

## Interview with Amanda Wright

**Narrator:** Amanda Wright

**Interviewer:** Janice Gadaire Fleuriel

**Location:** New Bedford, MA

**Date of Interview:** September 24, 2006

**Project Name:** The Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project

**Project Description:** This project documents the history and culture of the commercial fishing industry and other port trades. The project was begun in 2004 in conjunction with the Working Waterfront Festival, an annual, educational celebration of commercial fishing culture which takes place in New Bedford, MA. Interviewees have included a wide range of individuals connected to the commercial fishing industry and/or other aspects of the port through work or familial ties. While the majority of interviewees are from the port of New Bedford, the project has also documented numerous individuals from other ports around the country. Folklorist and Festival Director Laura Orleans and Community Scholar and Associate Director Kirsten Bendiksen are project leaders. The original recordings reside at the National Council for the Traditional Arts in Maryland with listening copies housed at the Festival's New Bedford office.

**Principal Investigator:** Laura Bendiksen, Laura Orleans

### Abstract

On September 24, 2006 Janice Gadaire Fleuriel interviewed Amanda Wright as part of *The Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project*. Amanda Wright is a seasoned lobster sternman, and she shares her experiences and insights of 22 years in the fishing industry. Amanda studied art and pottery, and she describes moving and setting up a studio in Provincetown. To make ends meet, she started working for local scallopers opening scallops beyond the breakwater. She became interested in trapping after her work with the Shellfish Department in Wellfleet, where she trapped predators of oysters and clams, like green crabs and horseshoe crabs. Amanda describes her eventual transition into lobstering, the challenges and rewards of the trade, and the physical demands of working with lobster traps. She recites a poem she wrote about her love and respect for tomcod and talks about the beautiful things she's seen as part of her work. Amanda also speaks about potential industry changes, including the proposal of privatization, and says she hopes people learn that "this is our livelihood and our life, that we have respect for the environment, that we embrace the environment, that we are part of the environment every day. For them to realize, when they buy a piece of fish in the marketplace, that was hard earned."

[00:00]

Jane Gadaire Fleuriel: ...Fleuriel. It's Sunday, September 24, 2006, at the Working Waterfront Festival, and I'm interviewing Amanda Wright. I know that briefly when I met you last night, Amanda, I think it was Sharon Cumming said you've done anything and everything on a fishing boat there is to do...

Amanda Wright: Yes, I've dabbled in it all, but lobstering is my forte.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: That's what I've been involved in for the past twenty-odd years.

JGF: Oh, okay...

AW: ...twenty-two.

JGF: ...so what I'd actually like to just – we always like to just start is asking people if they can tell us where and when they were born and a little bit about your family background or how you ended up in New Bedford, if that...

AW: Okay. I work out of Newport...

JGF: Okay.

AW: Rhode Island...

JGF: Okay.

AW: State Pier Nine, I – I've worked out of Wickford, Rhode – I've worked all over Rhode Island as far as lobstering is concerned, and, when I landed in Rhode Island I looked into all the different fisheries, and trying to decide what I was going to do when I was coming from Cape Cod, where I'd lived for eleven years, and lobstering seemed to be the one that suited me, or fit me, or fit my lifestyle, so...

JGF: Huh. Interesting...

AW: I wasn't interested in really going offshore so much anymore, so lobstering that I'm involved in, I'm home every night in my own mouse bed, so....

JGF: Yeah, ha ha.

AW: ...that's a good thing.

JGF: Yeah, yeah... So where did you actually grow up, on the Cape or somewhere else?

AW: No, um, I grew up – I was born in Princeton, New Jersey...

JGF: Okay.

AW: My family relocated down south when I was eight.

JGF: Okay.

AW: There is no fishing history in my entire background...

JGF: Huh!

AW: ...although we used to spend summers on Nantucket.

JGF: Okay.

AW: I really don't know where this came from except it just made sense for me when I got connected with it at the age of twenty-three.

JGF: How did that connection happen?

AW: Well, I landed in Provincetown, Mass, and I had studied art and I made pottery, and I had a studio and a shop...

JGF: Okay.

AW: ...in Provincetown, and when I landed in Provincetown, it was like, I couldn't believe that this place existed, because it was so wide open and so free and so independent, and it was full of poets and writers and artists and fishermen, Portuguese fishermen, and... it was just every walk of life...

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: ...and, I landed there in November with my potter's wheel in the back of my Volkswagen station wagon, and... I got there because I knew a glass blower that was living there, and she said, "Well, why don't you just stay?" And it made sense to me. So I set up a studio, and, I got – did very well as far as making pots, had a shop with a couple of other women, but it was seasonal, and to make ends meet, in a year-round capacity, it wasn't happening. So these offshore scallopers were coming into Provincetown this particular winter, and hiring people off the dock to go beyond the breakwater and open scallops all day.

JGF: Oh! [03:04]

AW: They were paying ten dollars a bucket.

JGF: Wow.

AW: I got to be pretty good and I was having hundred dollar days, and that was a lot of money back in the seventies.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: And one thing led to another, and I was invited to go offshore as cook on the [*Gerter Riva?*], which I did. My first trip I had a check that was worth fifteen hundred dollars.

JGF: Wow. For how many days?

AW: For a ten day trip.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I said, "Well, this might be for me." [laughs]

JGF: [laughs] I love it! Yeah, yeah.

