

Maine Coast Oral History Initiative
Fred Viola Oral History
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Interviewer: JW – Joshua Wrigley
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Joshua Wrigley: This is an interview for the Maine Coast Oral History Initiative, to be shared jointly by the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association and the Island Institute. The date is September 19th, 2013. My name is Josh Wrigley, and today I'm interviewing Fred Viola of South Portland, Maine, about his experiences lumping fish at the Portland Fish Exchange.

Fred Viola: Yes. My name's Fred Viola. I was born in Portland, lived in the Portland area all my life. As far as the fishing, I got into that. My dad was a fisherman all his life. I was born into it. I never liked fishing, going on the boats. But I always worked on the shore side, unloading and I'd make a trip once in a while. I worked construction for most of my life. When construction was slack, I would make a trip fishing. But they were few and far between [laughter].

JW: So, you worked at the Portland Fish Exchange?

FV: I do now. I do now. I run heavy equipment most of my life. I retired from that, and ever since I was old enough to work, I've always worked on a waterfront. Weekends, days off, I'd unload fish, was down there doing something, helping out, earning extra money, and just continued on with it. Later on, and when the fish exchange opened, I didn't work for them, but I worked with them. They needed people to unload the boats. I started a little company and started unloading the boats. The way it worked is, at first, the boats would call me if they wanted lumpers, because they call us lumpers. But if they wanted someone to unload the fish, they'd call me. After a while, I got a lot of boats coming in. I got together with a Portland Fish Exchange, and the boats used to call in there and tell whether they wanted lumpers or not. In turn, the exchange would call me and let me know. So, I kind of worked with them that way to work with their schedule and stay busy myself.

JW: What's the process of lumping?

FV: Process of lumping is getting the fish off the boat and onto the wharf, where they can sort it and cull it and weigh it and get it ready for auction. Get it ready for display. I just get it off the boat. Basically, it's just bullwork.

JW: At what age did you first begin to unload vessels?

FV: Well, [laughter] kind of funny. I was in high school. At fifteen, I got a work permit. Back then, whiting was a big item in the summertime. Boats used to go whiting fishing. Well, I got a job in a whiting factory, cutting whiting one summer. I was working for \$1.25 an hour. Well, I got talking to the lumpers, the ones unloading the boats out back. They were telling me what they made, \$300 and \$400 a week. I said, "Well, that's the place for me." So, the [laughter] following year, I talked to a couple boats and that's what started my lumping.

JW: Where was the whiting factory located?

FV: It was on Holyoke Wharf, the one I worked at. At the time, there were two or three, and this was Maine Fisheries.

JW: Is that where the New England Fish Company is now located?

FV: I don't know. I don't know the New England Fish Company. But I don't think so. No. I think Joey (Scola?) has the wharf now. He handles lobsters and some fish. It's changed over the years. I haven't really kept up with it.

JW: Did you handle other species besides whiting when you were cutting there?

FV: No. No. When I was in high school and at, that was the whiting shop and in the summertime, and I guess that plant did handle redfish too, the other end of the building. But I never dealt with that. I was too young. I was just summertime work. Because like I said, my dad was a fisherman all his life. The boats he was on, if they wanted lumpers, he would call me. Most of the time, he wouldn't ask. He'd tell me to come down [laughter]. He'd say, "You've got to work." From there, I liked it. It was good money. It was hard work, but the money was good, and I stuck with it. I always stuck with it, even though I worked construction.

JW: How many whiting were there back then when you started?

FV: Oh, there was thousands and thousands of pounds. Small boats would go out. I'm going to guess forty footers, forty-five footers, and come back with twenty or thirty thousand pounds of whiting every day. Leave in the morning, come back in the afternoon, rounded right over with whiting. That's all they'd have.

JW: Were they fishing in shore?

FV: Yes, they were, fairly close. Then over the years, that kind of disappeared and ended. Same with a lot of the fish, see.

JW: What years would you say the whiting was most prevalent?

FV: Well, as far as I can remember, when I was in high school, the sixties were big years. Probably in the seventies, they started dwindling, dropping off, and finally, come to an end. Nobody really caught any.

JW: When did you graduate high school?

