You just got to go so fast, long ways, 260 miles from here. So, it's a long ride to catch one. I think this year I did three trips. We did good all three trips, so I quit on a high note [laughter].

JW: What did you catch?

BB: Just swordfish and tuna. I got a few tuna, a lot of sharks. Blue dogs are everywhere. They say they're the most populated species in the world, blue dogs. They're everywhere. But I think we caught 112 swordfish in three trips, so we did okay.

JW: What was the size range?

BB: Probably about 100-pound dressed. Probably live weight, the average, on a longline, you get about 100-pound. If you harpoon them, you get about a 200-pound average dressed. That's no head, no tail, no nothing, which they call a marker, 100-pounder. But we got probably 100-pound average. Yes.

JW: Is that a market term?

BB: Yes. They call it because they got markers and double markers, a 200-pounders, and triple markers, 300. But we get a few big ones. But you get a lot of them around the 80-pound range, so it brings your average down.

JW: So, when longlining, what bait do you use?

BB: We use mackerel. I was – oh, we'd go out there. Like I said, we'd load up with ice and fuel and bait, which steam for a day to get there, off the edge of Georgia's. Then at the edge of the deck, you start running the gear out. It takes you about three hours to run out. We're running about 14, 15 miles of longline. Then we'd sleep for three to four hours and get up at daylight and start hauling the gear. It usually takes us about four or five hours to haul the gear back. Then we'd ride around, try to harpoon a few. So, it was a busy day out there, but we did okay, something different.

JW: How do you harpoon a swordfish?

BB: They're stupid. I mean, they are the real stupid fish. If you can see them, you can get them. You just ride up on them. The bigger they are, the less they're scared of you. I don't think they're scared of anything. They'll let you come up on them, and you can harpoon them. This year, we didn't do very good harpooning because the wind was too rough out there. But last year, we had some pretty good days. We got four or five a few days. One day, I think we got seven or eight. We only got five aboard the boat. We lost a couple of them. They're usually about a 200-pound average, them ones.

JW: What are the ideal conditions?

BB: Calm, flat calm, so you can see the fins going along the ripple. Out in Georgia, there's just always a big swell out there most of the time. It isn't real rough, but just swell enough to see. You'll have a hard time seeing them. But this year, we had 15-, 20-knot wind, not bad to be fishing in, but they had to be trying to harpoon a swordfish.

JW: So, when you approach one, where do you aim?

BB: Right in the middle of them. You got to get in the meat because they're soft fish. You'll rip out through them if you don't hit them right square. So, you really got to hit the middle of them. Yes.

JW: Did your father teach you how to harpoon?

BB: Not really. I kind of did that on my own. We used to do the tuna fish a little bit. We did that for years. We did a lot of tuna fishing. Jeez, we did a lot of years of tuna fishing in the summer. We'd haul that trap, run out there tuna fishing. We had to get a few. I had a few years, I'd get fifteen, eighteen tuna fish for the season. Well, we worked hard to do it. So, we'd get a few that way, harpooning. Most of it, we were getting them on rod and reel, chumming. I

always wanted to go swordfishing. But I didn't want to get on one of them boats and go for a thirty-day trip. So, I decided to buy a permit when the permits come up for sale. So, I see one on the paper for sale. So, I bought a permit and rigged up, went out, and did it. So, I can say I did it [laughter]. I made a little bit of a living from it. But I don't know. It's something different. I hate doing the same thing year-round. Breaks up the year if you can switch from fishery to fishery.

JW: So, what's the greatest challenge now in sustaining the fishery in your mind?

BB: Jeez, I don't know. I really think they got to do it with mesh size. I mean, they keep doing all these stupid laws and trying to – with mesh size, it will work. I mean, enforce mesh size. I really think they can do the job. Keep the fish on the bottom. Let the small fish on the bottom where they belong until they grow up because mesh size works if you enforce it. If a guy's cheating, you got to catch the guy's that's cheating. But if they do a mesh size, it'll work. We'll have all kinds of fish again. But as long as they worry about one guy getting one fish, like they worry about me losing one fish overboard, write it down. Then there's a guy next to me with a little card in, killing 10,000 pounds, but there's nobody on the boat. That's okay. But they got my one fish wrote down. But mesh size is everything. Like I said, leave the fish on the bottom until they're big enough to keep. They're worth more money. They weigh more. It only makes sense.

JW: Well, thank you very much for interviewing tonight, Brian. I really appreciate it. I wish you safe travels in the future.

BB: Sounds good. Well, thanks for coming and talking about what we had to say.

[end of transcript]