AW: I was able to pay all of my debts and started living high on the hog...

JGF: Yeah!

AW: ...so to speak, and there was a lot of camaraderie in terms of being on the boats, they would – they would feed you like a hot lunch and played rock and roll all day in the shucking boxes, and, uh, we, uh, we had a really good time, uh, in terms of the shucking end, and then I saw that I did actually have sea legs and I never got sick, and...

JGF: That – I was going to ask you, so your first trip was – you – a good discovery for you that way.

AW: Yeah. It was phenomenal...

JGF: Huh.

AW: That I managed to pull it off.

JGF: Yeah!

AW: So...

JGF: How – what was the like sleep schedule then? Was it something...

AW: We worked six on, six off....

JGF: Mmm-hmmm.

AW: Around the clock.

JGF: Yup.

AW: Being cook, you know, I got time in the galley, also... but I – I had to learn a lot of things about that too... I was always a good cook cause I love to entertain...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...and I love people, and...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...my favorite thing in life is to give dinner parties, and...

JGF: Oh! Okay...

AW: ...bring a lot of people together, and food and drink and... seems to be a nice way to go about life.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I went out in my first trip and I froze this tuna noodle casserole in a clay pot. When I took it out the whole pot just like, when it warmed up in the oven like split in two, and [laughs]

JGF: [laughs] Oh! Ah!!

AW: So I had tuna noodle casserole everywhere.

JGF: Oh, no! You...

AW: But...

JGF: Did you take a little ribbing for that, or...?

AW: Oh, yeah, I took a lot of ribbing. But I never took anything personally.

JGF: Yeah, yeah. Well they – everyone does it to each other, as I understand, right?

AW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you learn how to bust balls very quickly.

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: Be on top of that.

JGF: Yup.

AW: Cause a sense of humor is very important in the fishing industry...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...because so many times you need to reach deep and find one.

JGF: Ah! Yeah, yeah. Like when the fish aren't coming up, or... any number of kinds of things?

AW: Right. When you're changing water, and then, you know, in the lobster industry you're on a one on one basis with your captain all day long...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: So it's just the two of you, but you – you may not talk a lot but the things that you do talk about can, you know...

JGF: Ah...

AW: Equate to humor.

[05:52]

JGF: Yeah. Yeah... just like – you just used the phrase “changing water.”

AW: That's when you're pulling up pots that are empty.

JGF: Okay.

AW: You have those times of year where you're – you may get three lobsters out of an entire trawl...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...so it's basically doing a lot of work for nothing.

JGF: Yeah, yeah. Huh. Interesting. So...

AW: But then you have the times of year where they're abundant...

JGF: Right...

AW: You're doing really well, so, it pretty much works out at the end of the year that you make about the same every year...

JGF: Right...

AW: ...in terms of the good times and the bad times, cause you're paid a percentage...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...in terms of the catch.

JGF: Yeah. Now, I'm just trying to sort of get a sense. You - you spent most of your years lobstering. How many, like, offshore trips – were - they weren't for lobster, then, your offshore...

AW: No. They were scalloping.

JGF: How many of those did you do – a lot, or for how long?

AW: I did that for about two years, three years.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I traveled out to Alaska and I also did it out there. There was a big scallop boom in Alaska in about 1978-79, and a lot of boats from the East Coast traveled out to Alaska for this.

JGF: Huh! Wow...

AW: I took the boat from Seattle, and we went through the inside passage, and we worked off a little town called [Yakitat?]....

JGF: Hmmm...

AW: Where you could see the glaciers and everything, and, uh, then I traveled across... the Gulf and uh, we went to Kodiak...

JGF: Mmm hmmm....

AW: Then when they switched over to black cod fishing is when I flew back...

JGF: Okay.

AW: ...to Seattle and then I drove back cross-country.

JGF: Wow... wow... that's neat. Then after that did you get back into the - did you switch into the lobster when you got back?

AW: When I got back is when I pretty much moved to Rhode Island.

JGF: Yup.

AW: I was also hired as a shellfish predator controller in Wellfleet.

JGF: Mmm-hmm.

AW: That's how I got involved in this whole thing with traps and bait, because my job was, they gave me a little sixteen-foot skiff...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: ...the Shellfish Department, and my job was to trap and find a market for the predators of the oysters and, um, clams.

JGF: Huh!

AW: So I was trapping green crabs and channel whelks, and horseshoe crabs, and moon snails, and so I set up a market for the green crabs for local fishermen to use to catch, you know, bass, striped bass...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I would sell those by the bushel in Hyannis, and then the channel whelks I set up a market

to restaurants for snail salad, conch salad.

JGF: Hmm!

AW: Salas' Restaurant which is one of the best restaurants in Provincetown...

JGF: Uh-huh.

AW: He used to give my husband and I when we came back to the Cape, a free meal and all the wine we could drink for a bushel of conchs.

JGF: Ah ha! There you go!

AW: Which was great.

JGF: Yeah!

AW: Cause the food was just outrageous.

JGF: Wow. Now that's neat. So, was it tricky finding those markets, or did you have enough sense of the whole...

AW: I've always never been a shy person, and so...

JGF: Okay... it was not hard.

AW: ...I just went out there and did it, but, in Wellfleet was the first time they gave me a little sixteen foot skiff.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: With a little davit and a little block on it pretty much taught me how to run the skiff...

JGF: Yeah?

