Interview with Hans Davidson

Narrators: Hans Davidson
Interviewer: Markham Starr
Location: New Bedford, MA
Date of Interview: September 30, 2012
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

Abstract
On September 30, 2012, Markham Starr interviewed Hans Davidson as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Davidson discusses his early experiences in the industry, his progression from a newcomer to a captain, and the various boats he worked on. He also shares his perspectives on the challenges of the fishing industry, including struggles against regulations, the impact of the job on family life, and the dangers of the work. The interview also touches on the social and cultural aspects of fishing life, the role of unions, and the changes in fishing practices and technologies over time.

Markham Starr: Okay, even though I know your name, we'll start off with…and what is your name?

Hans Davidson: Hans Davidson.

MS: And are you from here or where're you from?

HD: I was born in New Bedford. Fished out of Fairhaven, New Bedford, the port of. And I started fishing approximately 1974. I stopped fishing, year 2004, I guess. Well let's see I started, first, when you first go out you're a [shacker?] which means a new guy. You get all the, you know, you do whatever they tell you to do. I started out on the, actually, a *Florence B*, that was a dragger and I made a few trips and I decided that wasn't for me. And I came ashore and I worked at New Bedford Ship Supply for a few years. But then I saw how much money the guys were makin' scallopin' and I went out on the *Dolphin* that was out of Kelly's in Fairhaven. And I fished there, I fished on the *Dolphin*. From there I went on to the *Ambassador.* I was on deck, actually I, I got a shot and I went mate on the, on the *Ambassador*. I didn't stay there long. I ended up going with a friend of mine, Wayne Jacobsen [ph]. His family owned the *Eagle* and I went mate with him for a couple of years and then a man named Bob Breeze who owned another vessel came asked me if I wanted to captain it. I worked for him for 3 or 4 years and then I got a break. I bought into the *Edgartown.* All this time, we used to be able to fish all of Georges Banks. Then there was, I don't know the exact circumstances but the United States Government decided in its infinite wisdom to give half of Georges Banks to the Canadians which made it off-limits to us. They also decided to update the fishing fleet with government subsidies to build new, improved boats. Safer boats. But in doing so they doubled the size of the fleet and like I said, they gave half of Georges Banks to the Canadians, the most profitable half. So now we had a fleet that was twice as large with less fishing area.

So then scallops started getting a little scarce. There was no time limit on fishing then. You could fish 365 days a year if you wanted to. There was a union and that was one of the only things that was keepin', keeping us under check. You could, they, the union rules were you could only fish so many days and you have to have so many days ashore. But that wasn't government rules. We have a problem with the union, they went on strike, they were stubborn, the boat owners were stubborn and the union ceased to exist. Which was really not that good for the industry unless you were a boat owner. Then, like I say, the scallops became more scarce and the government stepped in and they came up with these closed area ideas. They, we were mad at them, they were mad at us, they said fishermen were the reason for over fishing. They wouldn't even want to talk about the fact that they doubled the size of the fleet and cut, cut away a lot of our fishing grounds. I remember going to meetings bringing up these, these issues and they said, "We're not here to assess blame. We're here to solve the problem. We don't care how it happened." But then when you turn around, they say, "blah blah goddam fishermen, they're the ones that caused this." And I'm sure what Larry must have told you, all the meetings we went to. We got hooked up with SMAST, Brian Rothschild and you know, these closed areas, they closed them without any really, idea of reopening them. So the only way for that we got to know were some people were poaching. They'd go in those areas, they're not supposed to but they did. Times were tough. And they'd, you couldn't believe how many scallops were in there.

You know, they, and, and but they got Woods Hole scientists sayin', no no there's not that many in there, there's not that many in there. And then we, through SMAST and Brian Rothschild, we got permit to go in and look 'cause we said well, what you're never gonna open them, blah blah, we disagree with you. We think there's a lot of scallops in there. So we got a permit to go in and I was, I was on the boat, one of the boats that went in. [Laughs] And this is hard to believe, when we were fishing in open areas, in the areas we were allowed to go, we'd fish 12 days, 24 hours a day and catch…

