

MAINE SOUND AND STORY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE FIRST COAST

AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH SMITH FOR THE FIRST COAST JONESPORT/BEALS
COLLECTION

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY GALEN KOCH

JONESPORT, MAINE OCTOBER 30, 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY ELLE GILCHRIST

Interviewee Name: Ralph Smith (Moosabec Mussels)

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

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Interview Description: Ralph Smith takes us for a tour of his mussel processing factory and then sits down to discuss how he and his family got involved in the industry of mussel harvesting and selling. Smith shares about his life, the changes he had seen in the industry and climate, as well as the biological cycles of mussels. He shares his understanding of wild mussels and the difficulty in communicating with scientists.

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Transcribed By: Elle Gilchrist

GK: Galen Koch

GR:Greta R

RS: Ralph Smith

[0:47:33]

START OF RALPHSMITH_MOOSABECMUSSELS_JONESPORT_TFC_AUDIO

[0:00:00]

GK: Woohohoo chilly chilly!

GR: Mhm, so cold somehow even though it's raining.

GK: [inaudible] I think all the way down

GR: Ok

[0:00:59.5]

RS: Hey hey!

GK: Hey! How's it going!

RS: Woo!

[0:01:59.4]

(inaudible small talk under machinery sounds)

RS: Busier in here today than it was yesterday!

GK: It's loud. I know!

RS: Now, what is she doing?

GK: She is doing [].

RS: Nobody does that. No one does that. This is what puts me on the dock.

GK: Oh yea.

[0:04:00.7]

RS: I was telling her. In there- that's not a mic is it?

GK: Yea

RS: Oh, I know, but I am talking about my customers.

GK: Oh ok.

[0:06:01.4]

RS: There!

GK: Could we meet out here? Because I can't hear you.

RS: You can't hear me.

GK: No. The machines are loud.

RS: Alright. They come in. We bring them in-okay. The stuff we are working on right now. See how it is knit together. I told you. Look at this.

[0:07:59.4]

GK: Yep.

RS: Ok. Right now what we are doing, see them bubbles?

(pause in audio)

GK: Guys it's on!

RS: I got to ask you a couple questions first. I mean-

(pause in audio)

RS: See this fellow?

GK: Yup. Wow.

RS: See this?

GR: Yea

RS: This is-

GK: Here, wait, tell me because I am the one with the mic.

RS: Ok! This is the way we turn them in. You can take this is you. I just wanted to know what you were doing.

GK: Yup

RS: So we bring them in and we wash them. Because we purged them, they knit right back together.

GK:Oh

RS: This is ocean water

GK: Ok

RS: Just coming right out of the ocean and because of it mussels are doing their thing (GK: Yup). They are actually forming that beard and knitting themselves back together.

[0:09:02.8]

GK: So you have to try and avoid that later.

RS: We are going to take care of it. We don't avoid it, we are going to take care of it! (laughter) We can't avoid. That's the problem with this business. There is no avoiding nothing, right? These are the way they bring them off the boats. Beside this. These go to other markets. Unprocessed, ok? (GK: Ok) Alright, so we have markets that buy them by two-pounders. We have markets that buy them in big bags. Ok.

GK: That's sort of like [inaudible]

RS: Exactly, this is right off the boat.

GK: Right

RS: We also buy mahogany clams

GK: Oh wow.

RS: Ok, we also buy these off the boat.

GK: I have seen these before.

RS: Yea, the only place they have them in Maine.

GK/GR: Wow

RS: Only place they have them is in Maine. That's been a good business since 1979.

GK: Wow. cool.

GR: What are they called?

GK: Mahogany

RS: Mahogany clams. We call them, in Maine, Mahogany quahogs.

GR: Oh quahogs.

RS: Ok first off-

Other person: These things are in [] water now. The were in 300 feet of water. (laughter)

RS: Oh yea yea. These things come out of 300 feet of water. The quahogs do. The mussels come out of 70 feet and under. 70 feet and less.

GK: Yep.