AW: Then I was just sort of sent out on my own.

JGF: Ha ha.

AW: Then a lot of the work I did was at low tide where I had my traps set for green crabs, where I would just walk out and bait them, at low tide...

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: Just put my catch into, you know, onion bags...

JGF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: ...and just walk back. I got a lot of exercise.



JGF: I bet!

AW: I loved just being out in the flats, and I was also connected with dredging for oysters there, and... worked on a lot of small boats out of Wellfleet. But when I moved to Rhode Island was... because I dealt with bait concerning the predator situation I was not afraid to get involved with, you know, all that smelly fish and stuff.

JGF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: ... and just... [10:00]

JGF: Huh, and so then that's when you made the switch to lobstering, too.

AW: Yeah.

JGF: Yeah. Okay. Was that like, did you have to pound the pavement to... did you have your own...?

AW: I did pound the pavement... and I started off in Wickford and there was this character Bruce Barr, and he actually saved my life which I'll tell you about...

JGF: Okay.

AW: ...in, in more than one way and he was the first person that I broke in with concerning lobstering, and I had to really bug him a lot. And I said well, you know, I make good sandwich and give me the opportunity and he hired me and...I worked with him and I did all the gear work all spring and, you know, all the – the labor that one does for like practically nothing...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...and then right when we were starting to catch lobsters, he fired me. Never told me why, and I was just, like, devastated, but I said, well, I'm not going to let this get me down and I just found another job on the dock, and continued on with my life. Well during the course of eighteen years, Bruce and I and his wife became friends, and he came to my house and after eighteen years he goes, "Well, I would like you to be my deckhand." So I went back with him, but the irony of it all is that I was on the only boat in all of Rhode Island that offered health insurance.

JGF: His boat...?

AW: His boat. He was incredibly fair as far as pay and phenomenally fair guy concerning money. I got health insurance and I was forty-eight years old at the time, and a year later I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

JGF: Oh my goodness...

AW: The irony is I'll always believe he saved my life by asking me to come back aboard that boat, because had I been on any other boat, I'd never had health insurance in my life, I would not have been taken care of properly.

JGF: Wow!...

AW: So I felt like the stars are, you know, in the sky taking care of me.

JGF: Yeah! Yeah... That's – wow- that's great.

AW: Eighteen years ago I made full circle and...

JGF: Oh you... did you ever find out why he fired you, or were you able to just let that go?

AW: Yeah... well, he said that he really – he told me eighteen years later, he fessed up and he said, you know, I really didn't feel like I could work with a woman, at that time.

JGF: Interesting.

AW: But he never said anything about it.

JGF: No... no...

AW: Then he told me eighteen years later, we were friends then, and...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: We socialized and stuff, but... he said I never felt that I could do that, but then I - eighteen years later he approached me and asked me to come aboard and... it was quite a compliment to me...

JGF: That's nice...

AW: Because he's a very good fisherman.

JGF: Yeah... well, and by then he'd certainly seen that you could do the work, and wanted to...

[12:47]

AW: Oh yeah. But he trained me well, he did. And he's one of the few people that I've worked with that I really feel like it was... I compare lobstering to sort of a dance, because when you're working with a captain... you know exactly what's going to happen before it happens, because you know that person so well...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: You know what they want you to do, you don't have to discuss it.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: You just do it. The day goes smoothly and the gear goes out properly, and...

JGF: Yeah... yeah...

AW: It's just a nice rhythm, which is, uh, created.

JGF: I get – I have two questions around this – I don't know if you can answer them all in one or what. One is what – what did the training involve and the other is sort of how does a typical day go lobstering...

AW: Every boat is different in terms of what the captain wants and how they – they like things done. They – they're very Type A personality, and people think, you know, because you have bait and this and that, you know, everything is – but they are clean, clean, clean, clean, clean. Everything is done in, you know, and the boat is just kept impeccably clean. And which brings me up to another story which is very humorous, but, um... he, uh, trained me in terms of teaching me, you know, how to string bait, uh, different varieties of bait, how to stack the gear properly, um... how to tie knots, um, how to lay the ground line so that it – it went off without like in a big bunch, or whatever, uh... things of that nature.

JGF: Now, so...

AW: What he did as far as like... he liked to have the bait barrels like set in a certain way so that you – and to work out of one and to keep it high so you weren't wasting any time in terms of digging down...

JGF: Yup...

AW: ...things of that nature...

JGF: Very similar to fishing...

AW: Yeah...

JGF: So he... the whole thing about the lines, I mean, you would obviously have to know the depth you're in for how much line to let out for traps, or what...

AW: No, no. Because all the gear is connected with sixteen feet of line between each pot...

JGF: Okay.

AW: ...so you have a string of pots...

JGF: Okay.

AW: But in terms of kicking them next to the pots when you lay them on the deck...

JGF: I see.

AW: ...and then the last pot you don't kick the line, so, because sometimes it gets caught in the corner...

JGF: Oh...

AW: I mean, there- there's just different things that hap-

JGF: Little tricks that...

AW: Little tricks.

JGF: Yeah. How much does each, like, lobster pot weigh, empty and full?

AW: Well, I started off interesting enough, uh, fishing wooden gear.

JGF: Mmm!

AW: The oak pots...

JGF: Yeah?

AW: ...which had to be dipped every spring in this really carcinogenic stuff, and...

JGF: Oh!...

