Interview with Diane Flynn

Narrators: Diane Flynn
Interviewer: Janice Gadaire Fleuriel
Location: New Bedford, MA
Date of Interview: September 23, 2007
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 23, 2007, Janice Gadaire Fleuriel interviewed Diane Flynn as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Diane shares details from her 27 years of working in the fishing industry as an inshore fisher of soft shell clams. Her partner, Skip, came from generations of fishermen, and taught her the trade, and she describes their work harvesting clams, along with scalloping, quahoging and oystering. Together, they raised eight children, and while they raised them with fishing as a central part of their lives, none of their kids were able to make a living on the water. Diane explains that because of a combination of regulations, environmental changes, and water pollution, living off the water is becoming increasingly more difficult. She reflects on being one of the few women in the industry, saying, "women can do the same thing as men. And that we're probably more determined to do [it]."

JGF: Today is September 23rd, Sunday. It's 2007. I am interviewing Diane Flynn. My name is Janice Fleuriel. We're at the Working Waterfront Festival in New Bedford and we're in the Harbormaster's House. So Diane if you could maybe just start by telling me about where and when you were born, and any family background that led to your experience in the fishing industry.

DF: I was born in Brockton, Massachusetts.

JGF: So was I. I grew up there.

DF: I was abandoned in the hospital in Brockton, Massachusetts—

JGF: Oh!

DF: —so I have no background to my family. And I got involved in the fishery about 27 years ago, when I met my partner now. And we're inshore, small-boat fishermen. We fish in open boats. Just one town, and it's in Bourne, Massachusetts.

JGF: Oh, OK. So is that considered the Cape? Is it the beginning of the Cape?

DF: Yes. The beginning of the Cape. We mostly harvest soft shell clams. We do that hydraulically and have done that since 1978. And we also diversified during the different seasons of the year with bay scalloping, which we'll start the first of October. And also quahoging and oystering.

JF: Wow, OK. So now growing up did you have any background in the ocean or ocean life?

DF: I had absolutely no background. I can't even swim.

JGF: [laughs]

DF: But. We have eight children between us, and, quite a few grandchildren when I first started fishing. And, out of necessity, to provide a livelihood for those children, then I chose to leave the pay check type of employment and go fishing with Skip Barlow.

JGF: Wow! Skip…?

DF: Barlow.

JGF: Barlow. OK.

DF: And… Like I say, we raised eight children just doing the fishing. And, the fishing was a big part of our family. The kids participated in it. And they would have to go oftentimes with us. Because we just needed to go fishing. And they all have grown up doing different chores

within the fishery. And that's built a lot of character I think in my children. And I know it has in myself.

JGF: Wow, I bet it has! Yeah. So, you said there is a seasonal aspect…

DF: The inshore commercial fishermen really have to diversify and also with the different town regulations, the rotating of beds where you can fish, lots of times you just can't stay within one fishery. We basically fish for steamer clams. But we also have to diversify when the beds are closed down, when different other fisheries come into season, we have to switch over and do the different types of fishing.

JGF: OK. Interesting. Is soft shell and steamer the same thing?

DF: Yes. Yes. And, because we hydraulically pump the clams we don't dig them with a rake. Our clams are usually used for fryers. They're opened and used for fryers.

JGF: So are you actually on a boat with the pump? Or how—because when I think of people, you know getting steamers, the only image I have is of somebody you know, in boots digging in the sand like you said.

DF: Right. We fish tides. And that's all part of our regulations. And we use a hydraulic water pump, which just pumps water through it from the bay. And it's just a real soft, gentle way of blowing the—and I don't mean to say blowing it—just moves the substrate and the clams because of their weight just come up to the substrate and sit on that for a period of time and then they dig back in again. And by doing this we're not damaging the clams with our rakes. And you know, making holes or breaking them. The clams are never broken. They're raked up very carefully and measured. And then the seed is put back into the area where they came from.

JGF: The seed?

DF: The seed clams, yes. And the rakes that we use have large mesh bodies to them so that most of the seed will go through anyways and it's just left undisturbed, where it came to the top.

JGF: Huh! So the seed clam is just smaller clams? Is that correct?

DF: Yes. A clam has to be two inches in diameter before you can harvest it.

JGF: OK. So you're not using a boat at all?

DF: We use a boat for the water pump and for the culling of the clams when they do have to be culled. And putting them into the boxes because we only can have a certain measure per day. And right now it's three bushels of clams.

JGF: Oh, OK. And is there—well it's all tides, right, with the clams?

DF: It's tides. Yes. We don't fish on the shores where the recreational people can go out and dig at low tide.

