

Interviewee Name(s): David, Cynthia, and Emily Thomas

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Matt Frassica (The Briney Podcast), Teagan White (College of the Atlantic Intern)

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

Date of Interview: March 2, 2018

Interview Description:

David, Cynthia, and Emily Thomas

Islesford, ME

Lobsterman, Librarian, and Family

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Teagan White

David, Cynthia, and Emily Thomas are from Islesford, Cranberry Islands, ME. David is a retired school teacher and lobsterman, Cynthia works at the island library, and their daughter Emily attended college and now works in Nova Scotia, CA, though she grew up on the Cranberry Islands. They speak about the diversification of Islesford, temperature impacting the location of lobsters, and changes in island life, such as setting up reliable internet service but losing the island store.

Collection Description:

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Transcription by: Teagan White, College of the Atlantic intern

Start of CYNTHIA_DAVE_THOMAS_VMFF2018_AUDIO

CT: Cynthia Thomas (Interviewee)

DT: Dave Thomas (Interviewee)

ET: Emily Thomas (Interviewee)

MF: Matt Frassica (Interviewer)

TW: Teagan White (Student intern)

[Start with chatter....]

[0:00:31.9]

MF: Um, so can I get you to say who you are and spell your names?

CT: Okay, Cynthia Thomas, C-Y-N-T-H-I-A, T-H-O-M-A-S.

ET: Emily Thomas, E-M-I-L-Y, T-H-O-M-A-S.

DT: David Thomas, D-A-V-I-D, T-H-O-M-A-S.

MF: Great, thank you. And where are you from?

CT: Isleford, Maine.

MF: All the same?

ET: Isleford, Maine, and now

[0:01:00.3]

ET: Bedford, Nova Scotia.

DT: Isleford, Maine.

CT: Do you want where I was born and raised? Cause that's different.

MF: Not necessarily, but go ahead.

CT: I was born and raised in Willow Grove, which is on the outside of Philadelphia.

MF: Ah! And what brought you to Maine?

CT: A place to get out of Philadelphia in the summer! [laughs] And then I met my husband, and that's all she wrote.

MF: Nice. And so you're from?...

DT: I'm from central Maine, but I ended up on Isleford to teach school. I went to college and taught kindergarten to 8th grade for two years and went fishing.

MF: And so is that what you do now?

DT: Done it for 43 years so it's been a good run.

MF: And what do you fish primarily?

DT: Primarily lobsters now. It was back - [laughs] as people say, back in the day I went gillnetting and I crewed scalloping and shrimping and ground fishing and

[0:02:00.3]

DT: set halibut trawls, just messed around with everything, but lobstering was always the best and the most lucrative I guess.

MF: And what have you seen change in the fishery since then? I mean that list of things that you used to catch, is one of those things that's changed.

DT: Uh, I, you know, everything has changed. Where I used to catch lobsters I don't catch them anymore, where I never could catch a lobster I can catch them there. We have seen our licenses, how you get licensed, the first license I got I sent in a check for 8 dollars and my check this year, my license was 1100\$. But at least I have a license because there's a lot of people that would like one that can't get one. So it's uh, entry, limited entry is uh, it's environmentally, ecologically maybe for the stock it's good, but for people it's not so good.

[0:03:00.0]

MF: Um, I'm sorry, I think it might be this, is creating um, interference.

TW: Sure.

MF: On the line. Um, maybe...

CT: I have a phone, do you want me to turn it off?

MF: It shouldn't...

TW: I just set up a hot spot, so maybe that's what it is.

MF: That could - yeah it just went away.

TW: Okay, great.

MF: Is that alright?

TW: Yeah.

MF: Okay, I apologize.

DT: That's alright.

MF: Um, so what, this is a question for all of you, what are you concerned about, um in your communities? What worries you? No, it's still happening... maybe it's my phone. I'm just gonna put my phone on airplane mode.

DT: My phone's out there so...

MF: That's definitely not the culprit.

CT: Well we live on an island,

MF: Yes.

CT: and I'm worried about everyone moving off and not being able to stay because you can't stay there by yourself.

[0:04:00.5]

MF: Because you can't, you can't stay there by yourself why?

CT: Uh, well, I just think it would be very difficult. You, there would be no ferry if there was no one there,

MF: Oh you,

CT: I'm not going to swim back and forth!

MF: You personally couldn't stay there by yourself.

CT: I personally couldn't stay there by myself.

MF: Why are people leaving?

