

Interviewee Name: Steven Burns

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Giulia Cardoso (College of the Atlantic) and Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant)

Interview Location: Rockland, Maine

Date of Interview: 02-28-2019

Interview Description:

Steven Burns, a lifelong lobster fisherman from Bar Harbor, ME, shares his memories of eventful days on the water, the lessons he learned from his mentor as a young fisherman, and reflections on the changes in technology that he has observed in his over 40 years of fishing experience.

Collection Description:

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019 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:

Burns, Steven, Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019 Oral History Interview, February 28, 2019, by Giulia Cardoso and Natalie Springuel, 7 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcribed By: Giulia Cardoso

Start of STEVEN_BURNS_VMFF2019_AUDIO

[0:23:45.6]

GC: Giulia Cardoso

NS: Natalie Springuel

SB: Steven Burns

[0:00:00.0]

GC: Okay Steve, so, can you start by telling us your name please and spell it out and tell us what you do and where you're from.

SB: Steven Burns. I'm a lobster fisherman from Bar Harbor, Maine.

GC: Ok. What are you doing here today?

SB: Came down visit and get interviewed by you! Giulia Cardoso.

GC: Cardoso. Come on Steve, you can do this (laughs). Alright, uhm, so you said you're a lobster fisherman, do you wanna tell us about your experience [inaudible].

SB: I've been a lobster fisherman since I was 12 years old.

NS: I'm gonna do this for now, just to minimize the sound.

SB: Okay.

NS: And then.

GC: Yeah.

NS: Sorry.

GC: The recorder picks up a lot of noise, so try not to move the chart around too much.

NS: You might wanna hold it a little bit closer . . . Thank you. Yeah, you'll get used to it Steve (laughs).

GC: Alright, sorry I interrupted your story about you becoming a lobster fisherman, do you wanna.

[0:00:56.2]

SB: I started as . . . lobstering when I was 12 years old. That was 1965. And been doing it my entire life.

GC: Did someone special taught you how to fish? Was it in your family or . . .

SB: It was my family, my dad went for a little, but . . . He was a master electrician and he was a construction, a heavy construction electrician and uh, he went uhm, back into the construction industry and I didn't. I wanted to fish, so I fished.

GC: Why did you want to fish? What did you like about fishing?

SB: I liked being independent and on the ocean. And not working for the man.

GC: What about the ocean is special to you? Why do you like working on the ocean?

[0:01:52.5]

SB: Well, that's hard to say. Once you get on the ocean and you . . . Nice days and stuff, you just fall in love with it, you know? And you don't wanna leave it. And that's the way I felt years ago and still do to this day. I enjoy the time that I'm at sea.

GC: Do you have a—

SB: And whenever I go on vacation, I go on the ocean. So . . .

GC: Do you have a special memory connected to maybe a place, that you've been fishing in for a long time or on the ocean in general that you wanna tell us about?

SB: A special place. No . . .

GC: Or like a memory from your days fishing?

SB: Uhm, I've done it all. Shrimping, scalloping, groundfish dragging ... Uh, lobstering. I didn't like clamming (laughs). Uh . . .

[0:02:59.7]

Special memories. They're all special memories when you're at sea with the people you work well with and, and uh, there been some times when things got a little heated, but you get rid of them and you take on somebody you can get along with and work well with, and as long as you both can work well together, then you see, uh, you both make money and you get the job done, you get the job done quick. Uhm, I've had good crew, very good crew and I've had one in particular that was with me for 12 years.

[0:04:00.7]

And she got pregnant and had two beautiful little children and, uh, I'd love to see her come back aboard again. And she has agreed to do that this summer, so, uhm, other than that, I think that we're gonna bring her kids aboard and we're gonna get 'em started young. They'll be two and three- oh well, they'll be three, uh, two this year in April. So, I can't think of a better time to start a young person out.

GC: Do you think you're gonna teach them?

SB: Oh, I'll teach 'em.

GC: Do you like teaching younger people?

SB: Course I do. Yeah. You know, we're all getting older.

[0:05:02.1]

And there aren't too many, uh, young kids able to get into this business, so if you get 'em started early then they can take from that and enjoy, enjoy what we have created for them. Cause back when I started, there wasn't, it was nothing like what it is today. And you know, like the State of Maine only caught, like, 53 million pounds when I got out of high school and, uh, that was for the entire State, and now we're up to 131 million, so we did something right. And—

GC: What do you think you did right?

[0:05:55.4]

SB: Conservation and, and increase in the gauge measure so that the juvenile lobsters were able to, uh, reproduce and the v-notch laws and, uh, throwing the little ones back and making sure your egg count was always above what the government wanted and, uh, that type of stuff like that. Uh, traps have all changed, of course, over the years. Everybody always spent all winter long pounding nails, building wooden lobster traps, and even into the '80s, when I got married, uh, I would spend, my wife and I would spend our evenings knitting heads for, uh, the next day, so that I'd have enough heads to put in traps and we did that all winter long.