JGF: Oh. OK.

DF: We have to stay six foot from the mean low water mark. So we're always fishing in the water. We've always got water above our rakes and pumps.

JGF: Oh, OK. Interesting.

DF: So we aren't disturbing the other fishery.

[Interruption/Paused/End of File WAV_0037_001] [Start of File WAV_0037_002]

JGF: Huh! Interesting. So when you first decided to go fishing, was it very hard to learn?

DF: No. Skip is a really good teacher and Skip comes from five generations at that time when I started, of fishermen. Although this was the first time that his family and the town of Bourne, when I started fishing with them, fished for steamer clams. And he did a lot of research and we had a lot of help from the Division of Marine Fisheries, to develop the equipment to work in the areas that we were fishing. So, it was a learning process for everyone. But Skip is a really good fisherman. And, again like I say, he'd been fishing since he was a small child. And had a real familiar background with the substrates in different areas in the town.

JGF: So is it just like the skipper and you on the boat? Or is it more of a crew?

DF: At one point in time, when the fishing first started and we were trying to develop the fishing—because you know it just didn't happen, and the fish—the seafood wasn't there. We had to develop markets. And we had to actually develop the areas where we could find the shellfish. And, so we would work in groups of four. There would be two people in the water, one person pumping and one person raking. And then two of us on the boats, culling through the clams. But as time went on and as the necessity was for the other people too, we would fish just with two people on a boat. And so there would be someone in the water with the hydraulic rake and then raking up the clams. And then I always would cull and pack the clams. And then as our family got older, we would have three generations of kids—or three generations—on the boat. Our oldest daughters, and our oldest sons. And then as they married and had children we'd have their children also on the boat. So.

JGF: Wow… Wow.

DF: It's a real family type of fishery.

JGF: And did the kids enjoy it, do you think?

DF: They did. It wasn't something that we always encouraged the kids to do. And, because of even in the little small-boat fishery that we're in, regulations and politics, and things like that

kind of have made the fishery not what it used to be. And now most people—you don't find families that totally derive their income from just fishing, but more from just being diversified.

JGF: Oh…OK. Yeah. And diversified, not just…

DF: Not in the fishing but—

JGF: But with having other jobs outside.

DF: —with other things, yes.

JGF: Almost like a lot of farmers have to do, it seems like these days.

DF: Right. And the thing that I've noticed from knowing the people in the town and the fishermen in the town is, they don't go to work for someone but they, find a way that they can be their own boss too, within the community. It's just something I think that's in fishermen. You know, they're motivated to be their own person.

JGF: Huh! So they might go into like…

DF: Be a carpenter or something like that. And a lot of people think that fishermen aren't well educated, and fishermen are very well educated.

JGF: Right. Right. Yeah. Well it doesn't seem like these days especially anybody can go into it without a whole wide range of knowledge.

DF: But that knowledge is passed on. And has always been the case until, of recent. That you know, it was families that would pass that on. And there would be fishing families in generations like Skip, within the communities and it's very true throughout all of Cape Cod. That there are generations of people that are in the fishery. But now, young people just can't afford to do that. And it's an art I think that's being lost.

JGF: Yeah. Yeah. So do you have children that have gone into it at all, to speak of?

DF: We have eight kids and we have twenty-two grandchildren. And, four of the eight kids fished with us and by themselves as commercial fishermen. But now, no. They're all off the water.

JGF: Wow…

DF: And it's—it's sad. It's sad for us. And it's sad for them too, because, it builds character. And you have to be motivated. And, those are things that a lot of young people nowadays never get to experience.

JGF: That's right. It's like an opportunity that they miss out on it seems like.

DF: Right. Right.

JGF: Huh. Wow… So, it sounds like though… You couldn't encourage them to try to go into it, even if…

DF: No.

JGF: It's sad.

DF: We couldn't. Because it—With the regulations… With the environment, with the water quality, the shellfish are—they're just not reproducing. They're not coming back. The bay scallop fishery has decline terribly in the past ten years. There's no eel grass. Up and down the whole coast there's no eel grass. And that—those are where the shellfish begin. And if you don't have that, then we're not going to have shellfish.

JGF: Yeah. Do you have any sense of what's causing that?

DF: I think that a lot of it has to do with runoff. With fertilizers. With those types of things. And it's not being done intentionally. Because I don't think people are educated. But we try, Skip and I, have a pictorial display that we bring into classrooms, throughout the southeast in Massachusetts. And we stimulate conversation with young people at all grade levels, in the hopes that they'll go home and say "Gee, you know what? Maybe we shouldn't put so much fertilizer on the grass?" Or, "Gee, we live down near the water. So, why do we have grass? Why don't we let it grow natural?"

