Interview with Edward Barret

Narrators: Edward Barret
Interviewer: Unknown
Location: New Bedford, MA
Date of Interview: September 26, 2009
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 began 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
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Abstract
On September 26, 2009, an unknown interviewer interviewed Edward Barrett as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Growing up in a small coastal town, Edward got into the fishing industry early on and currently fishes out of Green Harbor and Plymouth. Today, he is President of the Massachusetts Fisherman's Partnership and has been heavily involved in the management process. In this interview, Edward emphasizes the importance of the fishing industry to the fabric of New England as he shares his insight into various issues and concerns facing the industry today such as trip limits, species restrictions, differential counting, rolling closures, catcher allocation programs, and consolidation. He also explains his involvement in actions that are being taken to help the local fishermen. In sharing his views on the major changes he has seen in the industry from the eighties to the present, Edward describes the complications of new regulations and restrictions and explains how they play into his regular fishing trips and responsibilities as a commercial fisherman. Edward shares his concern over the loss of community fishing ports and also touches upon major projects, acts, and legal battles affecting the local industry as well as the importance of and current state of interactions between the fishing industry and local residents, tourists, and recreational fishermen of the Marshfield and Plymouth communities.

Unknown: What is your name?

Ed Barrett: My name is Ed Barrett. I'm a commercial fisherman. I'm, live in Marshfield, Massachusetts and I fish out of Plymouth and a couple other places. Hyannis and Nantucket also. I have a small day boat dragger.

UN: When and where were you born?

EB: I was born in Boston July 9th, 1955.

UN: Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood.

EB: The neighborhood I grew up in, we moved to Marshfield shortly after, and it was a, it was a town outside of Boston that was just starting to get developed. It was a coastal town. Grew up probably eight blocks from the ocean. Got to drive by the ocean every single day of my life.

UN: Who are your role models?

EB: I don't know. In the fishing industry, my first role models were my older cousin and his friends. When they were, you know, I really, really thought it was great when they were able to go mossing as teenagers. And, that's kind of when I first got bitten by the bug to be a fisherman.

UN: Are you a first, second, or third generation American?

EB: Um…

UN: In other words, what's your immigration history?

EB: My family's, I'm of Irish descent. My family's probably third generation. So, we're kind of like first generation Marshfield people. 'Cause previously our family all grew up, all lived in Boston.

UN: Do you have family who worked in the fishing industry?

EB: No not really. Like I said, my, my older cousin was four years older than I am. He was, he was the only other person in the industry that I was related to. We all kind of, we all kind of got in to it just from being in Green Harbor and Brant Rock.

UN: OK, I was going to ask you, how did you get involved in the industry and was this your first choice for a profession? Or your choice?

EB: Yeah, when like I said, growin' up, growin' up in a small coastal town like that you just, you go down, you go to the beach every day. See what washed up. Go to the pier, see what boats came in. It was always, it was just something that we kinda fell into, you know? And, so, you know, it was part of what we did for fun as kids. And… we started then, you know, small time, part time fishing, having a few lobster pots. After that, went away to college and then that's

when I figured out that, that, it wasn't, that, you know, fishing really was what I wanted to do. And so when I got out of college, I went, you know, I got a job. Well, I just started workin' as sternman and crewmen on boats and I went back to, I went back to school after that. I went to the University of Rhode Island for a semester to kind of — they had a fishing school at the time. Was there for a semester and came back and bought my first boat.

UN: And what year was that?

EB: That was 1979.

UN: What types of boats have you fished on and where have you fished out of?

EB: I've fished on draggers, offshore draggers out of Boston for a short time. But mostly day, day boat stuff out of Green Harbor and Plymouth. My first boat was a lobster boat. But back then we did a lot of different things. We didn't just go lobstering, we went tub trawling and we went sea clamming with that boat and tuna fishing with that boat and scalloping and ground fishing. So, you know. Back then we did a lot of different things. We didn't do just one thing. I's not so much that way today.

UN: How is it different?

EB: It's different today because the permit and the regulations don't allow for that kind of, that kind of, you know — Generally you have to have a permit — And most of these things are now restricted; limited access. And it's just gotten, its, the regu—the regulations have just gotten so strict that it just, really doesn't—it's not economically feasible to do it.

UN: Can you describe a typical trip?

