

Interviewee Name: Bob and Diane Williams

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations:

Galen Koch (The First Coast)

Interview Location: Maine Fishermen's Forum, Rockland, Maine

Date of Interview: March 1, 2018

Interview Description:

Bob and Diane Williams

Stonington, ME

Commercial Lobsterman and Family

Interviewed by Galen Koch

Bob Williams, a lobsterman, and his wife, Diane Williams, live in Stonington, ME and first met at the Fishermen's Forum 38 years ago. They return every year for their anniversary. In the interview, they discuss the rising value of property in their area, their experiences living in coastal Maine, and the changes in the culture and economy of Stonington since the 70s such as the decline of jobs such as quarry work, ice chipping, and factory work.

Collection Description:

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 is a project of Maine Sea Grant, The First Coast, College of the Atlantic, and the Island Institute, with support from the Maine Fishermen's Forum Board of Directors.

Citation:

Williams, Bob and Williams, Diane, Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 Oral History Interview, March 1, 2018, by Galen Koch, 16 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcription by: Galen Koch, The First Coast

Start of BOB_and_DIANE_WILLIAMS_VMFF2018_AUDIO_BothMics.wav

GK: Galen Koch
BW: Bob Williams
DB: Diane Berlew

[00:00:00.00]

GK: We'll start with both of you just stating your names and spelling them for me - well you don't need to spell them for me, I know how to spell them.

BW: Well, yeah. Bob Williams.

DB: Diane Berlew.

BW: My wife.

GK: And where are you coming from today.

BW: Stonington

DB: Stonington, yah.

GK: And how long are you going to be at the Forum?

BW: Three days, well, Thursday-Friday-Saturday-Sunday.

GK: Do you come a lot?

DB: Every year.

BW: And here's a good story for you, Diane and I met here on a blind date in 1980.

GK: No way, tell me about that.

DB: Who was I with? I don't remember that.

BW: She had a friend -

DB: Oh, Edna Grindle.

BW: Wayne and Edna Grindle that she grew up with in New Jersey and I had friends Dick Bridges said, "Well, I know a fella on the island." Edna told Diane, "That just got divorced, and you're getting' a divorce." And I've got six kids and she's got five.

DB: "So what else do you need?" she said.

[00:01:07.00]

GK: You have 11 children together?

BW: Most of them are grown, you know Sherri, James' mother and she was my youngest and Diane had Evan, which he was -

DB: I adopted him after I had five children in Ethiopia where I was with my ex-husband in the Peace Corps. That's how it all happened in my family.

GK: So you met here what did you do?

BW: The first night I think we went out to dinner and I think there was a restaurant called the Mai Thai.

DB: Yeah, yeah.

BW: So Diane and I this was our anniversary!

GK: what year?

BW: 38 years ago, 1980.

GK: And did you come to the Forum every year after that?

DB: Absolutely.

[00:02:01.05]

BW: Yep we've been here every year, I think. Mighta been one year we was in Texas, I don't remember.

DB: Yeah, yeah.

GK: That is great, do people know that here?

BW: Yeah there's quite a few people who know it.

GK: You should have a celebration on your 50th Anniversary.

BW: At 30 years when they had the reception, the banquet, I went up and I said, "I need the mic" and he didn't know what I was going to say and I got up and I said, "I met this beautiful lady here 30 years ago." And everybody cheered.

GK: That's sweet - so one of the things we're doing, if you want, I'll give you a color marker...

BW: I like green.

GK: Perfect and we're just asking - wondering over the years if where you fished has changed, or places that are important to you around the island. Places that are significant.

[00:03:13.26]

DB: Burnt Cove.

GK: Yeah show me where you live.

BW: You want me to mark? Burnt Cove is right there, I grew up right there.

GK: You grew up...

BW: Right in Burnt Cove and I haven't moved probably 500 feet from where I lived all my life because we built a house in the same area. So fishing... we fish, can I put a circle?

GK: Yep.

