

Interviewee Name: Edward (Eddie) Hagan

Project/Collection Title: The First Coast Jonesport and Beals

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch, The First Coast

Interview Location: Coastal Wreaths, Mason's Bay, Washington County, ME

Date of Interview: October 2018

Interview Description: Eddie Hagan, an artisanal wreath maker and seasonal worm digger, talks about the ins and outs of the wreath-making industry. Hagan also discusses the problems with climate change affecting his dual industries, the issue of large-scale chemical herbicide use on the coast, and mentions how his land was taken by the government for the construction of a new Beals Island Bridge.

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Transcribed By: Griffin Pollock

GK: Galen Koch

EH: Eddie Hagan

GR: Greta Rybus

[0:52:55.5]

Galen Koch: [0:00:00] – questions may be asked.

Greta Rybus: I'm always so curious. What did you think about [inaudible]?

Eddie Hagan: I loved it. Went up to – we had the winter festivals. We were up at McCall.

GR: Yes. Were you there for the ice?

EH: Yes.

GR: Isn't that cool?

EH: It's beautiful up there, yes.

GR: Awesome.

GK: Eddie?

EH: Yes.

GK: Can you say your first and last name for me?

EH: Edward Hagan.

GK: And can you tell me what business we are in or where we are?

EH: Well, you are in Jonesport, Maine, and this is Coastal Wreath Company.

GK: And how long have you been operating this business?

EH: In this location, in the last two years, but we've been in business for a little over twenty years.

GK: Wow. Okay. So you were in a different location?

EH: [0:00:58] Yes, still in Jonesport, but across from the US Coast Guard base in Jonesport. We had a building up there. Unfortunately, the state claimed half of my property for the new bridge that they're building. So we had to relocate and come down to where my residence is.

GK: Did they pay you?

EH: [laughter] They cut me a check, but they took it by eminent domain, so it wasn't even – it was a fraction, and that issue has not been resolved yet.

GK: Wow.

EH: Because we're still fighting the state on it. I got very little money for it, very little.

GK: Oh, I'm sorry.

EH: It happens. It happens.

GK: It happens for all sorts of things.

EH: Yes, yes.

GK: Wow. So you were down there, and now you're —?

EH: I'm closer to home. Right behind us. [laughter] So that does make it more convenient.

GK: Wow, this is great. So can you tell me what you're actually doing?

EH: [0:02:01] I am making a wreath. This is one of our most popular ones, the ones that we sell the most of, which is a twenty-four-inch ring, but it's actually a thirty-inch outside diameter wreath, double-faced with balsam fir.

GK: Wow. That's one of the more beautiful wreaths I've ever seen, to tell you the truth.
[laughter]

EH: Thank you. We are very small. We have a very loyal following. I don't have a website. I do advertise on Facebook. We want to keep it small because it's about quality control. We do probably anywhere from five to seven hundred wreaths a season. But as you can see behind you, we do have other items as well that we sell. It's not just the round wreath; we have other items.

GK: Do you have to take orders? Or do you just make them?

EH: [0:02:59] Yes. No, we have orders. We have people that will call us or email us that we've done business with over the years. We have a corporation out of Indiana that we do a lot of business with. They contacted us probably — we've been doing business with them [for] probably eighteen years. They buy around three hundred of these larger wreaths.

GK: Wow. Greta, let me know if you need me to move.

GR: Let me know if you need me to [inaudible].

GK: I think it's okay. I'm not really even getting it. What makes a good balsam fir tip for you?

EH: In what respect?

GK: Well, I guess every respect. What are you looking for?

EH: [0:03:42] It should be semi-full brush. It should be fingertips to elbow in size. That is a perfect tip, semi-full. This year, we are starting to notice because we had such a very dry season on the coast of Maine, that the blight, what they call blight, which is a parasite that lives in the needles, has come back in force this year, so we have to be very careful about it if you see the yellowing of needles down towards the base. Basically, they live in it, and they live off the juice from the needle. Then, once it warms up, it matures and then moves on to another. But it'll take the needles right off an entire piece of balsam.

GK: Oh, wow.

EH: [0:04:24] So that's a problem. Aphids [are] another problem. But again, it's the weather, the weird weather patterns we've been having in the last year that have been very dry summers and then very wet and warm falls. This one hasn't been too bad, but last year, it was extremely warm during the month of November and even into December, so that does have an effect on the balsam.

GK: Yeah. They need a very specific temperature and –

EH: It should be –

DK: – humidity.