I'm just going to use…What we caught in those 12 days, 24 hours a day, we caught in the closed area in less than 2 hours. I mean, it's documented. [Laughs] So now they're going, now the government's going oh boy we made a mistake, we never shoulda given them a permit to go in there. So now we finally get things rollin' and they start to reopen the areas. But they closed, now I don't even know what it is, I, I sold my boat like 6 years ago. I don't know what they're down to. I think they're down to like 50 days a year fishing. And it's the price has gone up. I, I, I hear they're asking for another cut this year, like I say, I'm not that familiar with the rules now. There were other, they started with a meat count. Which was impossible to comply with, kind of hard to explain you almost need to have scallops here to show you why they, it was hard to comply with. Well first of all they said you can't have more than 40 scallops per pound. The more scallops per pound the smaller they are. And they're not uniform. Some are very large, some are very small. And you don't have a scale out there, not a scale you can rely on. So we ended up with a coffee can, countin' scallops in a coffee can. And we'd come in and they would put up, set up a nice electronic scale on the dock and count 'em there. And if you were off by one scallop, they could confiscate your trip. You know, I got a tape at home we went through to all this, I should have brought it. Maybe I can get it to you later. It explains it even better. We, we made many trips down to Washington, Barney Frank. Barney was a large help to the industry. And we got some rules changed. A lot of boats, you'd lose your whole trip and they could still fine you on top of that. A lot of guys totally went out of business because of these regulations. I understand you have to have some regulations but they were draconian. You know.

They were treating…well….they didn't throw you in jail but they were tough regulations. They would take, what happened to my friend that just left, Larry, they took his boat. They took his permit. They took his ability to make a living away from him. I know he's still perusing this, I don't know how that's going to come out. At one time, going out fishin' was more or less pleasurable. But it turned into I don't know how many ulcers people have gotten over the years but…and coming in, the day you come in was the best day of the, well the best day of the month. And then it turned into the worst day you know. Because it they wanted to violate you, they could violate you. They would find a reason to violate you. Other than that, I mean…scallopin' was good to me, I can't complain. My father did it, his father before him did it. My whole family's been in it. I still have one nephew that's been in it but it's more or less we saw the handwriting on the wall and, if you didn't accumulate 5 or 10 boats you know, the day of the single boat owner is just about over. The family business, that's more or less over.

MS: Is that true you think in draggin' as well? The…

HD: Draggers have it even harder. They went a different direction, they…it all comes down to what the government thinks is out there. How many scallops are out there, or how much fish is out there. And for years, I know at least in scallopin' they would send out research boats and they would tow one drag. They, they didn't really know how to fish so they would go towing around and they would catch nothing. And then in their minds, there was nothing down there. But once they started bringing fishermen out, oh they caught something there. And if they readjusted their gear, they caught more there. That's why we got all excited when, when we were gonna be in cooperation with the scientists. And that went over well for a few years but then SMAST started getting' cut out of the grant money for research. You know I don't know for a fact but it's almost like they were getting' the results they wanted so they didn't want to deal with SMAST any more. It was kinda going in the favor of the fishermen.

MS: So they're not using that program anymore? The…

HD: They're not using SMAST anymore.

MS: Really.

HD: The grant money comes, actually comes from the quota. The, the, when they wanted to do research, when they want, when they said the fishermen could be part of the research, then they wanted a certain percentage of what, what stock the scallopers came in with. And we ended up saying, we're not going to trust the research unless SMAST does it because we had faith in in Brian Rothschild. Now I, like I say, I'm not involved with it any more but I've heard now that other colleges are doing studies and research and SMAST isn't getting the government grants that it used to.

MS: Can we go back, now you said your grandfather also fished?

HD: Well they, that was, that was a long time ago. [Laughs] Scallopin's only really started takin' off in New Bedford, I believe it was in the 40s. There was no market for scallops at one point. In the beginning they used to sell 'em by the gallon not by the pound and it turned out that that was about 9 or 10 cents a pound. Now they're $10 a pound and up. That's the only thing that saved the scallopers, the price.

MS: And was your grandfather fishing out of here, or…where?

HD: Well yeah, Long Island, Long Island Sound, out of Brooklyn and out of New Bedford depending on the times of year. Actually back then they would switch over from draggin' to scallopin' depending on the season. They don't do that any more. It's not even allowed any more. Well there are dual permit holders, I don't know if there are any left. I guess there may be. But draggin' has gone…the price of the fish hasn't kept up. Like the price of scallops, it just seems like it's a luxury item and no matter how high it gets, it's almost like the more expensive gets, the more demand there is for it. That isn't the case with fish.

MS: So going back to your childhood, your father was fishing, was your first fishing experience with him I assume?

HD: No actually he was, I came very late [laughs]. I may have been a mistake. I came very late in life. He was retired before I started fishing. But he owned a, he owned a part of a boat. I mean, he had friends that were still fishing. He had guys that he broke in. So I did get a shot at it. You know.

MS: And what was your first fishing trip then?

HD: It was draggin' actually. And after I made 2 trips I decided that wasn't for me and I went ashore and like I say, I was to New Bedford Ship Supply for a couple of years. But then I saw the money coming in the scallopers were making big money and I got greedy so I decided to go make….I decided to go fishing for a couple or 3 years and save my money and get ahead and a buy a house. 32 years later, I got out of it. [Laughs]

MS: What didn't you like about the dragging?