BW: I fish all these island up in here - plus offshore

[00:04:09.02]

you know all the bay. You want me to draw a mark on it?

GK: Yep.

BW: I fish a lot we used to fish Fox Island Thoroughfare. Way up in here, we do now too but not up inside so far. Then of course offshore as far as Matinicus Rock, off in probably this area here.

GK: You do you go all the way out there?

BW: did, I don't know.

GK: What were you fishing for out there.

BW: Lobster, yup. plus in the 60s we were trawling for hake cause you had wooden lobster traps, usually most people took up their lobster traps in the summer to dry out because there

wasn't many lobsters in the summer in those days. Trawling and of course halibut and so I fished

[00:04:59.21]

all this area from way up in here right down through and yep down in through here, and over this way. Yep.

GK: Do a lot of people on the island fish out?

BW: Yes, out Eagle Island there is a lot.

GK: And then what's over here?

BW: We call the Eastern Bay, all the fellas out of town either go this way or down the Isle Au Haut shore and they fish over towards Marshalls and Swans Island course Swans Island is a closed area now and they fish all up through here and of course offshore, all was Stonington, Swans Island, Vinalhaven, all fish in this same area now. There's more people fishing off shore than ever.

GK: Why's that?

BW: More big boats, more people

[00:05:58.07]

of course it has been good off shore, I don't think this year's been so good. But then you have, actually there's people from Western Maine that's fishing way down off Mt Desert Rock.

GK: Wow.

BW: Cause there's not so many lobsters in Western Maine.

GK: What's that like are people getting a little uppity?

BW: Well some people are upset about it. Yeah there's more people fishing off shore then I ever did. So in my day but I haven't been off shore since '94. Gave up fishing winters, so. But I been 63 years I think this year.

GK: And you're still going.

BW: Oh yeah I go May - December.

GK: But you're not going off shore, that was a long time ago?

BW: Yeah since the 90s, I haven't been since the mid-90s. But for 40 years I fished year-round.

GK: Has it... how has the culture changed on the island? Has it changed at all?

[00:07:02.26]

BW: Oh yes, a lot. I mean property wise. Values of property. My first house I bought, I used to live up half way from Burnt Cove to the town line I bought 48 acres for \$4000. So that was 1959, I lived there 30 years and the now it's owned by James, he owns it right now and Diane and I built a new house in Burnt Cove in '89 we moved there. So yeah it's been a long - we've been together, Diane has lived on the island longer than she's lived anywhere in her life. She moved in '81.

GK: What was it like when you first got there?

DB: Well I'd been to Maine before and spent summers with a friend in Brooksville
[00:08:00.10]
and been on the island a bit but never as a change in life but I always wanted to.

GK; Yeah, why did you want to?

DB: Because I loved it! I really. My brain always seemed clearer when I was staying in Maine, I don't know why but.

GK: Yeah, clear air.

DB: I don't know. Not too many confusing people around me.

GK: Yeah some of the questions we're asking too are what are some of the things you value about living in your community? Do you have thoughts about that.

BW: It's quite peaceful compared to what's going on in the world now and you know you know everybody, mostly. And family
[00:08:59.27]
family's always the big thing, we have a lot of family.

DB: Not many of mine because they're all over the world, so.

BW: But mostly Diane's people some live in Texas, one in California, one in Dubai. She has an older son who lives in Dubai.

DB: Adam lives there too.

BW: No he's in California.

DB: Oh, that's right.

(laughter)

GK: How many live in Dubai...

DB: Well he'd be there for a while, visiting or something.

GK: So it's peaceful and what role does the ocean play in your life?

BW: Well cause I've been around the ocean all my life from the days in high school, clamming was a big thing for kids to do and I actually went clamming during the part of the year when I wasn't fishing - for probably 10 years and of course in the winter a lot of the fishermen didn't go in the early days so they would cut wood or get jobs on the land

[00:10:05.19]

so I guess the biggest things that's changed now is the value of property - I'm lucky I got shore property inherited through my great grandmother so we're lucky to keep that right now.