RS: We bring them in and purge them. The reason we purge them is because Maine has a very bad reputation for mussels. Always had a bad reputation. How do you sell mussels with a bad reputation? You have got get them clean on the inside. There are ways of doing it. This is the way we do it. There are other ways but this is the way we do it. We purge them out with ocean water. This all goes into this drain. It all runs through a line back into the ocean. We have to take weekly samples to send to DEP. We have permit to do that (GK: Right) With that permit comes requirements.

[0:11:25.6]

GK: Can't have any gasoline around here.

RS: No, no no. Ok now what I am going to show you is the beginning to the end. Alright!

GK: Greta, do you want to come with us?

RS: Before we get in here, I am going to show you the beginning to the end. We might not be able to talk and understand but I'll show you it all.

GK: Yea

RS: We bring these in here. I am going to tell you first then we will walk through.

GK: Ok

RS: We send them through there. This is nothing but a big hopper. We can regulate the speed of it. That sets the pace for the whole system depending on the quality of the day. We might have to speed it up. We might have to slow it down. They come into this machine right here. This is two machines. This one is full of water. It's got a lot of stuff like this in it, [halves]. That's what separates them.

GK: Oh ok.

RS: Then we got to the next one and if there's any shells or anything its all out [thrown].

GK: Ok

RS: Then we are going to a [rock/lock] belt. I suppose I'll tell you so you can hear about it. We are going to a [rock/lock] belt. The guy on the [rock/lock], his job is to put up the rocks or clumps or whatever. Aboard the boat you clean them but you don't get them 100%.

GK: So there are some pretty big rocks on them?

[0:13:00.2]

RS: Oh no any rock. Firstly, we are going to get in there. I just got to make sure you don't shut down first. After the rock belt, we are going to a machine that goes like this. And when we get to the machine don't get nowhere's near it.

GK: Ok

RS: It's got 88 rods that go like this. There's water flowing and the water pushes the beard down and the the rods snip the beard off.

GK: Wow

RS: Ok, that rod will also take anything that touches it. Watch me and just stay way away from all of them. After that there's an elevator that brings them up to a sizer. We don't want to sell a mussel like this with a mussel like this. We don't want water in our boots.

GK: Oh no did it get in your boot

RS: I kept feeling my leg getting cool. I thought it was just laying against there.

GK: Oh no!

GR: Aw!

RS: All of a sudden, it started running in my boot. So anyway! We don't want to sell a big mussel with a 2 or a 3 inch mussel. Appearance wise, again, nobody tells me that's the way they want it but everybody has their own ideas. Personally, I don't like the appearance. We do sell the big mussels.

GK: It would be harder to cook them too. If you wanted to cook them all up at once it would be harder if they were different sizes.

RS: And then we come to the final inspection. (GK: Ok) From the final inspection that is where we do all of our ten-pounders. That's the []. However we take that [] and we go to another room with it basically with a magnifying glass.

GK: Yea.

RS: Hold on. Okay brother!

[0:14:59.6]

RS: All good. He's got to clean that out now. He dumped it in here. That's a rock in the []. Now, this here will feed that machine up there. That sets the pace for the whole system. I can change

the speed of that. This is the way it goes. It's wild in here. That's why we all end up wet. You got hip waders?

GK: No.

RS: I got some out here.

GK: Yea we should get some.

RS: See that box right there, that machine is letting out the shells. Does she want to come in here? That machine is letting out the shells. This is the rock belt I was telling you about. (GK: Right) What he is doing is picking the stuff out and still- step my way just a little bit. He's throwing the clumps in there to go back through again.

GK: Oh I got it.

RS: He's throwing the rocks in there. See all that stuff he is picking out. He's throwing them in there and then this machine.

[0:17:00.1]

RS: Alright. That tumbles onto there, just like this. You see them rods. They are like a file and they fan into each other. The water pushes the hair down and snips it off.

GK: Wow those are amazing.

RS: Ok

GK: How many of those are there? How many rods?

RS: 88, like crazy eights.

GK: Oh yea.

RS: Here! Those are ugly.

GK: yea yea.