[0:07:04.2]

And . . . got some sore fingers out of it too. Uhm, but, uh, you gotta be dedicated to it, you gotta love it, it's a job that's not necessarily fun, certain times of the year, as you well know, and, but there are days that it's very rewarding and very pleasurable to be at sea. And, calm, and those days in the summertime when it's 75–80 degrees out there and, it's just as flat as a mirror, you know? Uh, those are the days that you really enjoy and, and you just wanna, you know, you look back at where I fish, out of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert Island.

[0:07:58.5]

And you say, thousands of people a year come here to see what we, what we've got. And . . . every year. And, we're, we're getting it for nothing. You know? It's just uh . . . very memorable and it's all great, you know, those days I love. Those are the days that I really love. And, uh . . . But we've been on many rescues and I remember, uh, a year or so ago, I had my sternman, who I no longer have, uh, there was a family of people stuck on Bar Island. And, the harbormaster and the police were not allowed to go rescue them.

[0:09:00.8]

And, so, I grabbed my skiff and my power boat and went, got this family of seven or eight off the island and the little infant, and tide was coming. There was no way they were gonna be, you know, and it was starting to rain. Went and got 'em, they were awful, awful thankful. And I would never ever let a little kid be on that island with, you know, even though the

parents had the kid, you know, but, it's still, I thought it was kind of uh, a bad thing that the Park did and, not allowing uhm, not allowing the harbor—the rescue boat that the town bought for over 250,000 dollars to be used to go rescue these people. It was kinda ridiculous. And, uh . . .

[0:10:11.1]

GC: Cause that happens quite often, right? That fishermen . . .

SB: It happens very often, yeah. And, uh (coughing in background). I've seen some interesting stories that, there's been some very interesting episodes where that, we can't talk about that here (laughs).

GC: Okay (coughing in background).

SB: Uhm . . .

GC: You were talking about how there's not many young people going into the industry now.

SB: Well, there are a lot of young people who are in the industry, but they wouldn't be there if we hadn't made it possible for them to uh, to be in it.

[0:10:59.2]

And it, it has a lot to do with the fact that we, we created an industry that is renewable and sustainable. And, but, it, it's getting crowded. And, you know, we put these regulations into effect for a reason. And, one of the reasons that we've done this is, we, uh, we don't, we're being crowded. And, yes, there are unwritten laws that, and rules, that you respect other people's territory and uhm, lot of these young kids have no respect. And they just come in, and they will saturate an area. And, it creates some friction. Uhm . . .

[0:12:01.6]

GC: Do you think that's gonna change how the lobster fishing community is in the future?

SB: I don't know. Honestly, I know that uhm, when I started you went and asked the elders. And the man that taught me, Fred Cunningham, was, he was a very good fisherman and he, I swear he could catch a lobster in Eagle Lake if there was one there. But, uhm, he taught me and, uh, in the past interview I've told you the story and I was never, ever bothered by uhm, the elders again.

[0:13:03.6]

GC: Do you wanna tell the story again? It's a good story.

SB: It was uh, a gentleman named Ken Johnson. And, I was just a young kid in a rowboat, rowing to go and haul my traps after school. And I went to grab the buoy and this individual was steaming up behind the islands and I saw him and I grabbed the buoy and the buoy had been cut off clean with a knife. So, it was pretty obvious it just happened, and he was the only one around, so I went, told Fred, and Fred said, "Get in the truck." I got in the truck, I says,

"Where we going?" "We're going to Ken's." And I was scared to death. I was really not wanting to go and confront Ken.

[0:14:08.1]

But, we did. And Fred introduced me to him and I told him what had happened and he says, "Oh dear, that would never, I'd never do that." And I asked him if I could have permission to fish uhm, the Bay. And he looked at me and he says, "You will never be bothered again." And I never was. And, over the years, I progressed and I worked hard and built traps in the winter and I actually went and spent a lot of time with Ken until the day he died. And, uh, we became good friends after that. And, uh.

[0:15:01.1]

But I never ever had any trouble with any other of the uh, older fishermen after that. And then there's that, there is that unwritten rule that you just don't cross the border. Uh, the barrier, and, or the line, and, and you have respect. And when you lose that, then you take it on the chin, basically. And, so . . . I've fished, what? Forty-five, almost 50 years and so I've kinda earned that respect thing. So that's pretty much it, you know, I've done a lot, I mean I've rescued people on sailboats and.