FV: I graduated in 1968. At the time, there were four or five different wharves that they unloaded fish on. There were different buyers. I'd jump from dock to dock. Depending on who would call, I'd go unload them.

JW: Did most vessels stick to a particular wharf?

FV: Most of them did at the time. Once in a while, they'd bounce around, try to get a better price or a better deal, and kind of wheeling and dealing. Then the Portland Fish Exchange come along. I think it was about 1985. I'm guessing now. It could have been [19]84. It was right around there that they started the fish exchange. I think it was the first display auction in the

country. So, it almost closed. The boats were leery of going there. It was something new. Nobody wanted to leave their markets. Well, it was open for a short time and almost closed. Finally, there was a few guys put some money in it to keep it going just a little bit longer to see. Then when they did that – I don't know what it was. Maybe it was just the thought that other people saw that some of the fishermen were putting money into it. The boats started to come over, and as they tried it, they liked it. We got more and more boats. Well, it took off like gangbusters. It really took off big time. That's where I got a lot of my lumping. Because the boats would come in, the exchange would handle the fish on the wharf, but the boats needed people to unload them. Well, the exchange didn't supply that end of it. Well, that's where I come in. I started lumping.

JW: How did fishermen sell their catches before the Portland Fish Exchange?

FV: Well, they used to sell to different dealers. Sometimes, the boats would sell the whole trip. I got ten thousand pounds of fish. I got five thousand pounds of haddock, two thousand pounds of dabs, or whatever, and a buyer would give them a price. Say, "Well, we'll give you so much for your haddock, so much for your dab, so much for –" without seeing it. Sometimes, when a boat's unloaded, the fish would be shipped. The boats would get their money and it'd be less than what they were quoted because, well, the quality wasn't that good, or this wasn't that good. To me, it was a big difference from what I could see. Because your fish were on the floor, the buyers were looking at it. You were at the auction when the fish was sold. So, you knew what it was selling for. So, you knew what price you were going to get for it. Everything was above board, out in the open. If you didn't want to sell it, scratch it. No sale. If you liked the price, you could sell it.

JW: Before the auction, were a lot of the buyers local?

FV: Yes. Yes. They were local buyers because they'd ship all over New York, Philadelphia, different places. They'd buy it and ship it, and, of course, supply some locally. I don't know for sure, but I'm going to guess that it was the same people buying the fish at the auction that were buying before the auction. The same stores and restaurants and what have you.

JW: Do you remember who the most prominent buyers were at the time?

FV: I don't really remember the most prominent. I just know there were probably six or eight or more buyers. Dealers, they had their own little plants on the wharves and they'd unload, packed your fish, and ship it, and stuff like that. Because a lot of things changed when the exchange opened. It changed the whole ballgame because everything was out in the open and above board. The exchange is an honest place. It really is. You'll get an honest weight. You'll get a good cull, and you can look at your fish while they're unloading it. It's really above board. But it's changed a lot over the years. I mean, they used to have some shady practices [laughter] going on before, and this here kind of eliminated them.

JW: Who were the first fishermen to use the exchange when it opened in the mid-1980s?

FV: Well, it was Brophy. I can't remember his first name. He had a couple of boats brought in

there. Jimmy Odlin used to bring boats there. Bob McNeil. There were a lot of them. But at first, they were kind of sporadic. They'd try it, come with a little bit, and then they go back and forth. Because nobody really knew how it was going to work until they see some of the fishermen put some money into it. The boat started going there and they see everything was above board and honest. Sometimes, you like the price. Sometimes, you don't. You're going to get the bitching [laughter] wherever you go.

JW: Had Brophy and Odlin been doing their catches in Portland prior to that?