GK: Has it been hard to keep it?

BW: Well it takes, the taxes yes, the valuation of shore property is sky high so you have to generate a lot of money to keep it going some. That's one of my goals in life to make sure it keeps going.

GK: Have you seen people get pushed out of places that they've been in for a long time?

BW: Well forced out by the taxes are too much or the valuation of property. I guess the biggest change in the lobster industry has been the change in the price of lobsters and the price of going you know. From the bait prices when I first started herring was 75 cents a bushel and redfish was a dollar and a half. Now herring last year was 56 dollars

[00:11:07.13]

a bushel and redfish, I don't know. Redfish was approaching 75, 80 dollars. That's a big change right there.

GK: What about the money that people are pulling in, is that different now?

BW: Yeah I think a lot of the younger people are used to a lot of money and so last year in 2017 was kind of a downturn in the fishery and a downturn in the price so you know maybe we've reached the big high on the price and catch.

GK: Do you see that as something that could turn around? Or is that.

BW: I think it's amazing the lobster industry is the only industry that's actually increased in production

[00:12:00.18]

where most fisheries have gone down but we're doing a lot in conservation, small lobsters and escape vents, and so that's one of the reasons and plus they say warmer waters created more lobster, so. So now the thing will go down some? Or will it stay on the average, nobody knows. And I haven't seen the figures for the poundage in 2017. But 2016 was a record year.

GK: I remember that, I remember that. Yeah I just think about if there are any concerns that you're having.

BW: Well I think there's a lot of boats that are being built that's over half a million dollars now so you know if there's a downturn in the fishery then that's gonna affect those people too so the people that are well established it won't bother too much.

GK: But if you've got a loan...

BW: Yeah you've got a big loan and a lot of them gots loans on houses, young families.
[00:13:07.29]

GK: What was it like in Stonington down there in like the 70s and 80s.

BW: Well, I got out of school in 1955 and there's at the town meeting they were wanting to know what to do with the Community Center and I was the first, I was a freshman in 1951 and we was the first kids to go into that building and the gym. So that's quite a historic thing there, too. So the 70s was, there wasn't so many lobsters in the 70s and 80s even though the price, we got pretty good price compared to what was getting priced in the early days which was 35-40 cents. Then it probably went up to towards a dollar but then the you know the expenses started going up but since 1990 we've had several now it's been 27 years of almost continuous growth in the population of lobsters.
[00:14:13.16]

GK: What were you going to say, Diane?

DB: I keep hearing that the lobsters aren't as... uh... aren't around as much.

BW: Well in the early days but they've been around since the 90s.

GK: You mean in the last year?

BW: yeah the last year, that's was the big downturn for a lot of people.

GK: Were people doing - was there like a ground fish fishery in Stonington?

BW: Oh yes, big. I don't know whether John's come in, my son John. He went gill netting for years.

GK: Everybody talks about him, I was on Chebeague and somebody talked about him.

BW: Oh yeah? They in 1978, I had a 46-foot (something I can't understand), and then so the next year John was gillnetting in a 40 foot boat and the next year I got divorced

[00:15:15.02]

so I sold him, I sold him the loan and the 46-footer and so he went, he must have gone gill-netting for over 10 years. And dragging and scalloping and they have some big, there was a lot of fish was landed in Stonington in the 80s course then the regulations changed and some of the and of course the groundfish went downhill so that really caused a big, and the price wasn't much they got for them so you had to get a lot of volume.

GK: Right I remember hearing that like it was like crazy like 5 cents or something.

BW: Oh yeah, yeah, and sometimes it would cost more to ship 'em then you got for the fish cause you were selling on a open market so one day there might be 20 cents the next day it might be 5 cents. You never knew what you were gonna get.

[00:16:01.03]

Well lobsters usually you know what you was gonna get cause you go out in the morning for price.

GK: Because it's set whereas.

BW: Usually, the fish was a it's like a commodity on the market if there's more fish than they can handle than the price would be lower. Yup.