EH: [0:04:57] Before we even start making the wreaths, we should have at least two nights where it gets below freezing in order to set the pitch in the balsam itself, in the needles. The other thing that we don't do that some companies do is that you'll see that the wreaths are trimmed to give them the circular – if you don't find the little brown tips on the end of the wreaths, that means they've been trimmed. This will cut the lifespan by weeks of a wreath because then you have the sap running out of both ends of a piece of brush. So you have to be very careful with that. It's a craft that a lot of people used to hand down, but now you're seeing a lot of the wreaths that are machine-made, or they're clamp rings, or it's more of a wholesale wreath that you'd find at your big box stores or any of those places that are, in my opinion, kind of gnarly. They don't look good. I wouldn't sell anything I would not buy. That's our motto.

GK: [0:06:05] Yeah, they don't look like this. And also, the care of – you're talking in a way about actually understanding how the – it's like you're a farmer. [laughter] You understand what it means.

EH: It's taking pride in what you do. With any job that you have, whether you like it or you don't, you should still take pride in it. It should still matter as far as quality and what you put into it.

GK: How did you learn to make wreaths?

EH: [0:06:36] Well, first, it was something that my father was doing over twenty-five years ago. He's since passed. He was selling Christmas trees from Canada, and we would just make up a few wreaths for him to take down to New York and Boston and those places. Then after he passed, I decided to turn it into an actual business. I had a gentleman and his wife that lived in – I

don't know if they still do or not; this was over twenty years ago – that lived in Cherryfield, and they used to do – which makes mine look shabby – but they used to do a beautiful floral wreath that almost looked artificial. He went and got his own tips, which is – the backbone of any wreath is the tips. Him and his wife and kids made – and then he would hire a few people, but he was very specific, and he showed me the technique for making a proper wreath. So that was, like I said, a little over twenty years ago, and it just stuck, and now it's just second nature. It's just by feel and look.

GK: [0:07:44] Where do you get your tips? Where are these tips coming from?

EH: Most of these right here are coming from – a lot of them are coming from northern Maine, probably mid-state, anything above Route 9 because a lot of the balsam on the coast, again, [are] diseased. I'm in the middle of two of the largest wreath buyers in the state of Maine. We have Whitney Originals and Worcester Wreath [Company], and they consume a lot of balsam, and it's hard for small makers like myself to compete with them as far as trying to get tips or trying to get people that want to tip for me. So we have to pay a little bit extra for the tips, but because of the scale that we do and the people that we sell to, I can afford to do that in order to come up with a better product for our customers.

GK: And when did those big wreath companies come in? Have they been here for a long time?

EH: [0:08:45] Whitney's just started up, I'm thinking, probably in the last – I think he's been around for a long time, but he didn't really go mainstream until about a decade ago, and he picked up an order from LL Bean, which Morrill Worcester used to provide their wreaths for. There was some controversy over it. I don't know the story about what happened, so I'd rather not comment on it. But Whitney's ended up with that. Plus, they had their own online thing. They hooked up with 1-800-FLOWERS and businesses like that right there, but then again, it's still a mass-produced wreath, which is fine, and it's something I wouldn't be interested in doing because it would be too nerve-wracking; it would be too much.

GK: You have to fill a quota.

EH: [0:09:38] And trying to find the people. They have an influx of migrant workers that they have to bring in, in order to help fill their quota because it's not a job that a lot of people want to do or that [they] can do correctly. They still don't pay that much for a wreath. If it's a handmade wreath, it should be worth more if it's made well. Of course, if you look online on LL Bean or any of these places that you buy a wreath from, they don't give them away, they're expensive, but then again, the shipping – for us, the shipping is probably half the expense of the wreath, trying to get it from point – we ship all over the United States. We don't ship internationally because it's an issue where it's a floral product, so you have to be careful with diseases and things like that. We've even had a recall from California before because they are very strict when it comes [to] having a product sent to their state that isn't certified healthy.

GK: [0:10:39] Right. Did you grow up in Jonesport?

EH: I did. I was here until I was eighteen years old, and then I left for about ten years, lived in Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts – was a chef.

GK: Oh, interesting. Cool. [Recording paused.] All right. Greta, we're starting from scratch, so I'm going to have – while you're doing this, if you just tell me what you're doing, if it doesn't distract you.

EH: No. Basically, you just start with the wire, and then you grab a piece of the brush. You take the brush, you break it down, and the brush should resemble – the gentleman told me – a bouquet of flowers when you lay it on. A lot of people make the mistake of following the ring when they first make a wreath. You don't do that. You follow the outside dimensions of the wreath itself once you get started on it.

GK: So you're building – so you're looking at this outside.

EH: [0:11:40] Yes, and then –

GK: You're building that.

EH: – what I will do is I will follow the outside of the brush as I layer it on.

GK: Got it. That's probably why they look so round.