EB: Yeah, for us, right now primarily — I have two boats now, actually. But, a typical trip for us when we're ground fishing, is—You know, we leave Plymouth Harbor around four o'clock. We'll go out, generally we'll fish waters off of Mass Bay, Cape Cod Bay. Sometimes we'll go out to Stellwagen, out to the Stellwagen bank. We make three or four tows depending on, on what we're targetin g— Again, regulations have made things very difficult and complicated. So it's not — So there's trip restrictions on, on certain species. So, sometimes even though we're going out for the day, we might catch, for instance, all our cod in one tow. So, at that point you have to go home. So, generally it's, an ordinary day would be like three or four tows, and back to Plymouth Harbor around 2:30, 3:00. We unload our fish and go home for the next day.

UN: Which species are there restrictions on?

EB: On —There's restrictions on almost everything now. On groundfish we have a lot of different restrictions. Groundfish being flounders and cod and haddock, which are under a, what's called a multispecies permit. We have trip limits on them. First, first of all, we have a day at sea which is a certain amount of time that we're allotted to fish. So, on this one boat, I have thirty-five days at sea. Then after that, there are trip limits on certain species. So, for cod fish right now we have an eight hundred pounds per trip. And on yellowtail flounders we have

two hundred-fifty ponds per trip. We also have differential counting which is — Our days at sea are counted at, for everyday we use, we're charged for two days. So, it's a mortality control. So, we're, we're restricted that way. We're also have restrictions of rolling closures. Rolling closures completely closed down the fishing grounds right next to us for four months a year. So, those are all the — those are all the restrictions that we have on the multispecies. We end up fishing for other things that, at other times. we fish for fluke at times; summer flounder, and on that we have a three hundred pound a day trip limit; and we fish for squid also, and that, that is more like a seasonal, seasonal limit.

UN: Who decides where to fish and how does this person decide?

EB: Well, being the only person on this boat, I'm the captain, chef and bottle washer. So, I get to, I get to make that decision.

UN: What responsibilities do you have when your boat is at the dock?

EB: Uhm, you know, the responsibilities at the dock are, you know, I—I take care of all the maintenance. So, I have to make sure that I keep the boat in, in good repair. And, these days, the fact that we are fishing alone is kind of a, it's a reflection of the regulations and the restrictions and how much we've — We've been restricted so much that we've kinda lost our ability to keep, keep crew and to be able to afford a crewman. So, keepin' the boat safe is a, is an important thing. Then at the dock, if you're talkin' at the dock, I think the dock expands out to participating in the management process. I'm very involved in that.

UN: Have you ever pulled up anything unusual?

EB: Uhm… you know—I don't know, I guess what some people might — I've pulled up bones of whales…Unusual to me would be, huge bags of fish; which, which has happened. But, generally nothing crazy.

UN: What kinds of close calls have you had at sea?

EB: I've had—I've had a couple of close calls of bein' run over by tugs. [Chuckles] Sail boat collisions. That's, that seemed to be—that seemed to happen this summer an awful lot. I had a fire on the boat once. That's, you know, about it.

UN: What kinds of experiences have you had in stormy weather?

EB: We're day boat fishing so, you know, we, you know, we're not as — You know, we're fishing smaller boats so we tend not to stay out in the, in the weather. We're generally pretty close to port, so when weather does get bad we've got a, you know, not, not a far distance to go. So, we kind of manage to avoid most of those situations.

UN: How has the industry changed over the years?

EB: The industry's changing radically. We've, we're losing a lot of community fishing ports. A lot of the ports that are still holding on have fewer and fewer vessels. With fewer and fewer vessels you have less infrastructure; infrastructure being places to tie up, dealers to sell to places to get fuel and ice, all the things that you really need to keep a fishing industry goin'. These are, some of these, some of these ports are ports that have been fishing ports for four hundred years. Green Harbor started as a fishing port in 1623. William Green founded it as a fish buying station. Plymouth, Mass. is of course 1620. So Provincetown, all these place are, you know, they, they're losing their fleets and the local communities are losing their access to fresh seafood.

UN: What advice would you give someone starting out to that?

EB: When I hear of someone wanting to be a fisherman today, I tell them that they should try to get a job as a fireman in their local town.

UN: How do you stick with it?

EB: I's what I love. I love to do it. I'm 54 years old and I've been doin' it for 30, 33 years. So, uhm, it's, in some sense it's, it's what I know and all I know.

UN: What are your challenges?

EB: The challenges now are really to, to be able to, continue to have access to fisheries. We're about to go to a catcher allocation system. The challenge is, for me and all, many other small boats are going to be, to be able to have access to an allocation that will keep our businesses afloat. and, we're tryin' to address that. One thing we have formed is a permit bank, which is — We have a nonprofit, community based, corporation that's gonna hold permits, and therefore allocation for all our members in our area. And we're hopin' that that might be a hedge against some of the, the some of the cutbacks that we're going to — are about to take place.