RS: Now, what I am doing is I am pulling the big ones. I can move this anywhere I want it but for today's process this is where I want it. This is the final belt here. What they are doing is picking out broken ones, whatever, whatever. These are the big ones. We still sell the big ones. Right there is the finished product. They are going to dump them. These are all going to be 10 pound bags. Come right over here. This machine weights them out at 10 pounds. However, if we are doing 2-pounders we wont-

(pause audio)

[0:19:05.6]

RS: She's coming out with a [] bag right here.

GK: Do you mind if we go over here?

RS: You just saw that product there. I just showed it to you. Why bother. See that bucket there over on the table. We started at 7 o' clock this morning and that bucket on the table is all she has picked out.

GK: Yes.

RS: Probably, it's still full. Its 25 pounds but we have done (counting) already 2,000 pounds. She got just over half a bucket. Why bother. Do you know what I am saying?

GK: Ok, let's go somewhere quieter. Ok just for a few minutes. Yea.

RS: (inaudible) Is Greta coming?

GK: Yea I think so.

[0:21:04.2]

GK: Different kind of stories.

RS: Alright. Now, you needed to see that. (GK: Right) Now, on my website, I don't know if you went on there?

GK: Yea.

RS: You did go on?

GK: No no.

RS: Well I got a video on there.

GK: Of the whole operation?

RS: Including harvest.

GK: Oh cool.

GR: Great spot.

RS: Alright, now we can hear.

GR: We can hear!

GK: Should we sit over there or over here?

RS: Anywhere you want but right here.

GK: That's the captain's chair.

RS: Well, it's my daughters chair. The one who is actually doing the 2-pounds machine. She runs the whole thing for me and that's her husband thats out in the room where all the product is packed up.

GK: Is that your daughter with the dark hair?

RS: She's the one that's doing the two pound bags.

GK: Oh ok. The inspection, or the one machine after?

RS: Not the inspection. She's the one that's actually putting them into the little bags and putting the tags on them.

GK: Got it. Whats her name?

RS: Bobby Joe. That's all on my website too.

GK: Yup.

RS: You can go to my family. I have been doing this since 1975.

GK: Wow, right in this same location?

RS: Actually, I was a harvester in the beginning. I actually bought and worked with a guy in Massachusetts. Back in the day, in the 70's, the only thing you needed to sell shellfish, and mussels, quahogs, oysters, clams, was a tag to say the location to, that it comes from clean waters. DMR does all the inspections on. And, a place to call an office or a mailing address. That was the only regulation that there was.

[0:23:02.5]

GK:Wow

RS: Then what happened was this guy I was working for, he could not commit to state and buy for fishermen. I was just new in the business. He approached me and 'would I purchase for him? could he use my location for an office and what not?' To make a long story short I built an office on my house. I built a room on my house for an office and that was where we operated. I grew into a small cooler in my dooryard. I was still a fisherman. Then this guy eventually got out of the business because I was already a dealer under him. I went out and bought a dealer's license. As I say there was not a lot of regulations, so now I am a fisherman and I am a dealer. The first one in the state of Maine.

GK: The first shellfish dealer?

RS: The first dealer, fisherman. (GK: Oh got it) I held a license to fish and I held a license to sell out of state. I fishermen can sell to anybody in state but cannot sell to anybody out of state. (GK: Yup.) So anyways, I became the first shellfish dealer in the State of Maine.

GK: Wow

RS: Fisherman dealer.

GK: Fisherman slash dealer. And where was that house? Was that in Jonesport?

RS: Oh yea. I was born in this house. Back in my day we had home deliveries (laughter). I was born at home.

GK: Wow

RS: I bought the house next door. That's where all but one of my children, I have four, was born. No, in the same house I was born in because we went of to my mothers when my wife was going to have the baby. That's where we had the baby over there. We had the midwife would come in with the doctor and what not. It might be interesting to you. The historical society has done, I done, a presentation down there.

[0:25:21.9]

GK: I think I have it because I got all the stuff from Bill Plaski and he gave me (RS: Alright.) the whole treasure trove.

RS: I am just trying to say there's a lot of info. A lot of questions was asked that night. We feed them like 120 pounds of seafood, of mussels and quahogs. Oh yea

GK: Cool.