EH: Yes.

GK: Because that's the thing; they're not so flat. They have a real three-dimensional look. Is this a special kind of wire that you're using?

EH: No, it's just the standard gauge. I think it's forty-gauge wire that we use. We buy most of our products from a vendor in Milbridge, Kelco Industries.

GK: Kelco?

EH: Yes.

GK: They provide a lot of people with – again, we're not big enough to hire directly from dealerships, so we go through a third party to get our supplies.

GR: When you say balsam, is that fir?

EH: Yes, it is a fir.

GR: What is the difference between balsam and fir?

EH: [0:12:35] Well, there's many kinds of fir trees. There's the balsam – now you're putting me on the spot. I'm just trying to think of the different – there are many different types of – we use

balsam here because of its fragrance, but there are different types of fir trees that you probably – again I can't think off the top of my head, but I've owned several different types as far as gotten them for Christmas trees. But we like balsam because of its fragrance.

GK: And there's some that have different – the needles are splayed in different ways, right?

EH: Yes, yes.

GK: And they look different.

EH: Yes, yes. Well, even the balsam can, like I said, you'll end up with – that right there is a semi-full brush, and then you'll end up with this that looks completely different, and that's full brush.

GK: Okay, okay. Do you like that or not?

EH: [0:13:31] We can use it. I prefer this to make a wreath out of, but we use this right here for other things that we do. We do kissing balls. We do pots and things of that nature, so it does hold up longer.

GK: What does a kissing ball look like?

EH: If you hold on, I will run upstairs and get you one.

GR: Wait. What's upstairs?

EH: If you'd like to, I can – this is where – a lot of people will stack their wreaths like you see on the floor. We don't do that. We hang ours. So if you want, I can take you up.

GK: Oh, yeah. That would be cool.

GR: Yes, we want.

GK: We want.

GR: I want to see.

GK: I just love this smell so much.

EH: After you, ladies. It's just up over the stairs. Don't mind the mess.

GK: Thank you. Cool.

GR: Oh my gosh.

GK: Kissing balls.

EH: [0:14:28] Yes, and we trim ours usually. Those are just – we have them done up, but then we will trim them to be circular, and then we decorate them with berries and pinecones, and then we put a tail on them.

GK: Cool.

GR: I love it.

GK: If I'm leaving Wednesday, can I order a small wreath from you?

EH: No, you can have one; I'll give you one. Compliments.

GK: Are you serious?

EH: Yes, you can both have one if you'd like.

GK: That's so [nice].

GR: You need one for the airstream, a little cute one.

GK: Yeah. They're so nice.

GR: Now, I'm in the Christmas spirit.

EH: [laughter] I am when we first start, but by December 15th, I'm over it.

GR: You're like, "Come on, Valentine's Day!"

EH: Yes. I'm ready for New Years; that's my holiday. That's the adult holiday.

GR: I want to take a picture of you up here at some point, whenever you're –

EH: Where would you like me?

GK: You want to do it now?

EH: We're up here.

GR: [0:15:24] Let's see. Where do I want to put you? That's the question. Will you stand just right here for a second?

EH: Sure. Get the chair out of the way.

GR: Almost. Perfect, stay right there. Actually, stay right there.

GK: I like watching Greta pose people because it's such a skill.

GR: Well, I'm always – in a place like this, we don't have a ton of light, so I'm going to have to do a bit of problem-solving.

EH: I was going to say, I do have lights up here that I could turn on.

GR: I like what this little window's doing, but it just means I have to be a little specific. I'm gonna go right back here if that's all right.

EH: That's fine.

GR: Look at these wreath rings.

EH: Yes, those are fun to make.

GR: I bet.

GK: Whoa.

EH: Yeah, seventy-inch.

GR: [0:16:21] Probably really time-consuming. Can you come right out here a little bit more? And then, do you see how there's the two poles that stick out? Can you right – almost in between them?

GK: You'll just stand in between them.

GR: Cool. Perfect.

EH: [inaudible]

GR: Yes, that's perfect. How awesome is that?

GK: I love this. What an ingenious way of hanging them up.

GR: Can you look that way for just a moment? That's great. Stay right there.

EH: I keep my arms crossed because it keeps my gut out of the picture.

GR: And it makes you look like you're the boss of the wreaths.

GK: It gives you a mafia vibe. You're the wreath mafia of Jonesport. [laughter]

GR: "I'm the king of the wreaths."

GK: Kind of the wreaths.

GR: [0:17:21] Sounds like part of the North Pole. “We must go visit the king of the wreaths.”
[inaudible]

GK: [laughter] Do you fill this entire thing? Will this all be filled?