UN: Do you have children in the industry?

EB: No, I don't.

UN: What makes a good fisherman?

EB: A good fisherman these days is someone's who's, who can face odds and, and find the energy to keep goin' against them. They have to be fairly — I think a good fisherman these days is, is a good conservationist. The last thing anyone wants to do is catch the last fish. I think the fishing community has always been about having a renewable resource. I think a good fisherman these days is someone who can, who can wear a lot of different hats. You have to be able to go out and find fish and catch them. And then you also have to be able to market them, you have to be able to do the engineering on your boat. You have to be able to take care of the mechanics and the maintenance. So, these days I think you have to really wear a lot of different hats in order to be a good fisherman.

UN: Who are the people you have worked with that you most respect?

EB: I most respect, you know, the guys that are in my port that are, that are fellow fishermen that have, you know, taught me things over the course of time and, and who have stepped up to the plate and volunteered their time, you know, to some of the issues that, that I've talked about.

UN: How did you learn the skills you needed for the job?

EB: Basically by, on the job training. Going out, doin' the job, failing a couple of times, doin' the job again. Having other fishermen, give pointers and, and basically kinda bein' part of the community that, that, that helps, you know, helps each other out.

UN: How do you get paid?

EB: We get paid—I get paid from the sale of my fish, so, when the fish comes in we sell fish. It goes to uh—the next day there'll be an auction that will set a price for it. Every day that changes. So, some days, so, and it can change fairly radically in a day. I have a specific dealer that I sell to. So, he pays me on whatever that price was that day and, that's the, that's how the revenues work in that business.

UN: In your opinion, what years were the best for the fishing industry?

EB: You know, there were times in the 80s when, when the restrictions weren't so bad and, and there was, there were good fish stocks and, we were younger and, things, it seemed that things were just always gonna improve. Didn't always go that way and as it bottomed out in the early nineties, you know, people decided to, you know, that things needed to be changed. And I think things got a lot better in the late nineties and from '95 to 2001, 2001, we were seein' stocks rebound and there was a lot of optimism and I think management and fishermen were working together a lot, a lot better. But I think that changed in 2001 with the Conservation Law Foundation's lawsuit. And I think after that it got contentious. The environmental NGOs decided that it was going to litigate and National Marine Fishery Service decided it was, it was gonna be precautionary. And I think it's been all downhill since.

UN: Describe your port. How many boats and how many fishermen?

EB: Right now, I fish out of Plymouth Harbor which at one time had, you know, twenty-five, thirty draggers of fifty, sixty foot range. And now we have four federally permitted draggers, um. So, we've lost a lot of [clears throat] a lot of fish, fishing boats. It's still a fairly big lobster port. There's a substantial lobster fleet, probably about forty, about forty boats; forty day boat, guys lobstering. So there's still, you know, the four boats we're still hangin' in there. But I don't know for how long. I don't know how long it'll last.

UN: Is there a mix of recreational and commercial fishing boats?

EB: Yeah there are,

UN: And how does that affect the working port?

EB: Generally, I think we've been able to get along. It's been contentious at times. But I think that, I think all the stake holders startin' to see that if they don't work together, they'll all fall separately and that's — I think that issues that confront us now confront, you know, the recreational and charter people too, which is accessibility to a resource. We all, you know, these, most of these ports' real estate values have gone very high, so there's, you know, there's a constant threat I suppose that they'll find other uses for that waterfront. And that remains a concern for us; for all groups.

UN: What are the impacts of tourism on your community?

EB: They have a, you know, it's a very big impact. Tourism is a huge business in Plymouth and in some of the other ports I work out of. I think we're part of that story. People come down to see the boats. They come down to see people unload. I think tourism is, you know, it establishes a market for our product. It gives us a chance to tell our story. It gives people in it a chance to experience, you know, eating seafood, which I think is an important thing.

UN: Who lives around the port?

EB: Plymouth and Marshfield are still, middle class towns. they're not, they're not-- They haven't been gentrified. to a certain extent they have, but, there's still, working families and, and, and nice places to live.

UN: Are residents sympathetic to the needs of the industry and do you have newcomers?

EB: I think, overall, residents are — I think people in, people want, I think people want to have fishing industries in their town. I think it's important to them to have a fishing industry. I don't think they always understand what that means. and, and sometimes that is a source for conflict, but, generally it is a good relationship. But at times, it, it, at times there are, there are competing uses.

UN: How do they perceive the sights, sounds and smells of the port?