HD: Well I was young, I was fresh out of high school and I just didn't like the amount of time out there. All my friends were home partying, you know. It was…it's a lonely life actually. You gotta, you can't, it's no kind of a family life. It's not a family life at all. Actually I disliked my father for being a fisherman. You know, he would never be there for my little league games or anything that most of my friends' fathers were at. And I kinda got, ended up disliking him until I went fishing and saw what he had done for a living. That changed my whole outlook about him but he had already passed on by then.

MS: So pretty hard on your mother too then, with him gone a lot.

HD: Yeah you know it puts a big burden on the woman in the relationship because you know, some women would go wait 'til your father gets home. And then when she did that, he came home and he said listen I can't discipline the kids. I'm never here.

MS: I'm going to shut this off for a second. Just, sorry… [End of Tape 1]

MS: Could you, for people on this side of the road, they don't really understand what a day on a scalloper is like. Could you sort of describe what a typical day for a, say a crew member.

HD: Well it's very repetitious. It's a, sometimes you're your workload it comes at like 6 hours on, 6 hours off. Or 8 hours on, 8 hours off. Or what they've really kind of, years ago, many many years ago they'd go out and they would say, they put their boots on and they would work until they dropped. Then they would go down and get a few hours sleep. And then like I say, they union came in and they had rules. It's either 6 on, 6 off; 8 on, 8 off. There would be rules. When the union was displaced, they went back to of course, there's no rules. The rules are what the captain says. And they were back almost to the same thing, you were workin' 'til you dropped. The government said no more 13 men on a boat. 7. And fishermen you know, they're greedy. That, greed makes a good fisherman. Competition makes a good fisherman. Now here they are out there, now 7 men and they're hardly sleepin' at all. They, you'd get up…when the union was here, like I say there were rules. You'd get up, you'd wake up, they'd call the watch,

that's what they call it, calling the watch. Everybody is woken up, there usually is a meal on the table and then you're in a repetition. You go up on deck, you put your oilers on, you put your boots on and now you're on deck and it would be every, it could be as short as 20 minute tows which means every 20 minutes the captain would ring the bell, you'd start the wench and haul 'em back. When the gear comes aboard, you dump it, you put the drags back on the rail, knock 'em out, which…he'd put the boat in gear, you'd be steamin'. And then you'd knock the drags out. Now you got a pile on deck. It could be a pile of rocks, it could be a pile of starfish. It could be mixed up trash, it could be a big pile of sand. Now you take a basket and go out there and you pick through the pile. You take the scallops and put 'em in a basket. When the basket is full, you bring it back to the shuckin' house which is where the scallops are cut.

Now you got a pile of nothing on deck, a pile of you know, shit you'd end up call it. You grab a shovel and you shovel it out the scuppers. Now you go back and you start openin' the scallops. And depending on how long the tows were, they could be any where from 20 minutes to an hour, the size determines how much time you have to open the scallops. When the bell rings again, you go back out, start the wench, haul back and do it all over again. If the captain's doing his job, if he can back you up, back you up I mean catch more scallops than you can handle. And it goes on and on for your whole watch until they ring, until they call out watch, the other watch. There's 2 watches, 2 gangs actually. And that's it, then you go down and get as much sleep as you're allowed, like I say, there was a lot more when there was union rules. You have to eat on your time, not on, not on the time of work time of course. And it was, just very repetitious. And this goes on no matter what the weather, the weather is really not a factor unless it gets so bad that it's, the captain deems it dangerous. Then you may stop until he deems it not so dangerous, [laughs] then you restart.

MS: Is there a sea condition that's rough enough where the dredges won't tow the bounce or is that never really a problem, it's just…

HD: It was years gone by when there wasn't enough horse power on the boats. Now, I don't think that's a problem any more.

MS: Works on almost anything. In the past, they always had cooks. Is that still true in more modern times, where meals were a big thing has it sort of…

HD: Meals now, I don't think they even have a cook now. I mean, it's just, every man for himself. You'd get off deck and maybe one guy will, one guy may cook for the 3 guys that got off or the 2 guys that got off but it's more or less from what I understand it's every man for himself.

MS: And how about when you were fishing early on, you had cooks?

HD: Oh yea, yup. And the cook would get a long time to prepare the meals. Well, when I first started we were 13 men on a boat. So you needed a cook, you can't have 13 men ravages for themselves. The cook had, had power too. I mean you had to listen to the cook too especially at the galley table.

MS: And then the cook when he wasn't cooking was also on deck doing whatever…

HD: Yes he would come up, but depending on how well, how good of a cook he was, he, he got slack. He didn't have to produce as quickly. He didn't have to be such a good man on deck if he could cook well. Everybody would kind of help him out a little bit.