AW: But then they came out with the wire and it – it took a couple of years to get these guys, you know, sort of, like, interested in using this wire...

JGF: Mmm...

AW: Cause they don't like a lot of change in their lives...

JGF: Yeah, right.

AW: For them to trust it... but the wire gear weighs probably twenty pounds less than what the wooden gear weighed.

JGF: Ah...

AW: Wooden gear soaked, probably some of those traps weighed about fifty pounds, sixty pounds...

JGF: Wow...

AW: ...a piece...

JGF: Wow...[16:06]

AW: But I was younger, I was in my thirties then.

JGF: Yeah!

AW: Now the gear that we set weigh - weighs anywhere from thirty-five to forty pounds a piece.

JGF: Mmm hmm.

AW: But you have tricks... where you don't overwork yourself by sliding things down the rail...

JGF: Mmm hmm.

AW: ...properly.

JGF: Okay...

AW: As a particular, swaying in terms of putting that pot on the deck and sliding it...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Which makes it easier for you too.

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: So as – a good thing to know, and they say the best lobstermen as far as deckhands are the short lobstermen.

JGF: Oh!

AW: Because we're so low to the deck that...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: We don't hurt our backs.

JGF: Trying to do – yeah.

AW: Yeah.

JGF: Interesting.

AW: I'm a small girl but it's amazing how – how strong...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I've become, and...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Over the years...

JGF: Yeah!

AW: In terms of...

JGF: Huh. How many lobster pots would... a lobsterman, say, have so many pots and they'd all go out each day and come back each day, or is he putting some out and then another out the next..?

AW: No, no. The strings stay out there.

JGF: Mmm-hmm.

AW: So you have a group of gear that's in one area...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...that you work on.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: So we generally – we're allotted 800 pots now. When I first started in this industry you could fish 2,000 pots if you wanted.

JGF: Oh! So you guys have limits...

AW: So we – we're limited to 800 and each particular boat, they're making regulations now as to how much gear that these boats have fished over the past five years, and...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: They'll be allotted X amount of pots...

JGF: Wow...

AW: ...but 800 is the most pots in Rhode Island...

JGF: Hmm...

AW: ...that you're allowed to put out. So we fish generally anywhere from 275 to 300 pots a day.

JGF: Wow... wow.

AW: Total.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: Our strings consist of fifteen pots.

JGF: I see.

AW: Some guys fish twenties. Some guys fish twelves, tens, depending on where you are.

JGF: Hmm. Yeah. So you're checking each of them each day, and if there's nothing then – no...

AW: No. We check probably three hundred – two – two fifty to three hundred each day.

JGF: Okay. But he has eight hundred out there somewhere.

AW: Yes.

JGF: I see. I see. Yeah.

AW: They're in different areas of Area 2. That's the area that we fish in.

JGF: Okay. Is that something that's licensed or by choice on his part.

AW: It's licensed.

JGF: It's licensed...

AW: It's federal waters, so...

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: You have to have a license for that.

JGF: Huh. And as lobstering these days – do you all have the sort of day limits that the other...

AW: No, we don't.

JGF: You can do it all year round every day of the year?

AW: No, but, um... there is addendum 7 that's coming up where they want to privatize the industry and, uh, that seems to be the thing that's gone on everywhere like Alaska and all over the country, meaning that if you're a young person and you want to get into this industry, you have to buy a boat that has a license for that particular...

JGF: Ah... just like...

AW: ...area.

JGF: ...what the scallopers and draggers are doing now?

AW: Yeah... that's what I'm talking about in terms of privatizing.

JGF: I see. Okay. Wow. So limiting the number of boats that can be doing it and...

AW: Yup.

[19:08]

JGF: Yeah... what do you think about that?

AW: I'm for it because the people that hung in there when things were really lean...

JGF: Uh huh...

AW: Okay, I think deserve to be able to sell those licenses.

JGF: Okay.

AW: That's how I feel about it.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: I feel very strongly about it. As opposed to anyone just being able to come in and out of the industry.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: Because they've paid their dues.

JGF: Right.

AW: They have hung in there through everything.

JGF: Right. So it's like... like the equivalent of anyone else selling their business, so to speak.

AW: Right. They've hung in there through the bad times, and the good times.

JGF: Right... right.

AW: So...

JGF: Huh. Interesting. Now who would set the price of the license? Is that like a regulated thing or could a person charge whatever they feel it's worth for the business of [inaudible]?

AW: They – they could charge whatever they...

JGF: Aha...

AW: ...feel it's worth for the business, depending on how many pots that you got with the boat, and...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: ...some pots would only be allotted four hundred pots...

JGF: Right.

AW: ...for that boat, because they've only fished that many over X amount of time.

JGF: Right... I see. Yeah...

AW: But the guys that have fished the eight hundred... and...

JGF: Yeah.



AW: And then they have to prove their landings also.

JGF: Mmm hmm... I guess that way, too, if somebody wanted they could a – a child could inherit a license, if they chose to do it that way?

AW: Yes.

JGF: Yeah... Interesting. Had you ever given any thought to having your own boat, or have you always been happy to be the...

AW: I was always happy to be the sternman...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Because I can get off that boat, and live a life.

JGF: Right.

AW: It's not breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: My day is done...

JGF: Yeah.

AW: ...the minute I step on that dock, and... we have those bugs put in the box, or we've sold them at the market...