[0:16:01.6]

And, there's been people that shouldn't be at sea that were at sea, that uhm, didn't know where they were (laughs). And especially in the fog. I do remember one case down off Otter Creek Bell. Uhm, guy coming out of the fog and he says, "How do I get to Southwest Harbor?" and I s—got laughing and I says, "You head right due west," and I says, "You're gonna run into something over there. Hopefully it's Southwest Harbor!" But, uh, I don't know that he ever made it or not, but all he had to do was just go west and he was gonna hit something. But, uh, and that's the way I learned to navigate, I had to take marks when I left an area and I knew which direction I had to go.

[0:17:07.1]

And if I wanted to get to that point, I knew how fast the boat was going and I knew how hard, how many minutes it took to get to where you wanted to go in the fog. This was back before we had radar and [inaudible] chart plotters, we never had any of that stuff when I started. You went by marks, and you went by dead reckoning. You didn't have a clue as to what, who was around you or anything else. I mean, you . . . when I got out of high school, I went shrimping with what we called a flasher. And an Apelco flasher. And, it would just show you the bottom, it didn't tell you what really was there, uh, but, I caught quite a few rocks (laughs).

[0:17:57.7]

GC: Do you it made your relationship with the ocean stronger? The fact that you didn't have much technology, and you had to learn how to use natural navigation?

SB: Yeah, I mean that's what you did, uh, if you were gonna go that's what you did. I mean, you had to watch the tide, you had to know what the current was doing, and you had to know, uhm, you know, especially in our area, because you, the tide runs two different directions.

And, and you know, you could have a, going tide out in the channels and stuff, but you'd have a incoming tide on, in on like, 15 fathoms of water in some of the coves. As for instance, Young's Cove and, and uh, Anemone Cave and those areas. Tide outside on 35s would be ebbing and then you'd have uh, a flood on, coming in. You know? So . . .

[0:19:01.1]

And then once you got down past Baker's Island, the tide would run North and South, inside of Baker's Island, but when once you got outside of Baker's Island it would run southeast, or, southwest to northeast and, so, you know, you had to plan on that. And, and . . . but that was through experience, again, and stuff like that, and there's been some times at sea when it's been pretty doggone hairy. Uh . . . (coughing in background) one day, Jenna and I were at sea, we were down a place called Tucker's Rock and the wind was blowing hard Northwest, I don't, I, I don't remember how hard. But we took a wave and—

[0:19:58.6]

I wanna call it a rogue wave, because it was very [inaudible] it came very quick and [inaudible] we almost took the windows out of the windshield. Uhm. Everything forward of the crash bulkhead kit wound up on top at the engine and, all the tools and everything went on the floor and we broke all the window, we broke all the rubber gaskets around the windshield, started leaking there, uhm, uh that's how I think we broke the uh, spray rails that you and I put on this year and (coughing in background) we moved the lobster tank back, which was full, about a foot, and she looks over at me and she says, "Do you think it's time to go home now?" and I says, "Yeah, I guess it is." So . . .

GC: Okay, we don't have much time left (coughing in background).

SB: Okay.

[0:21:00.3]

GC: We have someone else coming in next, but maybe, in like, a couple of minutes can you tell us how you feel about the future of the lobster fishery in Maine? If you're hopeful or if there's anything you're worried about . . .

SB: Well uhm, I'm definitely worried about the bait situation and I think the representatives have let us down on representing the commercial fishermen (coughing in background). That is my biggest concern right now. And, you know, the DMR has rules that, of what bait you can and can't use, which is going to limit the number of traps people can fish and the younger fishermen really don't have any options. And, uh, you know, they're gonna wind up either staying ashore or not fishing and, uh, that I, is unacceptable to me.

[0:22:02.0]

And, uh, I mean, I've used herring, I've used rockfish and redfish and all that stuff and pogies, but I think the government has stuck their faces in where . . . too deep. And, uh, I'm not very happy with what they've, the AMMFC is doing and quite honestly, I think that I wanna see, I wanna see them get sued because we're always getting sued for something. Uh, if it's not whales it's, it's something else and, you know, there hasn't been a whale entanglement or

killed in Maine waters for quite a few years and, and, uh I think that, you know, the fishermen have gone out of their way to try and protect the resource and protect the, uh, wildlife that's out there.

[0:23:06.5]

And, uh, we're probably more of a conservated-minded group, than any other (noise in background), than anybody else. And uh, it's just, you know, that's the way I feel about it. And, and I'm not very happy with the legislation and stuff like that, and, and those people are not, they're more interested in trying to kick Trump out of office than they are trying to keep us in the fishery.

GC: Okay. Thank you Stevie.

SB: Okay.

GC: I'm not gonna [inaudible].

[0:23:45.6]