EH: Yes, before the end of the week. I have two other makers that I have doing as well, that I’ve trained over the years, so they make at home, and then they bring the wreaths in.

GR: So they’re making wreaths at home?

EH: Yes.

GR: What’s that like?

EH: They have little entryways or mudrooms that they’ll make in. Some people make them in their kitchens or living rooms. That’s where we got started. My now ex-wife and I would – we used to make out of a mudroom. That’s where it all started.

GK: Wow.

GR: Look towards Galen for just a second. And then towards the window one more time.

GK: [0:18:13] It’s amazing, too – so you’re doing this. Can you describe your seasonal work? So you’ve got this going on, and then –?

EH: This starts, like I said, first of November, depending on the weather, through probably about the 15th of December. Then I get my two months off, and then I start up the wholesale bait business, sea worms that we do.

GK: Is that in here?

EH: No, no. That is down towards the Beals Island bridge. We have another building down there.

GR: Great. One last thing. I’m going to use this chair and make you sit on it.

GK: I’m going to quickly check on Zed because I hear him barking, I think.

EH: What’s that?

GK: I’m going to check on my dog. I hear him barking.

EH: I don’t know if that’s your dog or my dog.

GK: I’ll check on him.

EH: I have a Rottie [Rottweiler] out back.

GR: You do?

EH: Yeah.

GR: What's his name?

EH: [inaudible] ...

GR: [0:21:08] Really? Do they have a lot of personality as well?

EH: Too much.

GR: That's how Murray is.

GK: Talking dogs?

GR: Talking dogs. Hey, Galen, I just want to – is there a way to turn off – there's this golden light here. I think it's just coming from downstairs.

EH: Oh, that's coming actually from the [inaudible] actually coming –

GR: Oh, is it just the sun?

EH: No, no. It is coming from downstairs. You're right.

GR: Can you [inaudible]

GK: I'll turn it off.

EH: You should be able to turn the lights off. I'll [inaudible] do it because you wouldn't know which switch it is.

GR: Is it okay that I'm –?

EH: [inaudible]

GK: Oh, I wonder – where is that coming from?

GR: [inaudible]

EH: Actually, you know what it is? It is the daylight outside. It's not [inaudible]. Yeah, it's the daylight outside.

GK: Yeah, it's daylight.

EH: So ain't much we can do about that.

GR: [inaudible]

EH: I'm good, but I can't stop the sun from shining ... [0:22:13] [Break in recording.]

GR: [0:23:34] All right. We got it. Let's go back downstairs. Check out these wreaths.

GK: Where do you get all of these decorations?

EH: Kelco.

GK: Wow, all of them, huh? Kelco.

EH: Yeah. As you're riding through Milbridge, you'll see a big red building, can't miss it.

GK: That's it. It's specifically for wreath making?

EH: Yes.

GK: Or Christmas stuff.

EH: Yes. Of course, they sell their own wreaths as well. They make wreaths and sell them.

GK: I just want to get a little bit of – once Greta's down here. Greta, I'm going to get a little bit of wreath-making noise.

EH: [0:24:39] Noticed that my secretary has decided to skip coming in this morning because she knew you were coming. She did not want to be interviewed.

GK: I understand. Some people are timid and shy and don't like it. Is she just your secretary?

EH: No, she's my secretary.

GK: Okay. You never know with all these –

EH: [laughter] No, I don't chase her around the desk or none of that stuff. No, we've worked together for – twenty-seven years she's been with me.

GK: Great. That's amazing.

EH: Yes. That's what she says, that she's put up with me for that long.

GK: So you have how many people making wreaths?

EH: I just have a couple. Couple ladies that make – and only because the demand has picked up enough so that – again, it's trying to find the right wreath makers. There's a lot of people that make wreaths, and they're nice wreaths; they're just not the quality I need for my customers.

GK: [0:25:42] Yeah, you're doing sort of the higher end.

EH: I would like to think that we do a higher-end wreath. There are those out there that make a much prettier wreath than I do, and I've seen them. They get very good money for them, as well they should because it takes a while. Each wreath probably takes twenty minutes to thirty minutes to make. So it's a little bit involved, and it can be a little tedious.

GK: Do you listen to Christmas music?

EH: No. No. Sometimes it's unavoidable because, after Thanksgiving, every channel's the same. So then I turn on talk radio.

GK: I know, yeah.

EH: I don't get into Christmas spirit until usually, this is over with, and then I'll go out and do shopping for my kids and stuff like that. Then that kind of puts me a little bit in the mood. But as far as staying here every day, no, it does not put me in the Christmas spirit.

GK: [0:26:43] When does the worming start for you? Do you have some time off?