FV: Oh, yes. Yes. They were coming to Portland. Every once in a while, the boats would go to Gloucester or Boston, but not as much. For a long time, the exchange I think was either the top or right up near the top on the East Coast as far as fish landings and unloadings and stuff. Then the government regulations come in. The government started regulating everything, and prices started going up. Fuel prices, ice prices. The regulations have changed so much over the past few years, you almost have to have a lawyer to keep up with the changes. Some of the boats, they were fishing closer to Massachusetts. Down there, you could bring lobsters in a dragger. So many lobsters and sell them. In Maine, you can't have a lobster on a dragger. With the price of fuel and everything, it started to make a big difference money wise. So, a lot of the boats started going to Gloucester and Boston and New Bedford and leaving Portland. Of course, the government had a big buyout that when they first started putting the regulations into effect, it was hurting a lot of fishermen. Well, they had a buyback. They were buying boats back. They'd ask you how much you want for your boat and this and that. They'd kind of bid on it and the government would buy it and scrap it.

JW: When was the buyback program?

FV: That was in the [19]90s, I think, the late [19]90s. Mid-[19]90s, late [19]90s, somewhere around there. Of course, the fleet started dwindling. But it wasn't too bad. I mean, we still stayed busy. Then every year, they come out with new regulations and more cutbacks and different things. At one time, I had my lumping and my books, I put everything above board. Guys I had working on a payroll, which was never done before. I had over sixty boats I did on a regular basis. This was in the [19]90s. Today, I'm down to zero. I mean, I finally gave up the lumping business. I turned it over to the exchange. I'll find guys to help them unload if they want. We have so few boats coming in to unload fish that use lumpers that you can't do it anymore.

JW: Did most of those vessels hail from Maine?

FV: They used to. Well, when the exchange started going good, we used to get boats down here from New York, Delaware, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, all over. Boats would come here, and they liked it. Everything was honest. It was fair. Of course, like I say, when they started putting the regulations in and cutbacks on the fish, they started dwindling. So, out of the sixty or so regular boats I did, I probably don't do three a year now the ones I used to do, because they're all gone. At my high point, I know the exchange used to do about twenty-five million pounds a year, fish, or thirty. My biggest year just unloading the boats that I unloaded. I didn't unload them all. I unloaded fifteen million pounds.

JW: What year was that?

FV: I'm going to guess now. I think it was between [19]93 and [19]95, somewhere in that area. Right after [19]95, it started going downhill a few at a time. I'd lose a few and lose a few more. Finally, it got down to where I lost them all. You couldn't keep helping because you couldn't offer them any work. I mean, before, I could offer them a week's pay. They'd have a good income coming in. As we lost the boats, the pay got smaller and smaller and they all got other [laughter] jobs. So, you don't find a lot of guys that lump anymore.

JW: How large was your lumping crew at that point in the mid-[19]90s?

FV: At the peak of it, I could keep six guys going steady five to six days a week. I'd use up to twelve guys at different points of the unloading. Because we could unload four boats at once down here. If I had four boats, I had at least three guys to a boat. But most of the time, it was two at a time, and I could keep six going right steady and use the other guys on the other boats.

JW: Were they mostly guys who would crew on vessels as well?

FV: Yes, they did. A lot of them were fishermen or they ended up going fishing. They'd start lumping and get a site and go on fishing. Some of the guys I had were pretty good workers. The guys that owned boats or captain boats, because they got to know them and they said, "Geez, they're good workers." There's a few of them still fishing now.

JW: So, there was a lot of back and forth movement between the fishing industry and the shore side processing.

FV: Yes, there was. There was. Like I just said, some of my help would end up going fishing. A lot of times, if they'd quit a boat or get done on a boat, they'd be in between, I'd use them lumping in between until they got another site. A couple of them are still fishing now out of Boston doing real big, and they started lumping. But things have changed [laughter].

JW: How long would it take to unload an average catch from a vessel?

FV: Well, that's hard to say because it depended on the type of fish and the crew you had on the wharf. See, my lumpers got paid by the weight. So, I mean, they were bulls. They wanted to get the fish out quick because they knew they were going to make the same amount of money in two hours or six hours whenever the fish were out. Well, the guys on the wharf, depending on how many hours they had for the week, I mean, they could call fast or they could slow down to try to make up their hours. They were getting paid by the hour. So, [laughter] you kind of had to find a common ground there [laughter].

JW: Was there a lot of tension?