CT: I think there's not enough jobs, there's certainly no jobs for women. Um, there's no store any longer, and it's just much more difficult to live there without a store. You don't think about it but, you can't run out to the store if you're out of something, you know, you just can't.

MF: Cause you have to plan to go on the ferry and all that?

CT: Right. So, we all stock up.

MF: Go ahead.

DT: Yeah, we could feed the five of us for a long time.

[0:05:00.3]

DT: Uh, it's just the way that it is. [laughs] The weather has it's uh, creates troubles you know. And how often the ferry service runs and um, I guess I worry about, you know, the cost of land, how expensive it is to buy a house. You have to be well off to afford a house to be able to, especially to buy a house all built. I mean it's, you have uh, a fishermen's income or a carpenter-caretaker's income trying to buy a house that a Philadelphia lawyer or Chicago brain surgeon wants and uh, you know the two are incompatible, so...

CT: Yeah.

MF: And what do you value about the community that you have now or that you had when you, when you first started living here?

CT: I like the friendliness of everyone, and that is still there, that hasn't changed.

[0:06:00.1]

CT: But it doesn't seem like as a community we do things together as much as we used to and I don't know if that's the advent of internet? Although we didn't have internet for 3 months, which made life difficult as well. [laughs]

MF: What happened that your internet went out for 3 months?

CT: We had one service stopping and the other service that was starting up wasn't quite ready.

MF: Interesting. So what happened in those three months? How did things change? Did you see people more?

CT: Well I'm a librarian and so more people started coming to the library more, and used the internet there, because the library still had internet, but if you're trying to conduct business and you have to go to the library once or twice, or three or four times a day to check your email, it's not convenient and people want convenience, so. it's up and running now.

MF: [chuckles] And uh, what did you see growing up on an island,

[[0:07:00.4]

MF: what, how do you see the changes there?

ET: I think that islands are still a place where you can let your kids out the door at the beginning of the day and just say "go, get out" and run around the island and you know that if they fall and scrape their knee you know that someone will pick them up and wash them off. There's more diversification in terms of what jobs are available, but not as much as there could be and I think it's important to have a strong and diversified fishery for the island community, but also other jobs as well.

MF: Can you, can you give examples of ways that diversification shows itself?

ET: So, there are now people who are able to live on Isleford and work via telecommunication as a professor in Baltimore, and they moved there because that capability exists. Uh, so he spent a lot of time I know, going back and forth between the library,

[0:08:00.3]

ET: even before the internet went out for several months, uh because the internet signal was stronger there. So that is something that when I was a kid, did not exist. When I was a kid you were either a caretaker or you were a fisherman. There was no in between and now there's someone who is a potter year round, which I think is absolutely fantastic, there's more diversification.

DT: And the potter has a website and an Etsy account and a Facebook account and she's constantly upgrading each and reaching out and it's just, you know, instead of having no sales through the winter, any sale is better than no sale.

MF: So it sounds like in some ways things have become, there are opportunities that have opened up that didn't exist 20 years ago or 25 years ago.

DT: That's why we spent 1.2 million dollars for decent internet, so people could be part of the 21st century and give people the opportunity

[0:09:00.4]

DT: to create that type of business. I mean, you know, you can, if you have access to the internet, you can do any number of things. All sorts of people work away from home now. Uh, they work *from* home. You know, they sit there and fiddle with their computer and they consult with whatever they do or they create algorithms or whatever it is they do, they can do it from home and send it in, and maybe they have to go to the office a couple times a week, so.

MF: And what changes do you see on the waterfront itself in terms of access, has all of that gotten more difficult as the population has changed to be more affluent?

DT: We solved that problem in 1978, we bought a dock and started a co-op, so we have access to the water, so we're not too worried about access to the water on the island.

[0:10:00.2]

DT: Access to the *mainland*, it's like, the mainland is the beginning of route 1 to wherever we want to go, and that concerns me a little bit. The town did buy a piece of property in southwest harbor 7 or 8 years ago, so we're gonna have access one way or another, how much it's gonna cost us if we ever have to build a dock there, right now we access the dock, the Town dock in Northeast Harbor year round and southwest harbor in the winter time, I mean in the summertime, so, um. But there's a tremendous number of fishermen that don't have any access to the dock except for where they sell their lobster or at the town dock where there's 40 other guys angling for space, so we feel pretty fortunate.

MF: Do you wanna, do a map? A map exercise? [laughs] A chart exercise.

DT: Sure, I mean we've done some for Teagan and her group last fall.