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: It is over. Because I – I do all the bait on the board.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: There were many years where I used to string all the bait on the dock the day before we would get in, and I would string the bait and make sure everything was ready for the next day...

JGF: Mmm... right.

AW: Then it would be put on the boat, but we steam for about an hour and a half to two hours to the grounds that we're in...

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: So I'm able to get at least a hundred baits done before we even reach the grounds...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Then during the course of the day, between setting the gear, and banding the lobsters, I'm

able to get the rest of the bait done.

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: While the pots are going off and we're steaming between different trawls.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: So, when we hit the dock I'm finished.

JGF: Okay. So I'm still – I'm just a little – okay, so if you have pulled up, let's say, the three hundred pots that day...

AW: Yup.

JGF: You bring those back in with...

AW: No.

JGF: No...

AW: We set them back out there.

JGF: Okay, so then you...

AW: Everything is left out there.

JGF: When you bait the pots, you're actually having to pull them up again to put the bait in?

AW: Yes.

JGF: Okay.

AW: So that, you know, we do that every day.

JGF: So I'm sure you're pretty strong! Like you said...

AW: Oh yeah. I know how to use a pitchfork very well.

JGF: Is that... for the bait or for getting the pots up?

AW: For getting the bait out of the barrels.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: Seen these big blue barrels...

JGF: Yeah!

AW: ...around the waterfront? Well that's...

JGF: That's what those are?

AW: Yeah, those are bait barrels.

JGF: What kind of bait is it?

AW: We use anywhere from – anything from skates, which is considered hard bait, uh... to, um, flounder racks, which are fileted flounders...

JGF: Okay...

AW: ...that come out of, uh... uh, the filet houses here....

JGF: Uh huh...

AW: Cod fish, haddock...

JGF: Is it like the not restaurant quality stuff or what?

AW: No, it's stuff that's been cut.

JGF: Oh...

AW: So, it's just the head.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: And the... the body...

JGF: The remnants...

AW: With... with... with no filet on it.

JGF: I see.

AW: The remnants.

JGF: Okay.

AW: They used to practically give the bait away, but not bait is – is very expensive.

JGF: Wow.

AW: It is not cheap. One of those drums of skates can cost you anywhere from fifty to fifty-five dollars.

JGF: Wow...

AW: Per drum.

JGF: Wow... How many... so that would be about how many pots worth?

AW: Depending on if you were doing straight skates or whether you were mixing it.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: You can get straight skates if you were stringing, you can get eighty baits, or seventy baits, out of that drum.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: But that's it.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: So you've already spent, you know, quite a bit of money before you've even thrown the dock lines.

[23:14]

JGF: Yeah. Then when you bring the lobster back in, there's no auction for the lobsters...

AW: No. No.

JGF: Yeah. How does it get sold...

AW: But there is a price, a precedent. Some people – it fluctuates between fifty cents a pound.

JGF: Is he having to bring it to the restaurants or is there a place he brings it?

AW: No, he's got a seafood market.

JGF: Oh!...

AW: Everybody has their own private place where they sell, or...

JGF: I see.

AW: Then there's Aquidneck Lobster in Newport which a lot of guys just go there.

JGF: So do you like lobster?

AW: I like it on occasion, I mean, I like lob- I like to make lobster fritter, which I did at the cooking demonstration last year.

JGF: Okay.

AW: I like lobster sort of like pick- the meat picked and chopped up and sort of, like, tossed in pasta or something, but for me to sit down and rip a lobster apart and like just chewing on it...

JGF: Yeah?

AW: I wouldn't do it.

JGF: No? It's not worth it for you, yeah. Interesting. Interesting... Well, I know that you said you had your poem.

AW: Yeah.

JGF: So I'm trying to think it – well I kinda had that... oh, you had that humorous story that...

AW: Oh yeah... this guy I know Bob Bradfield, he had this deckhand and it was a very, very, very, very hot, like, July, you know, season. He took the weekend off, and his deckhand left this very innocent basket. Like one of those little fish baskets with a couple of skates in it on the deck.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Bob went off for the weekend, he went to Maine or did something or something of that nature. When he came back down to his boat, on Monday, his entire boat was encased in maggots.

JGF: Huh!

AW: It looked like it was alive. I've never witnessed anything like that in my entire life.

JGF: Oh my God!

AW: Nor had anybody else. It was in his engine.

JGF: Ah!

AW: It was all over everywhere. The boat was actually moving, there were so many maggots.

JGF: Aah!

AW: He had – his deckhand saw that and just disappeared, and he had to go rent a shop vac...

JGF: Ahh!

AW: Shop vac everything.

JGF: Ohh! Eeww!

AW: Off the boat, it was – I wanted to get a photograph for it because I always wanted to write a – a book called Better Home or Better Boats and Bait. And I thought Oh, God, this – if I had a picture of this...

JGF: Oh my God... boy, what an image though, yeah.

AW: I know. It was phenom- I've never seen anything – just this – and just a couple.

JGF: Yeah?

AW: But they just, like, just flourished and grew and grew and grew. It was amazing.

JGF: Uh! That's like what nightmares are made of, it just... you know...

AW: It was... it was. [laughs]

JGF: Ohh!!!

AW: It was pretty bad. Pretty bad.

JGF: Then, like, finding maggots here and there for a few days...

AW: Oh yeah!

JGF: I can imagine...