FV: There really wasn't, no. No. Once in a while, getting a little rough. But most of the time, everybody got along good. We'd work together pretty good. We knew them. They knew us,

and it worked out good. There were times that we could unload a boat, we'd do over twenty thousand pounds an hour. If everybody was on the same page and wanted to – because we used to figure an average of at least ten thousand pounds an hour. That was a pretty good average and kept everybody happy. So, if you had a big trip with a hundred thousand or more than a hundred thousand, you'd go a lot faster because everybody wanted to get out of there. Even the guys inside were getting plenty of time.

JW: How soon after the unloading process would the auction take place?

FV: You have an auction every day. Right now, it's 11:00 a.m. It used to be noon time at then. It started at 1:00, then they changed the time back to noon time. Now, with the fewer boats and everything, they moved it to 11:00. But we'd start unloading. A normal day would be started at 4:00 a.m. If there was a lot of fish on, sometimes we'd start at 2:00 a.m. or 1:00 a.m. and start unloading for our noontime auction. You'd have to hustle sometimes to get them on. But most of the time, we made it. Sometimes, boats would come in and they'd be off on their hail. They might come in and hail thirty thousand and have forty thousand on or 45,000. Well, you're trying to figure timewise on what they hail, and all of a sudden, you run over. Then sometimes, we'd run [laughter] into problems.

JW: So, would those fish then be folded into the next day's auction?

FV: Sometimes, they would, unless we were able to get them on that auction. We'd try to get everything on. But if we couldn't get it on, they would go on to the next day's auction. Sometimes, they'd hold up the auction for an hour. If you hailed your boat and everything was right, they'd do their damndest to get you on. They might have to hold up the auction on a Thursday, especially. Any boat that was hailed on a Thursday for Thursday's auction had to make the auction. Because that was the last auction until Sunday. You wouldn't hold a fish Friday and Saturday. They would shut you off if, say, you had 150,000 pounds hailed, they'd say that's a cutoff. Anything over that, we aren't guaranteeing. We wouldn't take. So, on a Thursday, if you had 150,000 and if it took you to 1:00, 2:00 to unload them, those fish still made that – they'd hold the auction up for it because it was the last auction for the week, and they told you, you could go. You don't see so much of that now because you got a lot fewer boats, a lot fewer fish. The exchange is cut way down in size. They rent part of their building out now. They lease it. I've seen times back in the heyday that the whole building wasn't really big enough for all of the fish they landed. We'd have 200,000, 300,000 pound auctions on Sunday – 200,000 or 300,000 pounds on a Sunday or more. The cooler floor wasn't big enough to hold them all.

JW: What was the diversity of species like at that point?

FV: Well, it changed depending on the season, depending on the time of year. I mean, certain times, you get a lot of pollock. Other times, you get a lot of flatfish or that and depending on what the boats were going for. We used to have swordfish boats down there, takeout. Shark boats, the ones that just went after sharks. We had boats that used to go to the Grand Banks and bring in yellowtails. So, it kind of depended on what the market [laughter] wanted really. Or the season, whatever was going at the time. There might be a lot of haddock at certain times of the

year, or a lot of pollock at certain times, or a lot of dabs. So, there's a lot of things factored in there.

JW: Was there communication between the fish exchange and vessels at sea about what the current market conditions could absorb?

FV: Well, that really wasn't between the exchange. It was, more or less, most of these boats had seller reps – sellers that repped a boat. Well, they'd tell the boat, "Geez, they need codfish or they need pollock or whatever. The dabs are high or the redfish is high." So, the boats that they repped would start working on different species and try to catch – they'd kind of keep an eye on the market that way. That was up to the boat's rep to do that. The exchange, all they did was, didn't matter what you brought in, we'd put it on the floor. It's kind of being impartial, just unload them, put them on the auction for you and charge you a fee. But as far as telling you what to catch or trying to say go after this or go after that, the exchange had nothing to do with that.

JW: So, did the reps move between vessels often or did they often work with singular vessels and on a continual basis?

FV: There was a bunch of reps and they usually worked with the same boats. I mean, for example, if I owned two or three boats, I might have a rep, say, Barbara or whatever. She would rep my boats. Another guy would have Mickey. Mickey will rep his two boats. They usually stayed with the same boats. Sometimes, the boat owners would rep their own fish. I mean, they had the option. They could do that. But most of them at the time had someone going down and doing their buying and selling for them.