RS: That was a very fun night and whatnot. We done a presentation. You can actually see my beginning and of course you can see where I am at at the present. Where was is?

[0:26:03.3]

GK: You had your house, you had your kids.

RS: Oh my house! Yup, so then back in the early 80's people started buying mussels in Maine. Dealers. They started buying mussels from fishermen, whom I also sold to. I was not processing. Alls I would do was harvesting. I was also selling those big bags you saw down there. So people began to 'processing' mussels, they called it, back in the 80's. They didn't have no water. What they would do is run them through a declumping machine and they would bag them up. They were manually cleaning them up a little bit. They was getting, we'll say I am not sure exactly, we'll just say, 50 to 60% more money for the product. They were doing well so I

says, "I got to do something different". I was selling big bushel bags. So I decided to take and sell half a bushel bag. Like a 25- pound bag, let's call it, off the boat. I put another individual on boat with me. Instead of have 2 people back in the stern, I put three people back in the stern. I could get them a little cleaner. I could get them as clean and they was getting them.

GK: mhm

RS: For over 20 years I had a heyday in that half-bushel market. Nobody messed with it.

GK: You were getting them cleaned on the boat?

RS: We were doing them on the boat.

GK:Wow

[0:27:45.7]

RS: Ok, now, Maine at that time built a back reputation for mussels. Gritty, muddy inside and barnacles and you name it. I mean they had a bad reputation. At the same time, PEI launches a mussel industry, rope grown. All my stuff is wild. It comes off the bottom. That's why you see the stones and everything on them and whatnot. They come off of the bottom. PEI had a rope grown industry that they just started. Because they were suspended there was no grit and because they were just starting their meats were bigger per shell ratio. They started doing 5 pounders, 10 pounders, and 2 pounders. Well, I continued on that twenty-five pound pack for quite some time because I was competing against the Maine sales. My product was equalizing them, even though, I wasn't doing small packs. Then came along the mid 90's I was unloading this place here and the guy decided he wanted to sell it. It didn't look like this

[0:29:11.7]

GK: What was here before when you were here?

RS: The building was here but everything was delapidated. The poles on the wharf was like this. I mean it was very dilapidated. So I says, "Oh man, I am not going to have a place to unload. I need a place to unload." So we agreed on a price and he agreed to finance it. I talked to my wife and (laugh) I talked to some older people around town that I had respect for. At the time, I mean where was I? That was probably around '88, '89, '90. They kept pushing me and the older people said 'oh Ralph you could do it' so I bit the bullet.

[0:30:00.5]

GK: And you bought?

RS: So I bought this.

GK: You were asking for advice on whether you should buy this place.

RS: Right, I was asking older people (GK:Yup) because this had been a business and it run down another business and it went down, another business. In the meantime, the dock had

gone down. It took me six years. We done sections. I got a crew in here and at one time I had 25 people. Plumbers, electricians, carpenters, because DMR has regulations you have to meet. Its just unbelievable what you have to do. We done all of that and I had people and we'd take a section of the wharf a year. I would dismantle the whole thing and put brand new in. It took me six years to do this whole dock. (GK: wow) It was a lot of money. It took a lot of money per year to do it. It was six years in the warmer months. Then at the same time I am realizing my 25 pound bag is- because PEI is doing 2 pounders. The consumer wants to go in, grab the 2 pound bag, go to the check out and go home. I already bought this (phone rings)- that's probably my other couple. (laugh).

GK: Here I'll pause

(pause audio)

RS: Oh I didn't see you come in.

GR: I am all cozied up over here.

GK: She's been there the whole time.

GR: Yea

RS: You've been there the whole time! Course you did because you followed us out. You were hidden behind her (laughter). I can move that chair over for you. We have another chair over there if you want.

GR: All spread out.