MF: Oh okay, would that be useful to do now

[0:11:00.3]

MF: or do have uh, I was just gonna ask because David mentioned that there are places that he catches lobster now where he didn't catch them before. Is that a useful thing to do?

TW: Yeah, let's do it. The trick is to draw it through the mic equipment.

MF: Yeah. This is all inactive though, so we can move this.

DT: Oh, you can see where Bruce fishes.

[CT and DT laugh]

TW: We might have a better one, let me see.

DT: I can write on the same one, we don't worry about things like that.

[CT laughs]

DT: Well I would say when I started fishing, we caught a lot of lobsters in close when shedders were moving. Wow! Let there be light! [laughs] Uh, I mean in close,

[0:12:00.4]

DT: and now there's not as many lobsters there are there used to be and there used to be 20 guys fishing this line and now there's only 2 or 3 of us and we fish it because we enjoy it and you do catch a few lobsters. I would say the guys that are fishing out here, where's the Hague Line? This it? Offshore. If you go this way... 40 years ago nobody fished out here because there was nothing to catch and now this is where, oh I'm gonna guess 80% of the lobsters caught in the state of Maine are caught outside of the 3 mile line, up to the Hague Line. I think this is about 53 miles from here, to the island, and about 53 miles from here to Yarmouth Nova Scotia, and the US boats here,

[0:13:00.4]

DT: and there's Canadian boats here and they're all, you know, fishing on the line and they don't, I mean 20 years ago, I mean there were a few big boats that tried it on occasion and sometimes you know, certain times of the year, but there's guys that are out there now, that's where they fish, and they catch a ton of lobsters.

MF: Year round?

DT: Year round. There are times of the year that they catch more than others and I would say that this area, Baker's Island... where, right here, um there were times when we used to catch lobsters here, and now there's more times when we catch lobsters here. It's a longer season. Just a much longer season. Um, you can take anyplace inshore here where there's deep water, and they do, you know, most anyplace, they do

[0:14:00.4]

DT: pretty well for certain times of the year and other times they don't but, this is to me, this is the biggest difference. This push outside here where guys are just buying big boats and they're charging off

there at 10:30 at night and they don't come in until they haul their 800 traps whenever that is.

MF: Why do you think that is?

DT: I don't know.

MF: that the change in distribution...

DT: Oh, well I think it has to do with water temperature. I think that probably, I think if the bottom temperature reaches 65 degrees, I might be off a little bit, the lobsters die. They can't get enough oxygen out of the water. And we started seeing a real difference in 2012 and 13 when there was warm, hot hot summers and we were catching soft-shell lobsters inshore in May and June, we usually don't see them until July or August and I think that drove a lot offshore. I think that's where the big females are with the eggs and I think the eggs kinda stay where they're released

[0:15:00.0]

DT: but fortunately the difference between 2008 when we caught 60 thou- 60 million pounds of lobster and last year when we caught 132 million pounds of lobsters, um, there's a lot more lobsters everywhere so, there's more out there but there's enough in here as well. As long as these don't keep disappearing, so.

MF: Um, so you talked some about the pressures on the island population, why people leave, can I ask you Emily why you don't live there?

ET: I, [laughs] I left home when I was 14 to go to boarding school and I went to high school in Massachusetts, I'm gonna go home. I'm gonna go home to Maine after high school. And then I got done with high school and went, I think I want to go someplace else for university, but I'm gonna go home after I go to university so then I went to university in New Brunswick, so I went to Canada and then I wasn't ready to be done with school yet

[0:16:00.2]

ET: and went okay, I'll go back to Maine when I'm done with graduate school and by the time I was done with graduate school I had met my partner and I didn't want to be where he was not, so I stayed where he was. But there's always a part of me that's going to be living in Maine too.

MF: I imagine you guys would like to see that happen.

CT: [laughs] Yeah I don't think they'll ever come back to the States but maybe they'll come closer than Halifax. [chuckles]

MF: As the crow flies Halifax is pretty close but it's a little bit difficult.

DT: Well actually we can get there with about, 6 and a half hours of driving and a two hour ferry trip, which isn't bad. We just go to St. John's, take the ferry to Digby and drive up.

CT: And it is a nice drive, whereas our other daughter is in Philadelphia which is not a nice drive.

DT: No.

MF: How did she end up in Philadelphia with you, you in particular, probably

[0:17:00.3]

MF: directing them anywhere but Philadelphia?