MS: Then what kind of meals, when you had a cook, were they?

HD: That's…if you're on a boat, a Norwegian boat, you got Norwegian boat, you got Norwegian food. If you're on a Portuguese boat you got Portuguese food. You know.

MS: So just for an example because I don't think people will understand, you know, you're just having cereal for breakfast or…

HD: No, oh no, no. You'd have…you'd get up and there would be pancakes already made, the cook would ask you if you wanted eggs, however you wanted them cook, he'd be standing there cookin' 'em. They're be bacon…there would be meals that you, if you ate it all you wouldn't be able to work. [Laughs] It was a big spread. The cook would put out a big spread. Now I think it's only, now you see cereal, more cereal. Quick kind of things. You know.

MS: How about other facilities on the boat, where as you just kind of pretty much just come off deck fall under your bunk wearing the clothes you're in?

HD: Hopefully you have, you can, you're not too tired to take your boots and your oilers off. But I mean I've heard stories of boats that leaked…the water would leak down into the bunks, they would wear their oilers in their bunks. I was never on a boat like that. But I heard stories. The first boat I went out, didn't have a toilet. Didn't have a bathroom. You know, we used a bucket. But that, that was another thing that the union got in. Every boat has to have a toilet, has to have a, have facilities. The union did a lot of good things, and I'm sure a lot of people would, as soon as you mention union, it was a bad thing here because we had 2 really bad strikes. But they did do a lot of good in the beginning. That's the same with everything, unions were good in the beginning, when, when they decided that they owned the boat or they owned the company, they're not so good no more. You know.

MS: How was it as a captain and an owner dealing with crews, is that…

HD: There was some advantages to it. It was more difficult being an owner/operator when you dealt with the union. I mean, I actually had the union…if you were a member, if you were a union boat you, you're only supposed to take out union members that were in good standing with the union. In other words they were paid up with their dues. Some of the best men weren't in the union but if, if a union guy knew that there was a non-union guy on the boat he would go up to the union delegate and they would come down the boat and they'd say, that guy can't go fishing, he's not in the union. So now you're, you say well, I don't have a union guy. We just happen to have one right here. [Laughs] And out comes this 75 year old man that was probably a good fisherman in his day but he was in good standing with the union and he'd say, okay that guy's gotta get off and here's your replacement so now you know, fishing is, it's all production

and if you don't have, and it's a young man's game. By far. I also had the union come down say, this boat's not, this boat's not going out fishin' with, because of the strike and I'd say, did this boat belongs to the union, they would say. This boat belongs to the union, and I say, well do you pay the mortgage at the end of the month? No, well then I don't think it belongs to the union then. You know, there was a, always, trouble and then when they went on strike they go violent. There were a few fires and stuff, there were a few threats to boat owners' wives and stuff. They got together and they said, we can't deal with these people and they just broke, they ended up breaking the union. And at that point, you, we had to, we had to. You were dealing with union people comin' from New York and all they were was, leg breakers, you know.

MS: Was there much hard feelings after the strike when you got back out fishing, did it take a while to sort of, sort out?

HD: Yeah, yeah. It was. And a lot of guys never went back fishing, they weren't, they weren't accepted back into the fold.

MS: And why did you get out of fishing, eventually then?

HD: Well I was always [an] operator, I was always the captain on my boat and I ended up with a couple of heart attacks and I ended up sending it out with another guy and he did okay, but I couldn't even go down and look after the boat properly when it was in and we just…I had a friend that lost a boat in an insurance suit and that's easily done. You know if you're on the boat, you can watch you can be careful. You can stop fishing a little bit sooner in bad weather, you can make sure things are maintained so they don't break and hurt somebody. But if you're not operating the boat, you're putting that job into somebody else's hands and he's gotta be very competent and I couldn't really seem to find somebody that I could totally trust at that. So I just figured I'd pack it in and get out.

MS: And maybe one last question, is there anything that if you had a newspaper at your disposal you would like people to see and hear or understand about fishing, you know, if you had your…

HD: Well one of the biggest things that I saw, I didn't think was right, when National Marine Fisheries came in, they, and they got the ability for whatever they confiscated, they put into their kitty. I saw a lot more confiscations, I don't think any enforcement agency should be able to pocket the money from whatever they decide is inappropriate because they all of a sudden things just get really tough. I think they kind of proved that with National Marine Fisheries and I know they're working it, but nobody should benefit from confiscations when they're in charge of confiscating things. That's about it.

MS: Well great, thank you very much.

HD: All right, no problem.

MS: Appreciate it…one last thing, what they, what Laura….

----------End of Interview----------

Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 2/1/2025