GK: She's happy

GR: Yea

[0:31:46.1]

RS: Oh you're good? The PEI was really off and running and now all of a sudden because of the Maine reputation, Maine sales went like this. Even though there was a lot more money. So I said, "Man, if I am going to stay in the mussel business." I am a fisherman, a lobster fisherman in the beginning. I took to into musseling in '75 when there was no such a thing. My father told me I was crazy. He said, "Ralph, what are you doing. There ain't no market for mussels" I had a feeling. From there I said, "I am going to fall by the wayside. Nobody needs to buy mussels off of Ralph Smith because they can buy them off of anybody." Because I am running a business, I have to get a mark up on them. Even the small bags. Anybody in the state of Maine can buy off the fishermen. Follow what I am saying?

GK: Yup, so why buy from you.

RS: So I said, "I am going to be falling through the cracks here if I don't do something." That's when I decided that I was going to invest in processing, cleaning them up, purging them out and

all this and that. It's been about 2000 since I actually started that. That's what I have been doing ever since and again I had customers that wanted you to do them faster. Drop the quality and what not. It comes down to who can do it the cheapest as I was telling you yesterday. I have seen this happen. I have seen this happen in shrimping, in quahogging. It doesn't work because in the end of the day everybody goes out of business. I decided, "Ok, if I am going to do this I got to forget competing against the Maine product, I have to compete with PEI."

[0:34:00.8]

RS: Now, I am taking a dirty mussel and I am going to compete against PEI who has no dirt. This is why you see what you see and this is why over the years that I have learned that this works. That this don't work. You just keep putting it together. Even to the getting of the mussels. You have to get a quality mussel out of the wild to start with. You just go over and throw you drag, like your lobster traps. You got to know where to go. Presently, my son in law is getting all of my mussels. I have a boat right here that is all ready to go. I'll be doing some dragging too, because the winter times it's harder to get them in all the weather and everything. I'll be helping him out. Basically, that's where we are at. I started out, as I said, with just whoever. Then these guys wanted it for cheaper money and I said 'I don't play that game'. I learned that if I am going to do this, I've got to go quality, high-end. What was high-end? I had no clue at that time.

GK: Do you think that high-end market is going to be sustained for a while? I mean do you think more businesses will want that kind of option?

RS: You just keep occasionally picking up a customer (GK: yea) and if you actually go on the website and you hit images. It's interesting. I was in there the other night and I hit images and you see restaurant menus. I don't know much about computers, but you hit on that one it will open up a bunch more. So forth and so forth.

GK: Oh yea its like a -

RS: I was a little (laugh) surprised that Moosabec's- you see them in menus and restaurants up in New York and anyway. So that's where I got way off track of what you wanted.

[0:36:01.9]

GK: No that's great. (RS: Oh ok). I am curious too because a lot of what we do is fishing, that aspect.

RS: Well we can show you that but I can't today obviously.

GK: No, definitely not today. But, has that changed for you in the last like 50 years of where you are going and how?

RS: Yea. Mother Nature. Mussels work in cycles. There are places that you'll get a set. We call it. The spawn will set. There's places you'll get a set almost annually. There are places you might get a set every five years. There's places you might get sets and then all of a sudden there's nothing for years. We have some of those. On the other hand, the Portland Herald had made a lot of publicity about the mussel business going out, which is not true. On the other

hand, we have harvested mussels in the past ten years where there were never no mussels. I mean never. You lose this one you gain that one. Mother Nature's way of balancing things. I am not a scientist. The water is warming up. The climate is changing. I don't really know what causes what but I do know there's constantly a change.

[0:37:37.5]

GK: What do you think determines where they set? Does temperature affect that? What do you think? Do you know?

RS: Well, I don't know. Say for instance, we got a place down here we call the Great Bar. The tide comes in and out. Its open ocean as soon as you come by Roake Island. You got open ocean. Well, the scientist and biologists tell me that the spat will go floating suspended in the water for 21 days. Don't quote me. I am only saying what they tell me, which I believe because I know when they spawn and then I know when all of a sudden the seed starts to show. They will suspend for 21 days. Those creatures, which are nothing but larvae, are totally at the mercy of the environment. We can get storms, big tides. As soon as they get out of the bay, they are gone. In my opinion, that's what's happening to some of the stock. It's not that they are not spawning. We know they are spawning because we see them spawn, every year. Different areas spawn at different times. The colder the water, the later they spawn. The spawn up to the western up to three weeks a month ahead of down here. Right now, we are fishing in the Trenton area. They will spawn early up there. So what we try to do is push as long as we can down here but then we have to leave because of the lobster traps being set off. The spawning season up there will start the end of May to the end of June. Basically, the month of June, early May. Down here the spawning season don't start to July. So if you can fish down here long enough, I avoid the spawning season as far as marketing. You know what I am saying? (GK: Yup). So we will go up there and fish up there. The traps are being taken up around here so we will actually be coming back to the Jonesport area again within a couple more weeks. We will fish these beds all winter.