JW: How much of a challenge was it for people like Brophy and Odlin to gain the confidence of fishermen in the Portland Fish Exchange during the early years?

FV: When they first started, it was really hard with the boat owners and the captains. Everybody was leery. It was something new. Nobody had done this before. It was a full display auction, where you had to take care of your fish. I mean, you put them on the floor, buyers would come in and look at them, or their reps, and grade them according to quality and stuff. Well, people were kind of leery and it took a little while. It really did. Like I say, they'd come within hours of shutting down. In fact, I didn't work for the exchange. I worked with them, unloading. At one point, they kept just a skeleton crew. They were going to hold their last auction and they were going to lock the building up after that. Well, that last auction kind of brought them down to the wire. That's when some of the people started kicking in some money and said, "Well, we'll bring our boats here. We'll try it." Then that's when it took off. So, it did take a while to get confidence going and get – a lot of the boats, once they see a few of them going there, then they started coming. Of course, you see somebody doing something and you try it and it works out. That's what happened.

JW: Did the fish exchange have the support of fisheries organizations that advocated for the industry?

FV: Well, I really don't know because like I said, I didn't work for the exchange. I was there a lot. I would guess they did, but I really don't know.

JW: How did fish handling practices change with the auction?

FV: With the auction, we used to use pitchforks unloading fish and put them in barrels and stuff. Well, then as the exchange started coming around, the buyers started coming. They started complaining, "Well, geez, you're putting holes in the fish or you're tearing the fish." Well, we ended up using fish picks, just small hand picks. The boat started taking better care of their fish. I mean, when we first started, nobody really took care of the fish really like they do today. I mean, they'd put ice and stuff to them, but they were all mixed in together and mashed together, and you had to use pitchforks to unload them. Well, as the auction got going and people started getting a better price for the better quality fish, these boats started changing their tactics of taking care of the fish. Well, they'd put them in layers and a layer of ice and layers, which made it a lot easier for us as lumpers. But we had to go to fish picks and try to pick them in the head and get them without tearing the fish or putting a big hole in it. Well, then it got so that we still use the fish picks, but we'll use shovels more often than not. Because the ice is layered, the fish are taken care of better, and you can shovel the fish without hurting the fish. So, it's come a long ways.

JW: Was the duration of average time at sea for voyages affected at all?

FV: I don't think it was. They still make anywhere from five to seven to 10 day trips. But it's the way they take care of the fish now. They do a lot better job of icing them and taking care of them. So, the fish are a lot nicer when they get in. It's not just thrown into a pen and shovel some ice on it. Now, they'll lay it and placed in there. So, it makes a big difference in the quality. As far as the length of the trip, I mean, you could make a ten-day trip and have better fish than some guy making a six-day trip, depending on how you take care of them.

JW: So, when you go about lumping a vessel, how many men would go down into the hole at a time?

FV: I used to use two guys in the fish hole and one man on the hatch guiding them out. If it was a really big trip, I'd put three guys in the hole – three lumpers in the hole. But ordinarily, we'd do it with two. Of course, you'd weigh yourself out, but you'd get the fish out.

JW: How many fish would they remove at one time via the hoist?

FV: With the hoist, I think the barrels go between two hundred and 250 pounds of fish to a basket. They'll ice it up, dump it on a table, and the guys on the wharf will sort it out and color it according to size and species. They'd put it in a hundred pound totes and tag it and put it on the floor. So, when the buyers go out, they can go to certain sections. Here's redfish over here. Here's (market cod?) there, and there's large cod over here. It's all marked and separated and there's different size limits.

JW: You mentioned before the vessel buyback program during the 1990s. Did you know many

fishermen who took part in that?

FV: Yes, there were quite a few that did. They sold their boats, permits, and all, and got out of it. Some of them had more than one boat and they'd sell one boat. But a lot of them sold everything and got right out of the fishing.

JW: What was the state of federal regulation at that time?