JGF: Oh nice.

DF: And, we've seen that it has had some impact. Not a lot. But, we're not going to stop. We continue to do this.

JGF: Yeah. Now you also—it says here you're also a clam shack owner.

DF: Yes. We have had to diversify as most. In fact there are—In the town of Bourne no fulltime commercial fishermen. And that—In the past year has declined from a hundred families that were fulltime commercial fishermen to no one. And, right now between five and fifteen part-time fishermen that go frequently. So, yes we have a clam shack. We've had it for seven years now. It's only open from April to September. So now we're gearing up to go bay scalloping. And we will do all of the winter fishing. And then go back to the clam shack in the summertime.

JGF: What's the name of your shack?

DF: Barlow's clam shack.

JGF: It's in Bourne?

DF: It's in Bourne right on the Cape Cod Canal. And Bournedale is where I was brought up. So, you know I've not left [laughs].

JGF: [laughs] You're very rooted.

DF: Yes. Definitely. About twenty years ago, because the fishing began to decline in Massachusetts, we went to North Carolina. And North Carolina on the coast was very, very much like Cape Cod was as we grew up. And the fishing was the same. They had a real strong bay scallop fishery. And the quahogs, or they called them hard clams. And we got involved in the fishing down there also. And we see now that the scallop fishery has declined down there for the same reasons. A lot of runoff. No, eel grasses. And, they're trying too, to figure out, you know how to correct that situation. And we also shrimped down there, which was really fun.

JGF: Yeah?

DF: Yeah.

JGF: Was that a whole different process?

DF: It's a whole different process. Oh, absolutely. And it's all night fishing.

JGF: Oh…!

DF: But it's a family-oriented type of fishery too. And the fishermen down there are very open to share their information. And, we were fishing for a while with one of the masters down there so that we knew the areas and knew what to do. And… So that's an experience that we will always have. And again, I think fishermen try to remain as much as they can on the water.

JGF: Yeah. It seems like it gets into people's blood or something.

DF: Absolutely. Yes.

JGF: Is the bay scalloping that you do—How does that process compare to the clams? Is it a similar process?

DF: Bay scallops you use dredges. And, you fish five days a week and you, again have a certain portion of scallops that you can bring ashore. And, bay scalloping requires opening up the shellfish where the clams and the quahogs and the oysters are sold in the shells. So, the family does still participate in that. They open the scallops for us. And, then we get them to market.

JGF: Where do they go? From Bourne, is it local?

DF: We sell to a local market. There is not enough scallops coming off the water in Bourne or any of the upper Cape towns that there's…, that you have to go chasing around to find markets. They want whatever you can harvest.

JGF: Oh…OK. So that's sort of the upside of the downside—

DF: Yes. JGF: —is everything you get you can sell.

DF: Oh yes.

JGF: And get a good price for?

DF: And get a good price for it, yes. And it's the same too with the oysters and the clams, the steamers.

JGF: Can you explain the whole soft shell vs. hard. Is it a different species of clam?

DF: It is a different species. Yes. And the soft shell clam has a very long neck. And, you eat the whole entire body. And, the quahog or the hard clam has a very, very hard shell. And it's eaten most of the time on the half shell. Where steamer clams are either steamed or fried. You never eat them raw.

JGF: Interesting. Do you eat them?

DF: Do I? Both of them, yes. And at the shop, we prepare—Everything's fresh. And so, we use the fresh hard clams or the quahogs to make our stuffers and our clam chowder. And the steamers of course, or fryers, they're coming locally. And they're opened off site.

JGF: So during your clam season you're also fishing and you're doing your clam shack?

DF: No. We can't possibly fish. Skip fishes a little bit prior to getting very busy. But, again it's a family business. And we're there when the place is open and we're closed one day a week. But we do all the shopping ourselves. We don't have it delivered to us. We just really care about what we give people.

JGF: Now when you decided to go into this clam shack was it difficult at that point to even find a place or buy a place? Like Cape real estate or, was that not such a problem?

DF: Again, I grew up in Bournedale. And the property… I grew up with the family that the property was for sale. And my daughter was looking for a business that she could operate herself, having young children. So she bought the property and the clam shack was a place that I've worked when I was fourteen years old. But it had been closed down for probably twenty years. And it was a gift shop and it was a number of different things. So when she got it and she tried to rent it out, she didn't find anybody that was willing to take it. So I said, "We can do that" [laughs]. So we just brought it back to what it used to be when I was fourteen.