GK: Right, right. Do you have any favorite stories that you tell your family or that you haven't told your family but you wish that they would ask you about?

BW: I don't know just outside of boats and fishery and doing the things at the right time. Everybody has had several boats in their lifetime.

[00:16:48.04]

I went back to wooden boats and John and I and there's quite a few in Stonington now they're John's Bay Boats built in South Bristol. And I think there's around 15 of them now in Stonington but they're more comfortable, easier on your body.

GK: Tell me a little bit more about that, what's so good about 'em?

BW: Wood is, it's heavier, moves slower in the water so you don't get the vibration from wood because it absorbs some of the vibration. As you get older, I had trouble with my legs. I had two fiberglass boats because the big boats didn't bother so much but I had a 35 foot duffy and that really, I didn't know if I'd have to give up fishing so I went back, I had already sold, I had a wooden boat previous to that, so I had already sold that one so I hunted around to

[00:17:43.21]

and Peter Cass st John's Bay Boat had already had n order and that one selling so he called me in the fall and said he had a fellow cancel. That was in 1989 so I put my order in and he built a 38 foot boat so I still have that boat now and it's named after my youngest grandson James Klemenz, Jamie K.

GK: That's sweet, what were some of the other names of your boats?

BW: Oh, I had all my kids were J's and S's, I had John, James, and Sheila, Shelley, Serena, and Sherry. So I named the other boat the J & S.

DB: Yep, simplify it.

GK: That's a thing I heard a lot I feel like there were a lot of families on the island that do that.

BW: Oh yeah, they do.

GK: I wonder where that started, it's a cool tradition. I like it.

[00:18:46.09]

BW: How long have you been back on the island?

GK: I'm in Portland but I'm in this thing so I'm going back and forth, I'm gonna be on the island for a month.

BW: So you've been interviewing all along the coast?

GK: I will be, this is the launch of the problem...

BW: So you told us, this is an Airstream.

GK: yeah, I tow it but I'm relying on others. I don't have a truck yet. I've just been trying to get the thing off the ground in other ways. We could do more on the island, too.

BW: I don't know what else do you have any other questions?

GK: We've got lots of questions! But I could talk to you for hours... but I'll be on the island -

(NOT RELEVANT OR USEFUL HERE, JUST GABBING)

[00:20:13.19]

BW: I have a film that was made in 1970 and my cousin Chris Knight is a filmmaker - they was gonna put an oil refinery in Searsport, Maine and it's called "A Question of Values" is the name

of the film. And I have that if you'd like to see it. It has Nat Barrows on there when he first came to the island, took over the Island Advantages. It has my father on there and it has me as a young fishermen and telling about the different things why they didn't want an oil refinery in Searsport, Maine. It's an interesting film.

GK: Wow that sounds great. And you've got it on... video?

BW: I'm not sure if I have that in a CD or not - but I have it in VHS. You can get a copy.

[00:21:10.04]

BW; My cousin lives in Cambridge but he lives on the island in the summer.

DB: Who's that Bob?

BW: Chris Knight. His wife is a writer. Kathy Lasky Knight. You might.. made a movie out of one of her stories so I know you can get it but that would be interesting for you to have because of what went on around the 70s.

GK: And even thinking about like back then just what Stonington looked like.

BW: Even when I was growing up - where the Inn on the Harbor is there was a restaurant there called the Harbor Delights.

[00:22:05.17]

Then course when I was a kid where the Granite Museum is that was a Hardware Store and Grocery Store. Frank Webb's and plus the drug store was there across the road and grocery stores, I think there was 7 grocery stores in downtown Stonington.

GK: Were there more people?

BW: Yes there was because the quarry was running. When i first got out of school there was still 100 people working on the Quarry in '55.

GK: And they would be there year round?

BW: Oh yeah that was a year-round business. My grandfather Malcolm Williams, he worked on the Quarry all his life, came to the island when he was 13 years old.