Like I said, winterbeds, that is not like a scattering. Usually when you have a bed of mussel, its set and when they grow it's a lot. The bed we are fishing on right now in the winter time, that one bed, we have been fishing that now for five years.

[0:40:20.1]

GK: Wow.

RS: Yea and we are taking 1000 to 1200 bushels a week out of it.

GK: Holy cow. That's a ton of mussels.

RS: Again, you have to work these beds to keep the quality up. It's like a garden. If you hoe your garden, cultivate your garden your product is a lot nice. It's the same with mussels. If you go in there and you pull the markets out and put the seed back, now that seed has more room for more feed. He's not fighting so much. Then they get more feed per bushel and they'll grow. This is the way they go. Sometimes mussels will set all in one layer. You go down Lubec way, as soon as you find a bed of mussels. You drag that bed of mussels and you got them in a weeks time. You got them. The whole area. Then I have seen places where you drag and drag and

drag for years. The Great Bar for instance. Back years ago, when that started we dragged that for years. I figured they must have been ten feet deep.

GK: Wow.

RS: Now, people will disagree with me on that. I can't help it. I've been there. I know it. I know what's going on. These guys that are coming here today. These scientists, who are due here anytime, they are coming here for different things. I try to talk with them like I am talking with you. Sometimes, it's hard to talk with scientists. (laugh)

[0:42:06.]

GK: Yea, well that's where-

RS: They look at it from a scientific angle where I look at the realistic angle.

GK: That's where our role is supposed to come in where we can be in between.

RS: You are scientists?

GK: No No not scientists

RS: Oh oh yea.

GK: But just impartial.

RS: Now that I am talking to you I understand what you are doing and so forth. (GK: Yea) You must be a writer or?

GK: Yea and radio.

RS: Radio! What station?

GK: No, not like that. Like I used to do freelance for NPR. Now, I don't. Now, I do this work where I come back with exhibits here to town. Like I told you, but I do audio stories and writing.

RS: Ok so what-

GK: Kind of the same thing just sometimes you have people's voices.

RS: Now, before these other guys come. I am not trying to rush you I just want to make sure I answered what you want for questions

GK: No, I think that was great. I think it was great.

[0:43:03.0]

RS: What are we missing?

GK: Greta, can you think of any questions you have?

GR: The only thing that would help me is if you could walk us out to the car and we can take a picture of you out on the water.

RS: [inaudible]

GR: What do you think about walking us out to the car and I take a picture of you out on the wharf?

RS: You want me to walk you to your car?

GR/GK: So you can take a picture of you outside!

RS: (laughter) Oh okay. Now did you get what you wanted Gretchen?

GR: Greta, but that's alright people call me Gretchen everyday.

RS: Did you take all your pictures?

GR: Last one is a picture of you. That's it.

GK: Yup.

GR: It will take two minutes.

(laughter)

GK: No that was great. Very informative and maybe I'll get your phone number. Maybe we can come get you doing a harvest sometime.

GR: Oh that would be so cool.

RS: I'll give you my card if I can got one in my pocket and you can just drop me an email.

GK: I know.

(inaudible talking)

[0:45:01.9]

(inaudible talking)

[0:46:20.3]

(inaudible talking)

GK: Hey! Thank you so much for showing us around.

RS: Thank you.

GR/GK: Bye!

[0:47:33.0]

END OF RALPHSMITH_MOOSABECMUSSELS_JONESPORT_TFC_AUDIO