JGF: Wow! I bet a lot of people were happy to have that come back. DF: Well, the community had changed. There weren't many—and there aren't many people that are left that were growing up there when I grew up.

JGF: Oh, OK.

DF: But, we have fun with hit. And Skip in his younger days was a cook. So he does the cooking and I take care of the rest.

JGF: Yeah? Wow….

[Interruption/paused/End of File WAV_0037_002] [Start of File WAV_0037_003]

JGF: One of the things that we do ask the people on the big boats—and I'm not sure if it would be any different or not with you but—do you ever when you pull up your nets, let's say, have any unusual finds in them? Or are you not out far enough…?

DF: We're not out far enough. We really are inshore fishermen.

JGF: OK. What would inshore mean? Is it like half a mile, or less, or…?

DF: Yeah. We go out a little bit into Buzzards Bay. I fished for scallops as far out as [Cleveland's?] Ledge. But that's very infrequently. We probably only did it two years in all the time I've been fishing. So, no.

JGF: Yeah. So what would be like—For the scallops, the size of your… What is your boat?

DG: Right now we have a twenty-four foot [crow?] line. And it's an open boat. We did have a Carolina skiff. But had a very tragic type event with it, probably after I fished with Skip for about fifteen years. And, I never felt comfortable again, like I say I don't swim. So I never felt really comfortable in that. So then we went to something that was a little bigger, higher sided.

JGF: A little more stable and everything.

DF: Yeah.

JGF: And is the net very different—It must be very different than what the big boats use then, the scallop net?

DF: We don't—For scalloping we use dredges. And they're only fourteen inches wide. Some of them are up to twenty inches. But they're dredges that we can lift ourselves, I mean I can lift it up.

JGF: So you're hand hauling them up out of the water?

DF: Yes. Well we have an electric hauler. We didn't have it in the beginning. But yeah. They're not the big giant things that you see. And the quahoging and the oystering and the steamer clamming, all just uses equipment that is very, very small scale. As, you know, opposed to some of these boats here.

JGF: [laughs] This stuff staggers me.

DF: Yeah.

JGF: It feels like, corporations on the water, they're so huge.

DF: And we only… We only day-boat fish. So our boats never stay out overnight. And most of that is because of regulations. We can start at eight o'clock in the morning. We have to be off the water by 4:30. These are part of our regulations. We're very, very…

JGF: And those are town?

DF: Town regulations. Yeah.

JGF: And what are those about? Is that about noise? Do you know what they're trying…?

DF: Noise is a factor with the steamer clams. And so, you know the 8:00 start is if people are sleeping or whatever. We can't fish on weekends. In most cases other than for the scallops, we can't fish on weekends. And the areas that we're allowed to fish are generated by the uses of the beach or the areas, the people who are paying the most taxes in town obviously live on the water. And they oftentimes don't want to see a commercial fisherman out in front of their beach.

JGF: [laughs]

DF: That they think that is also their beach because they bought the waterfront property. It's very social.

JGF: Yeah. I would imagine—and like you said, it sounds like with the change in the town population people who would have any sense of the traditional fishing aspect wouldn't be around.

DF: No.

JGF: So, it sounds like the regulations aren't really—

DF: Well you know they're never going to be something we always want to see [laughs].

JGF: That's right [laughs]. But they're not coming from a mindset necessarily—

DF: Realistically.

JGF: — of the culture either.

DF: Right. Right. It's a very political type of fishery. And our DNR, our Department of Natural Resource—which when I first started fishing there were five DNR officers and the Director—and their focus was the shellfish. It was the water. It was growing seed out, and then,

you know, casting it for everyone. And they really had a special direction that they went. And now, over the past few years, they're focus is with marinas and operating them, and hundreds of thousands of dollars that are generated from marinas into the community. And so, you know, so what if there's fifteen fishermen that are out there. Too bad. You know, we want to see that come into our community over what the commercial fisherman brings in.

JGF: Yeah. So you don't feel like you have too much of a voice particularly?

DF: We have a voice. And our voice has never been stymied or cut off. But, it's hard for people to hear that voice. They only want to hear what is good for them and the person that pays the most taxes or whatever. He gets heard over us. And fishermen have never been people either, I don't think, that work together real good.

JGF: No [laughs]. I've heard that a lot.

DF: [laughs] They're very independent people. So, you know you've got to also look at that aspect of it. And, so if we were all one, single voice maybe that might help.

JGF: You're all too busy out working. And it's hard, right?

DF: True. That's true, too.