EH: That starts in March. So January and February, I normally don't do anything but just sit and become a binge-watcher of Netflix or something like that during the Winter months.

GK: And trying to stay warm?

EH: Try to stay warm and do some outside activities, like ice fishing and things like that I enjoy.

GK: You said you were in Connecticut for a while?

EH: Yeah, I've lived in several towns in Connecticut.

GK: And what brought you back to Jonesport?

EH: My father getting sick. Yep. He ended up coming down with cancer, so I moved back to help with the business. Unfortunately, he passed, so I ended up taking over the business. Again, that was twenty-six years ago.

GK: Wow. Was he doing the worms and the wreaths?

EH: [0:27:43] He was doing the – before he passed, he was doing the wreath things probably two years before he passed. It was fairly new to him. We used to do Christmas trees as well, but we

stopped doing that because the temperature around here has gotten so warm in November, and they have to cut the trees basically by the 1st of October in order to bale them because we're buying them out of Canada or out of Vermont and those areas. So before they get any snow in those areas, they have to be cut and baled. By the time we got them here, with the warm weather in November that we've experienced, the needles didn't hold up. There's a few other people that still do it, but for me, it wasn't financially feasible to do it. So that's why we've stopped.

GK: So you've seen a lot – it sounds like there's been some changes in the industry because it's gotten warmer, and the weather's changing a bit.

EH: [0:28:42] The weather's definitely a factor. It's been a factor in, in fact, both of my industries. Both of the businesses that I do, weather has a lot to play in both of them, and we have seen the changes. I've seen it along the coast. Where my shop is down before you go onto the Beals Island bridge, probably fifteen years ago, we started to notice the astronomically high tides, that my cooler would flood because it now sits below sea level. Ocean levels have risen so much that we've noticed it, and that shop's been there for fifty years. It's only in the last fifteen years that we started noticing really big tides that we get flooding, not bad, but up to a foot of salt water will come into my cooler.

GK: Does that have an effect on your product? Or is it something you need to watch?

EH: It's just something we need to watch on big tides and stuff like that. We have to be careful. Everything just had to be elevated off the cooler floors, refrigeration units, that kind of thing.

GK: If we wanted to take a photo of that shop, is it by the co-op?

EH: [0:29:49] Well, I don't own the property. My niece does. I don't know how she'd feel about that. It belonged to my late sister, who passed, and now my niece owns the property, but I still work there. During the season, but at this point, they use it for storage and everything else.

GK: Yeah, even just the outside. It wouldn't be an inside shot or anything like that.

EH: Yeah, I'm sure it would be – when you go in, across from the Coast Guard base, you'll see the gray building co-op. It's directly across from the Coast Guard base. It's the first building in. You'll see a red building behind the gray one with the blue trim. My business is the red building behind it.

GR: When you're talking about the shop, it's a bait shop?

EH: It's a bait shop, yes.

GR: Are you selling directly to fishermen?

EH: No, I sell to wholesalers in other states. In Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maryland, Carolinas, and some to California.

GK: [0:30:55] The sand worms –

EH: Yeah, for sports fishing bait.

GK: – for sport fishing, which are really nasty looking.

EH: They can be, yes.

GK: Well, they have teeth on them, don't they?

EH: Yes, I don't think I have any pictures.

GR: Google it.

EH: The blood worms – they both do. Sandworms have two pinchers that come out; blood worms have – they call them a trumpet worm because their head comes out of their body and has four teeth attached to it, and it bites on to feed and then sucks it back into its body. Let me see if I have any.

GK: I hate them so much. [laughter] You probably love them.

GR: Well, I recently photographed lampreys and learned about them for the first time, and they're migratory like salmon, and they're just basically –

GK: They're like eels.

GR: They're eels, but they're one of the most ancient creatures that's still alive. I have to find the picture of their –

EH: Apparently, I have deleted all those.

GK: [0:31:56] All your sandworm teeth photos?

EH: Well, I downloaded pictures. Maybe. Maybe not. Here we go. That's what the bloodworms look like.

GK: Oh, nice.

GR: All right. That's kind of cool, actually.

GK: Do they have little feet? Yeah.

EH: Yeah.

GR: Little feet?

EH: Sandworms have more pronounced feet, not quite like a centipede, but similar.

GR: Do you have any of these at the shop right now?

EH: No, unfortunately, I don't

GR: It's not the season.

GK: 'Tis not the season.

GR: They're so cool. What is the season?

GK: We have to come back and shoot the worm stuff.

EH: The season on that usually starts up March, and ends around the 1st of November, unless you're dealing overseas. There are some people that do small retail things. California usually starts up around December – November and December for their season. But with everything that's going on out there right now, a lot of people aren't selling a whole lot of bait, unfortunately.