EB: It's part of the, that's part of the conflict sometimes. But we're smaller ports, and I think that, that the people and the surrounding areas, I think are fairly used to having neighbors who are fishermen and, and know what, know what that means. You know, know, they know that it means someone's gonna start a diesel engine at 5:00 in the morning and Plymouth, it's a little different. Plymouth's a little difficult because we're kinda short on space and there're a lot of people tryin' to conduct businesses all at once. It gets a little, little crowded, but, uh. There is, plans to renovate and improve that. So, generally in our area it's not too bad. You know, the, people gettin' along on that end.

UN: What are the strengths of your community?

EB: I think our community has learned to face adversity. And to positively react to it. I think they've, I think that our community has learned how to deal with government agencies and, and I

think our community is a close community that, that share their common, that share common goals. And common goals being, you know, wanting to sustain the traditions. And, wanting to sustain the ports as working, as working fishing ports.

UN: What are the challenges that the, it, the — What challenges is a fishing community facing in your area? Whether its pollution, the economy, regulations, fish farming?

EB: Mainly its regulations right now, but, but, but ocean development is a very big threat, I believe. The Cape Wind Project, wind energy projects, I think, I think we're going to be battling for real estate on the ocean. The pollution in the form — We have a lot of, we have a heavy, heavy residential area in Boston and on the south shore. And most of these towns have outfall pipes that, that change ecosystems. The Massachusetts MWRA pipe, puts out, currently puts out six hundred million gallons of fresh warm water a day. and it's scheduled to put 1.3 billion gallons of fresh warm water a day into a, salt water marine ecosystem. So, even the, even if that water's clean, it's still, it's still not, it's still fresh and it's still warm and it, and I think there are significant changes that are happening from that.

UN: What do you see in the future?

EB: I don't know how the catcher allocation program's going to go, but, at times I'm not very optimistic that it will go well for the small ports. I see, you know… I can, I can very easily see consolidation happening and people not being able — Or people making the decision not to, to sell their, their permits and not participate, as fishermen anymore. And I think, I think we're, at that point we'll be in danger of losin' a lot of, a lot of small ports. I think that once four boats become two boats, then, then it's, it's not long before two boats become no boats. I think the allocation issue's a very big issue. The political issue of how the sustainable fisheries act gets interpreted is a very big issue. So, you know that, I don't know where the future will be there. I think on the other side of the fence is, it's a two billion dollar a year industry, and someone's gonna harvest it. So, you know, I think it's up, it's really up to the communities to decide, you know, and not just the fishing communities. But I think the communities on a whole, you know, the states, the people that live there, they have to make a decision that, that a fishing industry's important to them and that they want to support that.

UN: How long do you plan on fishing?

EB: Well, I don't ever see myself retiring. So, as long as I get out — As long as I can.

UN: You're president of the Massachusetts Fisherman's Partnership. Can you talk a little bit about that?

EB: Yeah, the fishing, the Fisherman's Partnership is an umbrella organization of nineteen fishing associations in the state of Massachusetts. so each, each one of those organizations, sends a person to represent them on a board of directors. And this organization started in the mid-90s as a result of tryin' to get a health insurance plan for fishermen organized. And we felt that, a statewide organization that, that included all geographic regions and all different gear types, was an important thing to be able to push our agenda through. And so, it's an organization

that, uh—What we try to do is, work on issues that are common to all, all fishermen. And, we kinda stay away from the ones that kinda divide us up and we let the individual organizations decide, you know, what they want to do on that level. but there're a lot of common, there are a lot of common goals; ocean development, ocean zoning, safety, collaborative research, those are things that, we, we try to work together to, you know, to gain some political capital. And, and to have something that, on one level has one voice.

UN: What would you like festival visitors to understand about the commercial fishing industry and the working waterfront?

EB: I think it's, I think the Working Waterfront Festival is great outreach and I think, I think we've been the victim of such, of such a smear publicity camp—campaign by the environmental organizations. And, and I think they've just been given—I think there's so much misinformation out there, and I think what the Working Waterfront Festival does is demystify that. And I think it gives people a sense of the communities that participate in, in fishing. And I think it gives people a sense of the heritage of, of, of the fishing industry and the effect that it's had, in New England for centuries.

UN: Is —

[Interruption by sound tech]

UN: Is there something else you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

[laughter by EB and sound tech]

EB: Well, I just, you know—Once again, we're at a, we're at a, we're at a very, important point in, in New England as far as fishing industry is concerned. And, we really, we really need to make sure that as, that we're going to go forward and have an industry and, and have, be, and have an industry that young people are gonna be able to get into. And that people are gonna be able to enjoy the products that we bring home. And I think it's an important part to the fabric of New England.

---End of Interview---
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 12/18/2024