JGF: I know I've ever heard other people say, like some of the—in the industry people here, the women—they're the voice for their husbands who are out on the ocean all the time. Their husbands are just too busy, or the people on the boats—it's not always men. Now how—As a woman doing this kind of work. Was that ever an issue for you? Did you ever feel like you had to prove yourself?

DF: For many, many years I was the only woman in the fishery. Then some of the wives got involved. But, women really haven't been out on the water, in the small boat fishery as much as the men. Now there's no women out at all, on the water. It's too bad, but…

JGF: Yeah. But did it ever like—Did you ever feel harassment or like you needed to prove yourself?

DF: Oh, no. Absolutely not. Not. They were very respectful. Which was something that my parents just—they couldn't understand it. My father just had the worst time understanding how—you know, he's educated me, and I'm out on the water fishing [laughs]. But no. No, not at all.

JGF: Huh. Interesting. One of the things I just like to ask people is what would you want the average festival visitor to understand about the fishing industry, and I would say in your case, you know your aspect of the fishing industry and women's role in it.

DF: I think that I'd like that people would understand that women can do the same thing as men. And that we're probably more determined to do. I think that the community, if they just

understood that we aren't ignorant people. And that without us, the things that they put on their table they wouldn't have, if, you know if the fishery wasn't there. I think we play a big role in good food, healthy food. And, they just have to give us some understanding as far as that.

JGF: Right. Yeah, that makes me—sort of comes back to what you were saying. It's like people might not want to see it going on in their front yard so to speak. But are these the same people that want to be able to go and buy their seafood?

DF: Right.

JGF: You know, buy their locally caught food? So.

DF: Right. And I think this festival is just wonderful. I think that it's done so much to educate people. And, I mean people talk about it all the time.

JGF: Oh! That's great.

DF: And, the window into, you know where their fish comes from, where their shellfish comes from, is open now. They understand it much better.

JGF: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about the whole process of when—like say with… I don't know if it would be different for the scallops and the clams. And once you pull them up onto the boat, like… How do they get stored until you come in and all that.

DF: Again, we're only out there fishing for, six hours, seven hours maximum. And, because it's a shellfish, because they have a longer life, that they're still alive once they're pulled out of the water. Just, wet burlaps on top of our boxes, works well. And then they—They're never held overnight or anything so they're going right from the water within four or five hours of when they're caught, right to the market where they're sold.

JGF: Uh huh. Yeah. So it's just a matter of dumping them into the bags or something?

DF: Right. We have plastic shellfish boxes. Again all regulated.

JGF: Yeah [laughs].

DF: [laughs] And they can only be flat boxes. They can't be heaped in any way. And, those are taken right to market and they're tagged. And we use the credit card system to protect the general public.

JGF: Hmmm.

DF: And it's a very clean, fresh operation.

JGF: What do you mean, the credit card system?

DF: We have a credit card. We have to sell all of our shellfish using this credit card. It gets swiped so that the market lists where it came from. We have to list the area of the bay where we catch it. And then, the number. We have, all numbers. So that if, at some point in time some of that shellfish may be contaminated or something like that—.

JGF: Oh! Like a lot kind of a thing.

DF: Yeah. Then it just follows it right through until it gets to your table.

JGF: Wow! Interesting. And what would they regulation about the plastic shellfish boxes?

DF: Just the size. To make sure everybody brings in, you know—

JGF: Oh, the quota kind of thing.

DF: Yeah. Yeah. If you want to call it a quota. When I first started scalloping we had burlap bags. And we could do a number of things to those burlap bags. But we did have to buy them from the town and they'd have "The Town of Bourne" stamped on them. But if you put rocks in them and hung them on the line before you used them, you stretched out the burlap—

JGF: Oh! [laughs] I love it!

DF: —and you could probably get, you know [laughs], I don't know five or ten more pounds. And they'd have little drawstrings that you were supposed to tie. Well, very seldom did you tie them. And, you know you'd squeeze it. It was just a—it was really, I called it fun. There were a lot of people that, you know would have, disagreed with me.

JGF: Oh, yeah. But…

DF: But… So now we all use these plastic blue boxes. And you can't do any of that.

JGF: And shaking them? Does that help?

DF: Oh shaking them Oh, yeah. Oh definitely. [laughs]

JGF: [laughs] Oh that's interesting. Great. Well is there anything I haven't asked you about related to your aspect of the work that you would want people to know?

DF: No. I think you've covered it all.

JGF: Great. Well thank you so much.

DF: Well thank you for this opportunity.

JGF: This was great. Because I haven't had the chance to talk to people about this piece of things, so…

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

Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 12/20/2024