GR: Do you have concerns about how the weather might be changing in the future?

EH: [0:32:56] I think it's a concern for everybody. Anybody that relies on the oceans or the land to make a living should be concerned about it. I think we're seeing the impact of it. I don't know if it's a normal climate change or if it's something that man is doing that's speeding up the process, but we're definitely seeing climate change. Regardless of how it's happening, we're definitely seeing the effects of it. We're seeing storms that are bigger. We're seeing hundred-year storms, and now we're getting them almost on an annual basis in certain areas.

GR: Can I ask a follow-up question, Galen?

GK: Of course. Yeah.

GR: With these things that impact the livelihoods that you have, do you feel like some of the things like making wreaths, living off the land, fishing, [and] harvesting worms – are those also cultural things that are special to people here?

EH: [0:34:05] Yes, especially the worming industry. Maine is the only state left in the United States that does it as an industry, and it employs probably three thousand people along the coast of Maine, so it's not something – it's a job that you can go out; all you need is a worm-hoe, which is like a pitchfork but it's got curved tines on it, and a bucket and a pair of boots, and you can go make a living. It will have an impact. It has had an impact. I've noticed the decrease. We used to do – when my father was alive, we used to do probably half a million pieces a week. Now, if we do a hundred thousand a week, that's a very good week compared to what we used to. And the seasons were also longer. So between regulations, ocean temperatures warming up, and other industries that have come in that have kind of wiped us out or affected our industry, we've

definitely seen the decline over the years. I think unless something dramatically changes, in ten years, it will be more of a novelty than it is an industry, unfortunately. I will be the last of my generation to be doing this as far as the bait business goes.

GK: [0:35:32] Are they being impacted by green crabs too?

EH: Yes. That is a big – the green crabs are affecting the clamming. It's affecting the worming. My personal opinion is mussel dragging has had a huge impact on our estuaries because when you drag the mussels, you take all the top mud off from the flats, and that's where all your algae and your plankton and all that stuff live; that's what the worms feed on. It's like taking topsoil off your garden. Once you get down to the base, there's nothing left. There's no nutrients. I think between that and – we've seen, especially in Washington County with the blueberry industry, the use of velpar, which was pretty much unregulated thirty years ago, which is an herbicide that they use on the blueberry plants years ago – well, even up in Cherryfield now – the school up there, for the last fifteen years, they have to have their water trucked in; they cannot drink the water up there because of velpar in the watershed.

GK:[0:36:40] I've heard that's a problem in Mason's Bay, too.

EH: It is a problem. There's a cancer bloom. Washington County has probably one of the highest rates of cancer in the state of Maine, outside of another area in Florida, which uses a different type of herbicide. For years, it went unchecked. Now you see them when they're spraying it down – they have space suits on.

GK: But they're still using it.

EH: They're still using it because they say it doesn't harm humans. The blueberry industry is a very big industry, and it has the support of the University of Maine and it has a lot of people in the right places making for a good argument.

GK: You don't even hear – I heard about that when I came here because I was just down at Moosebec Variety chatting with people, and somebody was like, "Oh yeah, we can't drink the water in Mason's Bay." I never hear negative stories about the blueberry industry; it's like it's untouchable or something.

EH: [0:37:40] Well, they have a lot of lobbyists, and they've got a lot of people that are, again, working in the right areas. It is a big industry for the state of Maine. It's right up there with the lobstering industry.

GR: I also think that now – I'm taking notes over here because I find this really interesting, and I hadn't heard of a lot of this, but I also think sometimes it seems like it's so normal now to be using these extreme chemicals and herbicides, that it's almost like you don't hear about it because it's –

EH: It's the norm.

GR: – it's the norm in so many industries.

EH: And it's with big industries. Again, they're not going to tell you that they're doing this or that they're not going to publicize it. "Well, we had this lethal chemical that will kill everything – plants, animals. We're going to be spraying it on your land. We're going to do it for thirty, forty years, and eventually, it does seep ..." Everything heads to the ocean. No matter where it lands on earth, it all heads to the ocean eventually. It's a factor in all of it. We've seen a lot of the rivers and stuff where we used to produce a lot of sea worms; they dried up for years because of the overuse of that herbicide. It hasn't been scientifically proven, so I'm probably speaking out of turn, but I'm just going from what I'm seeing.

GK: [0:39:06] As far as I'm concerned, that's where the stories begin, and it is something – both of us are like, "Ding, ding." That would be something to talk to people about. Have you ever heard about anybody coming here and studying it? Like from UMM [University of Maine at Machias]?