AW: Oh yeah! [laughs] [26:27]

JGF: [laughs] Okay, so your poem. This is the first poem you've ever written, you said?

AW: Yes.

JGF: Okay.

AW: This is the first poem, uh, that I've ever written and, uh, I was just ove- so overwhelmed about being out in Astoria. I had this rule, um... which sort of came about during gillnetting, because I felt I was living that painting The Scream... um, my job – one of them on the boat – was to take these large raja skates, and I had to hang them alive by the eyeball into this hook on the back deck. And I had to cut their wings off.

JGF: For the skate wing market I've heard of...

AW: For the skate wing market. They had these, like, little mouths that look like little hearts, and little eyes, and I felt like I was living that painting The Scream.

JGF: Yeah!...

AW: Because their, like, mouths would just like... so I became very, very sensitized during this gillnetting, uh, period, because everything was like, it was a bloodbath.

JGF: Wow...

AW: Between the monkfish and cutting out monkfish livers and... picking the net, and, you know, cutting these skate wings, like eight hundred pounds of skate wings...

JGF: Wow...

AW: ...a day.

JGF: Wow...

AW: ...I was doing, I didn't even have an arm...

JGF: Yeah!...

AW: You know?

JGF: Was it very hard to cut those skate wings?

AW: Yeah, you had to hold the top and then you just had to – but you always, you know, made sure that your knife was, uh, really sharp. But, um, I hated that gillnetting...

JGF: Oh...

AW: Because it just was like caught everything in the ocean and you were picking these nets of, you know...

JGF: Right. Of course they were sort of tangled in by the gills, if I understand...

AW: Yeah. But I – it – I told the captain, I said, “You know I’m very good at picking these nets and it came so easily to me,” and he goes, “Why is that Amanda?” I said, “Well, it’s a little bit like dressing and undressing dolls.”

JGF: Ah!

AW: Which I did as a child.

JGF: Oh, that’s so funny!

AW: Cause you take their, like, little, uh, flippers and sort of flip them out and...

JGF: Yeah!

AW: He laughed. [laughs]

JGF: [laughs] They – think they never used to want women on boats. That’s hilarious.

AW: Oh yeah. [laughs]

JGF: Okay, so this poem came out of that?

AW: Well, it’s because there’s lots of different things that come up in the pots, besides just lobsters and crabs and... there’s all kinds of fish. These little tomcods in the fall, we see a lot of them. I think they’re so beautiful.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Lobstermen sort of have this attitude about the codfish because they eat their...

JGF: The bait...

AW: No, they eat lobster.

JGF: Oh! Okay...

AW: So, and there's nothing better than, like, a nice small, you know, cod filet...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: ...to take home for dinner.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: But, I just love these tomcods and I take them out and I kiss them and... I won't allow anyone to take anything from a sea robin to a sea raven to... anything, and just kill it for bait. I go, "Look, we have all this bait here, I mean, you don't need this beautiful fish."

JGF: Yeah...

AW: I'm always tossing them overboard, and, so... I've been in the industry for so long that they allow me to do it.

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: They don't really bother me with it. They always pretend like they're gonna kill it or something, but...

JGF: [laughs]

AW: But then they throw it overboard.

JGF: Uh huh. Uh huh...

AW: When you're running the deck, you pretty much have your say in terms of –if there is somebody else in my place, some other guy...

JGF: Right...

AW: If he wanted to kill it, then, you know, the captain would, if he wanted to take it home for dinner, or if he...

JGF: Right... so if...

AW: Or if they wanted to use it for bait – but with me, I just, I don't want to kill things that's a bycatch.



JGF: Yeah...

AW: I can't see any reason for it, so...

[30:13]

JGF: So this is on the lobster boats and I just want to cla- the running the deck, so there's more than you and the one boat owner guy...

AW: No, it's just me and the boat owner.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: But I'm running the deck.

JGF: I see what you're saying.

AW: Because he's at the hauler, so its my deck, you know...

JGF: Ah!...

AW: This is my, uh... my home back here.

JGF: Okay, great.

AW: So leave me to my own devices and if I don't want anything killed, that's my rule.

JGF: Okay.

AW: But I'm fifty-five, so I can save that...

JGF: Yeah, they've heard your...

AW: I've earned my thing, I mean, I'm always telling these young guys that don't know anything about me, I'm old enough to be your mother.

JGF: Ha ha...

AW: So shut up! [laughs]

JGF: [laughs] Ah!... and do they?

AW: Oh yeah!

JGF: Great! Okay...

AW: Okay. [reading poem]

I begged my captain for tomcod's life

We are lobstering after all

For most of the morning we've been changing water in every trawl

And you appear.

Mr. Tomcod, you are so small  
Your streamline torso is a silver canvas  
So lightly speckled like a child's freckled sun-kissed face.  
There are shades of yellows and pale greens painted on a variety of places on your wet scales  
So shiny and clean  
You entered our trap on a gold, sandy floor  
Once a prisoner behind wire, I watch you in dance in a voodoo frenzy  
On our textured glass deck

The cold crisp air burns like a smoldering fire in your tiny fish lungs  
You're an alien in a desert with no oasis to shade you  
Oh tomcod with your gray, slate face  
You may have traveled into the wrong place  
Although you entered our wire pot, it's clear  
You should have avoided this lobster gear.  
For my captain sees you at his table  
Not as his guest, but as his fable  
He believes you eat his daily bread  
For his fortune is lobsters, alive, not dead.