GK: What happened? Why did it go away?

BW: Well they built the - I don't know if you remember, you know where the Settlement Quarry is in Oceanville? They built that enormous building there but they went bankrupt before they even got it started.

[00:23:01.09]

That's what happened to the - but now of course they're still quarrying stone on Crotch Island. It goes to Rhode Island now.

GK: Do you know anyone who does that who lives there year round?

BW: No they have a small crew there in the summer that work on the quarry and getting the big blocks out.

GK: I didn't even know that they were still -

BW: Yeah if you drive down to Oceanville Road to where the wharf is - to Bill Baker, you know where Bill Baker has his right there that's where they're storing all the granite blocks, be interesting to take a picture, there is hundreds down there. Of those big blocks because that's where they landed.

[00:23:53.01]

GK: Out near the other Greenhead Lobster.

BW: Right I sell to Greenhead but I go into town. He's buying there in Oceanville and also Sunshine.

GK: Right, wow. I think it would be cool to get some - I think it's kinda interesting how it's easier to live year round a long time ago.

BW: It's true, people didn't travel off the island so much. Not like now, I mean, everyday somebody's going to Ellsworth or Bangor or... anything you want to add about since you've been living? Well Diane and I built a new house in Burnt Cove in 84 and she ran a B & B for ten years there.

GK: Oh! At your house?

BW: Diane ran it, Burnt Cove Bed & Breakfast it was called.

DB: And my family got bigger and more grandchildren to entertain in the summer which I enjoy doing and so switched it off.

G: What was that like? It was seasonal, I'd imagine?

[00:25:11.21]

The bed and breakfast were you open in the summer?

BW; Yup, May to October.

DB; yeah.

BW: We had three rooms we let and we lived in a camper out back in the summer. Just about like this, had a small camper.

GK: Oh that's great.

BW: But we met a lot of people, interesting people from all over the world.

GK: Has it always mind of been like that on Deer isle or has it changed having so many people come in the summer?

BW: Well years ago, if you look back in the historical society it's over 100 years they've been coming to Deer Isle. Because then they had the big inns and Douglas Point areas always been old families like the Southwest's they've been there over 100 years so there always - and my grandmother actually ran an inn in the 20s in Burnt Cove.

[00:26:07.03]

She was a school teacher when my mother was a teenager and her sister Irene Smith they came back in the summers and the original house where she grew up in they ran a boarding house and gave meals and I think in the 20s they got 18 dollars a week for boarding so you can see how things have changed over the years but there was people that came like families would come for a month in those days and stay.

GK: So it was still part of the culture of the island.

BW: Oh yeah big tourist business now and of course the biggest change is all the downtown area they've changed the usage of the buildings from now there's a lot of galleries and shops and there wasn't any. Since haystack came there in the 50s - the school - that caused a lot of artists to come and

[00:27:09.21]

I think more retired people in Deer Isle now than there used to be.

DB: I think there were always a few more artists around the Stonington area too.

BW: Yeah it's a great place for artists to come and paint.

GK: The landscape and that drama.

BW: One of the biggest changes I grew up my father had an ice business before refrigerators, he started in the 30s and I think up to '57 so all this - he knew all the summer people because he was delivering ice to them. And we'd cut ice in the winter and put it in the ice house so that's a big change there because nobody cuts ice now.

[00:27:58.08]

GK: What was the ice house, are those ice houses like underground?

BW; Nope, years ago they were sawmills like Barter Lumber and you'd go get slabs and we had an ice house in Burnt Cove, and one at Torrey Pond in Deer Isle and you would go and sometimes they'd use trees even and you'd put cable around when you'd put the slabs up and down and then you would, you'd put sawdust on the bottom from the sawmill and then you would in the winter put the ice in, you'd leave about 2 feet around the edges, then you'd fill that full of sawdust, and then you'd cover the top with sawdust and that ice would keep itself because the frost and even in the summer that would - it'd melt a little along the outside edges and the top but the inside would be just as - as when you put it in there. So you'd uncover it when you wanted to get ice, take out so much, then you'd cover it back over again.