EH: No, it isn't something that – well, I think there's been probably studies done on it, but I think any reports have been probably squelched.

GK: There's big money.

EH: Yes, and it has to do with big money. No big company wants to have it reported that their industry is affecting peoples' drinking water or the watershed period. And it usually happens in poorer areas, which Washington county is probably one of the poorest counties in the state of Maine.

GK: Thirty years ago, a lot of locals are raking, but now there's a lot of migrant workers, and you wouldn't even hear if they were having any health problems. You would never know.

EH: [0:40:13] No, you wouldn't. It used to be the locals used to rake, and then we had the Native Americans that live in-state used to do all the raking. Now they don't even do it anymore because of the issues with the velpar and stuff. So they have now – they have brought in – they bring in a lot of migrant workers to do this from the southern half of the state, same with the wreathing business.

GR: Is there a bathroom I could use around here by any chance?

EH: You hold on, and I can take you into the house.

GR: [inaudible] Thank you so much.

EH: You're welcome. [Interruption in the recording.]

GK: [0:41:45] Yeah, the story of Mason's Bay and the pesticides seems like something that everybody that I've talked to in town is just like, "Yep, that's the reality."

EH: It is. It is. Again, when you're talking to a poor community, it doesn't have the resources to really counteract what is being done. A lot of people depend on that industry, the blueberry industry, including in Mason's Bay. You'll notice, if you've been out there, there's a lot of blueberry barrens out there.

GK: What part of town is this? Is this East Jonesport?

EH: This is considered Mason's Bay.

GK: It is already? Okay.

EH: It starts right after you go by the campground road. Yeah, that's when it starts to be Mason's Bay. It is that until you get to the Jonesport-Jonesboro town line.

GK: [0:42:52] So are you able, with these seasonal industries, to have —? Are you financially okay in that stretch in the middle?

EH: Yes.

GK: Yeah, that's good.

EH: Mainly because of the businesses that we have and the length of time that we've been in them. We have — again, even in the bait business — customers we've been dealing with for forty years that haven't gone out of business, or if they have changed hands, they still continued to buy our product. But a lot of it is — it's a very competitive industry, and a lot of it has to do with quality. If you have a quality product, people will buy it.

GK: Yeah, do you think even with the wreath, the big wreath factories, as long as you deliver something that is a little bit more niche, it's almost the boutique version of the wreath?

EH: [0:43:48] Yeah, and it is, and people will pay more for better quality. I will myself. If I see something of better quality — if you've got a dozen apples, and they're all rotted, and they're only fifty cents apiece, you're still going to buy that crisp one that's a buck if it's unbruised. So you will pay more for quality; I think a lot of people do. That's been my mantra as far as what we do. Again, that's why we don't advertise, or we don't have a website, or none of that because we don't want to get that big and have it affect the quality that we do [have].

GK: Well, this is great. Do you have any more questions? It's nearing ten.

GR: I want to photograph the beginning of this next wreath.

GK: And I want to record these.

GR: I'm going to [inaudible].

GK: You don't have to. You can talk because I got a bunch of wreath stuff already. But it is a nice sound.

EH: [0:44:53] I hear it in my sleep.

GR: I bet. Do you like making wreaths?

EH: God, that's a loaded question. I used to. I used to like it. I'm fifty-five years old, so it's a little harder on me than it was twenty years ago when I started. The standing and I've started noticing that the hands don't work quite as well as they used to. It's just an age thing.

GK: It seems physically demanding.

EH: It can be. The biggest thing is the constant time you spend on your feet. You'll be sitting here – of course, there's a lot of bugs and stuff in this brush. So at night, when you get home, there's a very good chance that I wake up with spider bites all over me.

GK: How about ticks?

EH: Haven't found one yet. A friend of mine who hadn't even started making wreaths yet posted online a week ago that she hadn't even picked up a piece of brush yet and found a tick on her neck.

GK: [0:46:02] Yikes.

EH: So that's a prominent issue this year, has been the increase of ticks.

GR: It sounds like you're doing – this is a really personal question, so you don't have to answer it. You're doing the two trades that your father did. Do you feel connected to him when you're doing these things?

EH: Well, there's a sense of pride to know that I'm carrying on what he started. Like I said, it will end when my time is up. So there's a certain sense of pride to that. I think any man that takes over his father's industry has a certain sense of obligation to make sure that it continues to do well. And you want to see it do well. Would it be my first choice as far as –? No, I'd much rather go back to being a chef again. I enjoy it a lot more than being my own boss. I'd rather work for somebody else. Some days it's nice being the boss, but most days, it's a pain in the ass. [laughter]

GK: [0:47:11] But it's this sense of obligation that keeps you doing it?