FV: Well, more or less, it was just starting to come in then. That's when they had all the protests down in Gloucester. Even Portland, they blocked the harbor at one point to kind of protest. But I mean, it's like anything else. It's made some good news, but it never got [laughter] too many results. They started implementing the changes and the rules. Today, you'll see them still complaining. "Hey, I don't know. Science is science [laughter] and fishing is fishing." But I don't know where the two come together. But I think a lot of the boats, they believe in conservation, but sometimes, they think it goes too far or they're getting the wrong information. So, I don't know. It's hard to say on here.

JW: Do you remember at all what your father's observations were during the course of his career and how he saw fishery change?

FV: Well, he more or less retired when they started making all of the changes. So, when he went, you could come and go as you pleased. You weren't limited to catching a certain amount of fish or going so many days or all of those regulations. He fished when you could go out, make a ten-day trip, come in, take the fish out, and go right back out fishing the next day, if you wanted to.

JW: Was that how often he usually went?

FV: A lot of times he did, yes. Yes. Most of the time. At the end of it, in some of the boats he was on, they'd come in, take out the fish, take two or three days off, and then go back out. I remember growing up, I played little league. Four years of little league when I was growing up and my dad made one game in four years. That's how much he was gone fishing. So, he was out a lot.

JW: Was there anything that he would remark on in terms of the fishery?

FV: Well, yes. A lot of times, he'd talk about it, like, haddock, for example. They say the haddock were depleted. Maybe they were. But he claimed that years ago when he was young – and of course, now I'm talking sixty years ago or more. That they would go out and had boatloads of haddock. They'd get tired of dressing them, went until the captain went to sleep, and shove them out to scuppers, shoved them over the side. He said, "You do that and a year or two later, you wouldn't get hardly any haddock." Well, then a year or so after that, a couple years later, boom, they were catching all kinds again. It seemed to go in cycles, a lot of things. The shrimp the same way. He used to talk about that. They'd go in cycles. But I don't know. Because back then when he was fishing, they didn't have all the electronics and all of the modern equipment to tell you where the fish are and how deep they are. I mean, they were fishing by

compasses and LORANs and stuff like that. They didn't have all these machines. So, it's changed. I don't know if the science is right or the fishermen are right. But I mean, there's always been a conflict, yes. But I know the landings have dropped way off. Part of it's got to do with the regulations and the cutbacks and stuff. I don't know. I really don't know. I know as far as the landings in Portland, they're landing fewer fish. But as far as the boats go, I know they're going to Massachusetts, a big part of it is lobsters. I mean, it's not all of it, but it's a big part of it. They don't want to throw over four or \$5,000 worth of lobsters. If your fuel's costing you fifteen or \$20,000, you've got to kind of offset it somehow, and you can't do that in Maine.

JW: For the lumper, what was the single most important aspect of the job to perform well?

FV: Well, I guess you had to have a little strength and be in pretty good shape. Basically, a strong back and a weak mind is what it amounted to [laughter]. There are little tricks to it, but –

JW: What were some of those tricks?

FV: Well, how to get them out of a pen and fill in your baskets, how to hold them. It's not rocket science, but it's just something you get a knack for after you've done it a while. I got one guy that used to work for me. He still lumps. When they need someone, I call him up. He knows all the little tricks. Well, we'll usually send somebody that works inside the shop down to help him. They're always commenting, "Geez, Ralph, he makes it look so easy." Then he'll tell you, "He started showing me these little tricks," and he says that it works out pretty good. He's [laughter] kind of like an old timer, the young guy, doing things, and the old timers got little tricks that help them. But it's kind of up to the individual. It's like shoveling snow. I mean, you shovel left-handed, I shovel right-handed.

JW: Everyone has their own style.

FV: They got their own style, yes, and some are stronger than others. Strength has a big part to do with it. I mean, my son, he's strong. He can pull with a shovel and fill a basket where a normal person, [laughter] myself or somebody else, it would take him four or five scoops where he could do it in one. So, that's got a lot to do with it.

JW: Well, Fred, thank you very much for talking with me today and sharing your experiences with your career. It's been very –

FV: Oh, hey. It's been kind of fun really to reminisce a little [laughter] bit, come up over the years. I never figured I was old, but I guess I'm getting older thinking back.

[end of transcript]