CT: [laughs] She went to um, Jefferson M.P.H [Master of Public Health] studies school and then she got her M.P.H there and now she's back there and going to med school. And so, and my family, I still have family in Philadelphia so, so that's how she ended up there.

MF: Can you tell me about the library? Have there been changes in what you've seen in the way that people use the library? Obviously the internet didn't exist.

CT: Right. When I first started, yeah, I got into it for the books and so, when the computer's down and the internet's out, before, we were the only internet on the island, way before people were getting it in their homes, and uh, so I find that people don't read as much. They were reading more when the internet was out, so we'll see what they're gonna do once we're all, you know, sucked in to the internet again.

[0:18:00.6]

CT: [laughs] It takes a lot of, uh, a lot of your time up I think.

DT: Ask the librarian what she reads when she's traveling.

CT: Oh, yeah. I read a Kindle. [everyone laughs] I do, I do. I read the Kindle because, you know, because I would take 5 books with me and that takes up a lot of space and if you're flying that's a lot of space. [everyone laughs]

MF: You must have like a book jacket disguise or something so people wont see you. [everyone laughs]

CT: No no, you can tell, it's an ipad, or it's on my phone.

MF: And are people getting, the same, when they do take out books, are they getting the same kind of books or are they reading more of one kind of thing or another?

CT: Um, well it's pretty much the- usually it's fiction but you do have some nonfiction readers and right now because we don't have, the school on our island is closed and they're boating

[0:19:00.0]

CT: the kids to the other island. So our island is made up of five islands, and Great Cranberry has the school right now and next year the school will come back to Isleford so hopefully I'll have more people checking out books because you're not going to check out books from our island library when you're in school so part of the school program is they bring the kids to the library.

MF: Okay, so you have more influx of younger patrons.

CT: Right. Right.

DT: Every Tuesday morning Cindy, now starting in the first of the year through May, she has a coffee hour Tuesday morning, so you know, make a home baked goods and coffee and some days there'll be 3 people there, some days there will be 14 or 15 there, so you know, it's a gathering place. And then Thursday morning the preschool kids come in for story time...

CT: and a craft activity.

DT: And a craft activity.

CT: And in the afternoon the homeschoolers come in in the afternoon and I read them a story so...

[0:20:00.6]

MF: It sounds like a good routine.

CT: Yeah it is, it works our well.

MF: Well, okay, um, now I'd like to shift with no segway again, back to the fishing industry. What concerns you, what worries do you have about what's happening with the fishing industry now?

DT: I have concerns about the increase in water temperature and what that's going to mean. I have concerns about the young people, younger people, the young guys that are buying half million, 700, 800 thousand dollar boats and they're fishing out here and the lobsters aren't always gonna be out here and the boats they have probably won't work in there, inshore. They'll, they're just too big. I worry about bait supply. Bait, you know if we don't have any bait, we can't catch anything. A lot of people have tried a lot of different artificial

[0:21:00.4]

DT: baits and thus far, it's all they are is artificial bait, [laughs] they're pretty much make believe bait. Um, I worry about the ability of younger people to buy, find a place to live on the island. I started, I moved there in 1973 and between 1973 and '75 I think I moved 11 times because anybody that has a summer house wants a house in the summer time, they don't want to rent it to a school teacher, so I just lived where you could live and do what you can do so it's always been a problem and it's increasingly more so for the reasons I told you earlier, um and I don't, you know. There are things we can do about that, and things we are trying to do about that, but how well it works, you know. And just like everybody else in the country I worry about the economy and that's, uh, good reason to be worried.

MF: What did you teach and do you still teach?

DT: No, I taught from '73 to

[0:22:00.4]

DT: '75 and I um, got out of school of each,

CT: At the island school.

DT: At the island school, kindergarten to eighth grade, eight kids the first year and ten the second, and then uh, I think I got out of school on June 5th and set my traps on June 6th, and that was 40 years..... 43 years ago. So, you know, it's been a good ride. Been fun.

MF: You didn't, you weren't tempted to go back to the classroom after you started?

DT: No I, you know, fishing is hard on the body and when I started in 1975 you didn't go fishing with the thought of getting rich. You went fishing with the thought of, you know, surviving and enjoying what you do and if you didn't enjoy what you did or if you couldn't survive you probably should be doing something else and I think we survived pretty well. You know we're pretty comfortable, we're not vacationing on the French Riviera but I don't want to go to the French Riviera.