EH: Yes. It is. Now there's a lot of people that do depend on me for their livelihood. That in itself is a sense of responsibility, and I don't take it lightly because there have been days where I'm like, "You know what? I'm done. This is over. I've had enough." That happens probably at least three times a year that I'm done with it [and] don't want to deal with it anymore.

GK: Oh, Greta, it's starting. I'll get out of the way for a sec.

GR: Hold on, let me grab – I just want to get this empty – I like this big circle surrounded by the needles, like confetti almost.

GK: That one was bigger than the first one, wasn't it?

EH: That one right there? Yes.

GK: This is the –?

EH: No, they're actually the same size.

GK: [0:48:12] Oh, these ones? And then, this is the twenty-inch?

EH: No, these ones are the twenty-inch. Those are the twenties; those are the twenty-fours. Those are the smallest ones that we make.

GK: So cute.

EH: Normally, those right there end up going for cemetery plots, people that live in apartments, something like that right there – small doors. Then that's your standard-size wreath right there, the twenty-fours.

GR: Twenty-four inches is the standard wreath size?

EH: Yeah, that is the standard.

GR: That's quite big. [inaudible]

GK: I know. I think it's big, but that's because we live in Portland, so we get the little –

EH: Yes, we have some people that will do an eight-inch wreath.

GR: Little bitty guy.

EH: Ten is the smallest I will go.

GK: I bet it's a pain in the neck.

EH: It is, especially when you've got big hands.

GK: Did you get his hands, Greta?

GR: Yes.

GK: I want to see. Can I see them?

EH: Oh, that's mild.

GR: Wait, hold on. Let me shoot.

GK: They're all pitchy.

GR: [0:49:13] Can I see? Lay them flat.

GK: Do you ever get it off, or is it just like that for the whole wreath season?

EH: For the thumbs, this area here, yes, it can stay on for probably about four days after.

GK: Oh my gosh.

GR: [inaudible]

EH: The only thing I've found that takes it off is Comet.

GR: Oh my gosh. Really?

GK: Whoa.

EH: That's like bleach.

GR: That hard –? Oh my gosh.

EH: So I wash it in Comet, and then, before I go to bed at night, what I do is I have cornhusker oil. I use that on my hands to soften them while I'm sleeping.

GR: I'm going to make sure I got it because I was shooting with the –

GK: Shooting on the fly?

GR: Yep. Think I got it.

GK: Beautiful. Oh, wow.

EH: I'm a hand model; I never thought it would happen.

GR: Today's the day.

EH: Today's the day. Soon, I'll be waiting for my royalties check.

GK: I'd like to, Eddie, just grab – oh, shoot.

GR: What's wrong?

GK: [0:50:14] I forgot my release form, which is how I also get peoples' –

GR: Lay your hands flat, just as you were.

GK: – contact information.

EH: [indistinct]

GR: Yeah. Will you scoot –?

GK: Do you have an email?

EH: I do. Oh, here comes my secretary.

GR: Really, uh-oh!

EH: Her name is Sharon.

GR: Really? Sharon, time for your close-up. Just kidding.

EH: If she comes in with makeup on, I will be shocked.

GR: Oh, my gosh. So funny.

EH: I'll make a comment.

GK: I'll send you a couple of photos.

GR: Oh, yeah. Wait. Do that one more time with the – lay it flat just as you had it in that last shot. Do you remember? Just keep on – that's cool. Stay right there. All right, go ahead.

GK: [0:51:14] We won't record you. Hi, how are you?

Sharon: I've got a cold. Don't get near me.

GK: Okay. I'm Galen.

GR: Hi. Nice to meet you.

GK: Nice to meet you.

GR: Galen. Greta. Good to meet you. Sorry you're sick. It's going around.

GK: All right, Eddie. Got your email.

EH: Yeah, I told them nothing. I'm just showing off this part of my body. It's all about the abs.

GK: All about the ab.

EH: All about the abs.

GR: The six packs.

EH: Or, in my case, a keg. [laughter]

GR: We've been learning about all kinds of stuff.

GK: Yeah, this is really just great. Love these.

Sharon: [inaudible]

EH: What I told you to do this morning.

Sharon: [inaudible] try and get over there.

EH: [0:52:23] Possible snow ...

GK: A little bit more sound. How are you doing, Greta?

GR: Great.

GK: Feeling good?

GR: Yes.

GK: Okay. I'm feeling good too. Eddie, is there anything else you think I should know about the wreath business before we turn the recorder off?

EH: No, I think we've pretty much covered it all.

GK: That was great. Yeah.

EH: Thank you.

GK: Thank you so much for making the time.

[0:52:55]

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Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 9/6/2022