[00:28:56.12]

But someone was inside, they had built buildings where they put the ice in, So that was an interesting change there.

GK: I always hear people talk about that as something that was a big shift where if you lived through that - do you - is it something that you miss? Or is it just...

BW: No, too much

GK: Too much trouble!

BW: A lot of labor!

DB: Cutting it and....

BW: Yeah and of course the big like the canneries put up ice for the fish and shipping lobsters, there was...

GK: Oh yeah where was the Cannery?

BW: Where the Isle Au Haut ferry is now. That's where the Sardine Factory was but where the Penobscot East building is that was Ralph Barter. He bought lobsters and fish there

[00:29:57.24]

and then of course he had an ice house up on Burnt Land Pond. That's where they kept the ice but yeah my uncle Bob Smith he worked for Barter, TO Barter for years and they during the war they canned fish actually at the factory.

GK: And that was unusual?

BW: Yeah because the war effort they need food so they canned a lot of fish.

GK: At the factory? What were they doing before? I assumed they were canning.

BW: That's always been a sardine factory and I don't know when it was built but it would be in the historical society records.

GK: I want to talk to the factory girls.

BW: They did a film on that. We've seen it dear. They had a series of short films about the women that packed the fish, then they had it on the basketball teams, different highlights of what went on on the island. So yeah they have, one of the women is still working Janet Neville's, that packed fish

[00:31:12.14]

she was one of the fastest packers around. She's still living. She's Andrew's sister. Andrew Gove's sister.

GK: Did Rose work there?

BW: I don't think - not that I know of.

GK; I was thinking of parking this at the Nursing Home and spending a couple of days.

BW: They would love it.

GK: Some of 'em it's nice to just talk for a little while.

DB: Without too much of an agenda.

BW: They had a - I'm trying to think of what grade it was, dear.

DB: What one?

BW: Two years ago they invited people that grew up on the island, older people... and they had teachers they had Willard Stinson, they had me, they had about 8 or 10 people it was a 5th grade class I think about what life was on the island so we told about how much money you got I worked on the Quarry

[00:32:15.20]

and got a dollar and 68 cents an hour and of course kids now you can't get \$20 so the wages were very low in those days. And I've heard the stories my grandmother tell about her father Joe Fifield worked on the Quarry and he got 10 cents a day, 10 cents an hour for 10 hour days, right a dollar. 10 cents an hour but that was in the middle 1800s when the quarries first started. So I don't know what else.

GK: I'm curious when I come, too, if there's any changes that are happening, anything that you feel needs to happen on Deer Isle for the future for it to succeed?

BW: One thing, they're talking about the school, Galen, I don't know if you get the Island Advantages or not, of what they're gonna do because the population is going down, more kids are homeschooled.

[00:33:19.17]

There is a lot of kids coming up in the grade schools so that's encouraging but of course Stonington had a high school and then they built the high school in Deer Isle and that's going good but the cost of operation, we have one of the higher costs per student, so. But you can't believe in shifting the school, people just have to bear the brunt of the cost, you know cause once the school leaves then you lose the involvement with the kids and stuff if they're away. And so...

GK: Your sports teams.

BW: Yeah that's right which the girls had an undefeated season this year. Whole basketball, it was amazing!

[00:34:04.18]

GK: I think that's a big thing I'm curious to talk to people about - just what does it mean to have a school in community - why do we have a school, it seems like a simple question but apparently it's not.

BW: No it's not simple because it's money. That's the thing some people say, I don't want to support that much money in the school but you you're still gonna pay a fairly high amount of money to educate kids. But one of the good things they started a fishery program in the school for the kids that aren't going on to college. John's quite involved with that.

[00:34:44.19]

GK: Oh great, yeah I'd like to talk to some of the students.

BW: IF you come to the island probably you could come up to the high school with the fishery program.

GK: Yeah! Well thanks, I don't want to keep you.

End.