I will not tolerate the act of your sad fate  
I beg him mercifully to throw you back with haste  
He looks at me with a sarcastic frown,  
Picks up the ground line, revs the hauler, and turns around.  
For in my heart I know you're young  
And are deserving to swim and run  
Amongst your ocean kin.

To grow large and multiply, so you can be caught  
In a draggerman's net, by and by

For future generations of fishing folk  
Tomorrow, rather than this day  
It tears my heartstrings to look in your clear eyes  
As deep as a millpond in July

So while my captain cleans out the next trap I flip you airborne over the rail  
I never look back  
And feel my soul sail

So until my next purchase at the fish market on the pier I will think of you fondly, Mr. Tomcod,  
dear.

[33:24]

JGF: Oh, that's a wonderful...

AW: It was from the heart.

JGF: You can tell, I mean, the images are just so vivid. The part I wasn't expecting which I thought was neat too was the fact that until one day you'll be caught, to bring back in the larger fishes.

AW: Right.

JGF: Wow... wow... oh that was great.

AW: Cause I...

JGF: Have you had a chance to do it on, like, the stages yet or anything?

AW: I did it in Astoria.

JGF: Oh good!

AW: I'm writing other poetry now, and so I'm really excited about going back for the tenth anniversary.

JGF: Yeah, so maybe your book about... Better Home – Better Boats and Bait will be a book of poems.

AW: Right. Maybe...

JGF: Ah! Yeah... Well, that's great. Oh, that was beautiful. Wow...

AW: Thank you.

JGF: That's so fun because, I mean, well, as poetry will, right, I mean, the whole thing probably took a matter of a moment or minute or – or less, and – and you just built it up into all of this layers of... cool. Well, I don't know if there's anything else – I sort of have two general questions I generally like to ask people, and the first is, is there anything I haven't asked you that you would have wanted to share, about your – your experience in the industry.

AW: Just that I've had a love-hate relationship with it and, every year since I got into it it's like, Oh, well I'll be out of this in my thirties. And it's, like, no, I'll be out of this in my forties. And, oh, I'll be out of this definitely in my fifties. I actually – it gets better, I mean, I feel very, very blessed to have stumbled into this, and it's worked for me on many, many different levels. I mean, I would never pay to exercise.

JGF: Okay.

AW: It's sort of, like, it's kept the old heart pumping.

JGF: Yeah?

AW: It's a very healthy industry in that respect and I've met wonderful people and I've seen beautiful things that other people haven't seen. I've seen sunrises that were just spectacular, and I'm not a morning person.

JGF: Mmm!

AW: But I'm forced to become one.

JGF: Right.

AW: Because of the industry.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: It's been good.

JGF: Yeah... what would be the hate part do you figure?

AW: Well... sometimes you just don't want to be there, and you have to be, and...

JGF: Like every job... kind of, yeah...

AW: Yeah. Just, you know, it's a job. I mean, that's why they call it work.

JGF: Right!

AW: But every job has its silver linings and its non-silver linings.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: But its – I think I'm a little ADD, and because everything has been so synchronized in the industry, it's worked for me in that respect because everything – I know exactly what needs to be done, I'm very familiar with it, and...

JGF: Okay, so your routine's in place.

AW: My routine is in place, and so, that's good.

[36:31]

JGF: Yeah. Now, so you go out all year long...

AW: Yup.

JGF: What are your hours daily, like, four am to something, or...

AW: Well, I get up at, anywhere between 3:30 and 4:00...

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: We throw the dock lines at five.

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: So the first thing I do when I get on the boat is I put my lunch away, my food away, and stuff, and make sure what I want, or need, is like on the back deck so I'm not always asking, you know, Ian to get out of the way to go into the wheelhouse...

JGF: Okay...

AW: ...to get this or to get that, so, if I want water I make sure my bottled water is back there and my juice or my orange or my apple or whatever. Then we throw the dock lines and – well, we sometimes load bait when I arrive...

JGF: Okay.

AW: Ian will check the oil and things of that sort, but... then I get my whole, like, set up. I've got three fish boxes – I don't like to use a table 'cause it's too high.

JGF: Uh huh...

AW: The three boxes, like, set on top of one another makes a nice table for me, and I can just work out of that...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: I cut my strings – I like to know how many baits I do, so... I can gauge what I need out of what we have on the boat, and I can gauge that by my strings. I put them in the fish box and get my bait needle and get my oil gear on and I start stringing all the way to the grounds.

JGF: Yup.

AW: Then once we get to the grounds I've got that much ahead, and then as I've said, I can work that way.

JGF: Yeah. What time are you usually pulling back in?

AW: We finish hauling anywhere between 12:30 and 1:00...

JGF: Mmm hmm...

AW: ...in the afternoon and then we're usually at the latest at the dock – we can be back depending on what area we're in, between 1:00 – 1:30 and 2:00.

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: In the afternoon.

JGF: So that's a good long day.

AW: Yeah. So...

JGF: Is it – how many days a week is it?

AW: Four?

JGF: Yeah? Oh, okay.

AW: Cause you have other days that - you get weather days that you can't get out...

JGF: Right.

AW: I mean, you can, when things are slow right now, so you could get out on those days, but why beat yourself up...?

JGF: Okay...

AW: Over nothing.