[0:23:00.3]

DT: We went to Cape May last, when we were in Philadelphia we went to Cape May with our daughter and her other daughter and her boyfriend and its got nothing but a little sand pile, I see nothing exciting about it at all! [laughs] I just don't wanna be there! [everyone's laughing]

CT: It's nice to visit.

DT: Yeah it's a nice place to visit but if it had been 80 degrees it would have been unbearable!

CT: Can I ask him a question about fishing?

MF: Please, yes.

CT: So when you first started fishing you were around...

DT: This was the back of Cranberry.

CT: Right. Do you know, 40 years before you where the men were fishing?

DT: They were fishing the same places.

CT: And so the fishing was...

DT: The fishing was good then. Before the years that they were catching 20 million, 18, 15, 16, 20 million pounds of lobsters, we were up over a hund- I don't know what last year's catch was, I thought they'd announce it today but they didn't. But uh, there's just lobsters where

[0:24:00.4]

DT: there wasn't and where they were they're not. It just uh, you know, when you go lobstering or any kind of fish, I'd think [inaudible] fishing, anything, I think um, if you try to do it the same way all the time, the only thing you can't change is the effort. After that it's all fair game. Uh, you know, you can change your bait, you can change the style of your traps, you can change, you know, where you set them, it's all part of putting the puzzle together every spring, but uh, if there's no lobsters, if the waters too warm, if the bait becomes scarce and instead of costing, uh 135 dollars a barrel it costs 270 dollars a barrel, if uh, fuel goes up from 226 a gallon to 456 a gallon, if traps go up from um, 75 dollars to 150, and the lobster population goes down,

[0:25:01.6]

DT: uh, that's not a very good business model.

MF: Yeah. Do you have any stories that you'd want your grandchildren to hear? Things that you would want to pass down to another generation?

DT: Do you have one?

CT: I'd have to think.

DT: When I met my wife, the first time I saw my wife, [laughs] um, I, the first summer she came to the, oh I guess it was the second summer. When I first saw my wife, she was between her junior and senior year in high school. Is that correct? And I was teaching school. The next year she was out of high school and I was no longer teaching. And it was game on. [everyone laughs] This is your grandpa speaking. [everyone laughs]

ET: Please note that she was not in the school that he was teaching in.

[0:26:01.3]

DT: No no no.

ET: She was in Pennsylvania not Maine! [everyone laughs]

DT: She was a summer girl! [laughs] Please note... and the rest of that story is when our older daughter turned 17 she came up to me, now can I date somebody 24 years old? [everyone laughs]

MF: And your answer to that was?

DT: No! [everyone laughs]

MF: That's great. Um, well thank you, thank you very much. Unless did you have one?

CT: I can't think of a story, although you talked about the docks that we have on the island, right now there's three where you enter the island and then one guy, one summer guy built a dock off um, it's called the Head, and he has a summer dock off there now. A while ago somebody built, from sand beach, they built another dock, now there's two more - three more docks perhaps

[0:27:00.3]

CT: going in. That worries me. I don't know what it does to the environment to have the dock, all the docks there but it kinda, can wreck your beach I think.

DT: It's their beach that they very graciously let everybody use.

CT: That's true.

DT: it's a postscript, we have to acknowledge that.

CT: Yeah, but it worries me to see that, and the amount of plastic and stuff in the ocean worries me a lot.

MF: And that seems to be new?

CT: It seems to be more. It seems to be more and um, when the kids were little we always went along the beach and we'd pick up urchins, well,

DT: The shells.

CT: They weren't alive, the shells, I never see urchins on the beach anymore.

DT: The urchin population crashed.

ET: That was in the heyday of the sea urchin fishery in Maine, so when I was a kid we would leave the island on the last boat on Fridays after school,

[0:28:00.6]

ET: so the boat would leave the island at 4 o'clock and get to the mainland at 4:40 or 4:45 and there would be boats coming in from going sea urchin dragging and they would be picking up shrimp tray after shrimp tray after shrimp tray loaded with urchins. And there's no, there's still a sea urchin fishery, but not to the same scale that there was. My guess it that's where all the urchins went and that's why we used to find so many, because they were getting more stirred up.

DT: That was the crash and burn of the sea urchin fishery. There was no regulations. No worry about roe content, no worry about anything except to God Almighty dollar.

CT: Well, and so I've been really proud of the lobster industry, because they do, they've done a lot to protect fisheries. And they've done a good job.

MF: Successful so far.

CT: Yep.

MF: Thank you so much, all of you. Um.

[0:28:54.8]

End.