JGF: Yeah. So there's seasonally slower times than others.

AW: Yes.

JGF: Okay.

AW: And right now it's - it's slow.

JGF: What about right in the middle of bitter winter, is that a good time, is it - how is it out there?

AW: You can have good winters, but you learn how to dress properly and they've got great stuff on the market now in terms of wearing.

JGF: So you don't feel like it...

AW: Well, you're moving...

JGF: That's true... that's true too...

AW: You're constantly moving, I mean, sometimes you're just peeling the clothes off...

JGF: Oh, 'cause you're moving so much...

AW: Cause you're in a sweat... yeah.

JGF: Is it very windy, though, as far out as you go?

AW: Yeah, I have a face mask, though.

JGF: Oh, okay.

AW: Neoprene, like, I look like I could hold up a couple of banks. [laughs]

JGF: Ah! [laughs] Yeah!

AW: It was very funny, I was in the bank and, uh, I couldn't believe it last week – there was a sign that said, No transactions done if wearing sunglasses, a hat, or a hood.

JGF: Yeah...

AW: It's like, what's this all about.

JGF: Yeah, I...

AW: I mean, the paranoia of 2006 is just phenomenal.

JGF: It is, but you know out where I live there've been several bank hold-ups where kids in like a baseball cap...

AW: Right.

JGF: ...are coming in and saying I have a gun, give me money.

AW: Right. It...

JGF: I mean, it's sad.

AW: Yeah...

JGF: But you can understand sort of where the paranoia comes from.

AW: Yeah, but who wouldn't with Bush in charge...

JGF: Oh, right.

AW: I mean, he's robbed all of our pockets.

JGF: Yeah.

AW: [laughs] But I won't get into politics...

JGF: Yeah, no, I don't think that's [something]...

AW: I can become a junkie or a dog when I talk about politics.

JGF: I know, and we don't have enough – me too – and I think we don't have enough tape, but...

AW: Yeah.

[40:21]

JGF: So my only other question would be then, what would you want the average festival vi-

festival visitor to come away understanding about the industry?

AW: That we are literate.

JGF: That's a good one...

AW: That we aren't all drug users...

JGF: Yup.

AW: That this is our livelihood and our life, that we have respect for the environment, that we embrace the environment, that we are part of the environment every day. For them to realize, when they buy a piece of fish in the marketplace, that was hard earned.

JGF: Mmm...

AW: Just, not somebody out there like...

JGF: Yeah, right, there's a whole...

AW: Fun and games.

JGF: There's a whole process behind it that we don't think about.

AW: Right. I mean, there, you know, there are people that have like, you know, raised families on this fish, and put children through school, and...

JGF: Yeah... yeah.

AW: There's whole histories behind...

JGF: Right...

AW: ...where this fish came from, and stories, and men's lives lost.

JGF: Right. The fun and games thing is interesting that you mention that, because I don't know if you've noticed now up in, like, Perkins Cove, if you ever go up there in Maine, near Ogunquit, and...

AW: Yup.

JGF: There's at least one person now that you can pay to go on their lobster boat and watch the captain haul his traps, and I'm just like wow...

AW: Yeah, we have that in Newport also.

JGF: You do? Yeah...

AW: BI personally – this guy that does this takes a family of like six...



JGF: Uh huh...

AW: Or like six people on board, and I think it's nice for people to see what happens.

JGF: But – yeah, well certainly it's funny because I would think people might go on thinking the fun and games aspect and then realize Wow, not really, you know?

AW: Well, you know...

JGF: It's not all glory...

AW: They get a taste, and every little bit of education that...

JGF: Uh huh.

AW: That people can get is a good thing.

JGF: Yeah... yeah.

AW: I mean, it's not – it's not a good thing to go through life being naïve, so...

JGF: Right, right... and I just wonder, I mean, I would think maybe when people go on and maybe they don't, but – that they're going on and they think, This will be a cute fun thing to do and then come off probably with a very different perspective which is a good thing.

AW: Right, but they're not really out in the elements, I mean, these guys are in the bay, and...

JGF: Right, so it's giving them a slight idea...

AW: Yeah, river fishing. [laughs]

JGF: What – and you brought this up and I don't know if you want to address it – when I left the festival last year, the impression I had was that that whole drug issue was big for a while and was now pretty much a thing of the past. This year, I've had people mention it to me over and over. I wonder what your se – is your sense that there's a problem in some – among some fishermen, but not everybody, or do you have...

AW: Oh, well of course. I mean, you could go to the biggest white collar corporation, I mean, we have people in corporations that are robbing people...

JGF: Right.

AW: ...of their money...

JGF: Right.

AW: ...and lying, I mean, there is nothing perfect, it – we don't live in a perfect world...

JGF: Yeah...

AW: Of course there's going to be some bad apples. But it...

JGF: Yeah, no, but not more fishing than anywhere else today...

AW: No more fishing than anywhere else.

JGF: Yup. Okay, interesting.

AW: I mean, cocaine is like the drug of choice amongst a lot of these corporate guys.

JGF: Right, exactly.

AW: Hello?!

JGF: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. True. That's...

AW: I mean, a drug is a drug is a drug.

JGF: Yeah... yeah... that's true. Alright, well thank you very much, it was fascinating....

AW: Thank you.

JGF: I look forward to reading your book.

[44:02]

-----End of Interview-----  
Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/30/2024