

Interviewee Name: Max St. Amand

Project/Collection Title: The First Coast Deer Isle and Stonington

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

Interview Location: Stonington, Maine

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Description: In this interview, Max St. Amand discusses his life as a young lobsterman in Stonington. St. Amand shares how he started fishing at a young age doing purse seining, lobstering, and clamming. Koch and St. Amand talk about buying and fixing up boats, changes that he has seen in the fisheries after being on the water for 15 years, how he handles territorial conflicts, and the culture of young people out on the water fishing differently. Finally, he talks about taxes on lobstering and what he loves about fishing and living in Stonington.

Keywords: Fisheries, changes to the fishing industry, young lobsterman, territorial conflicts, boats, lobstering, purse seining

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Transcribed By: Elle Gilchrist

GK: Galen Koch

MS: Max St. Amand

[00:32:17.1]

[00:00:00.0]

GK: Alright, say your name.

MS: Max St. Amand.

GK: Maximus Georgewell.

MS: Yeah. [laughter] Do you want the long or the short? George Maxwell St. Amand.

GK: [laughter] Max, where are you from?

MS: From Stonington. I was born in Blue Hill, Maine.

GK: At the old hospital.

MS: Yup. At Blue Hill Memorial.

GK: When did you start fishing?

MS: I started fishing probably when I was twelve or thirteen. I mowed lawns before that.

GK: Just to make a little money.

MS: Yup. Yup. Pay the bills.

GK: Have you always been an entrepreneur?

MS: Yeah, I guess so, yep. I like working for myself. I like working hard. When you are working for yourself, you just get a lot more done, it seems like. It's more motivating because it's all yours. You are working for your own future or whatever. It's awesome.

[0:01:10.1]

GK: Who did you go with when you were twelve and thirteen?

MS: I went with Jeff (Boise?) and Justin (Boise?).

GK: What were you doing?

MS: Well, I did a little bit of lobstering with them, but mostly purse seining for herring in the summertime. We also did a little clamming, too. That was fun for a while, but I didn't want to do that forever because it's back-breaking work. Once I took a liking to lobstering, I just started doing that, pretty much solely. I have been doing it ever since then.

GK: What is purse seining? Do they still do that?

MS: Yeah, purse seining is shutting off a cove that is full of herring. You just run a net across the cove at high tide. At low tide, all the fish, obviously, want to get out of that cove because the water is all leaving, and so when they try to leave, that's when you scoop them up into a smaller net. Then we sell them to lobstermen for bait. I usually save a bunch of bait for myself for the year, which is cool. I freeze up a whole bunch of it.

[0:02:19.4]

GK: Oh, you freeze it.

MS: Yea. It's not frozen. It's kept in the cooler at like 30 degrees or something. It's pretty cool to be able to save up your own bait to go out lobstering.

GK: Do you salt it?

MS: Yeah, we have to tend to it. I'll keep it for a couple months in the cooler. We'll have to take it out once or twice and salt it and just dump it over to make sure it's alright and not rotting or whatever.

GK: Where's the cooler?

MS: At Greenhead lobster. Hughie Reynolds is nice enough to let me keep a bunch of bait in there.

GK: That is nice.

[0:03:00.8]

MS: Yeah, it is pretty sweet.

GK: So are they one of the only people purse seining like that?

MS: There's a few people that do it. It's definitely dwindling. There's not many. I don't know. There might be fifteen or twenty people around that do it or something like that.

GK: Oh, not many.

MS: Not many, no.

GK: Is it an older kind of style of fishing?

MS: Yep. It is. It's older. The equipment to do it is really expensive. So if you don't have older stuff that was passed down to you, trying to get into it with new nets and everything would be extremely expensive and probably not very profitable, really.

GK: Just because of overhead.

MS: Yeah. Sometimes some of those nets are like fifty or sixty thousand dollars, I think. If you set it in the wrong spot and catches on a rock or whatever, it just rips it to shreds. You're out.

[0:04:00.6]

GK: So then you were doing that with Jeff and Justin for a while, right?

MS: Yup.

GK: Did you have to save up so you could get your own boat? How did that work?

MS: Let's see. Yeah, I saved up about half of the money to do it. Then my dad was nice enough to front me the other half to get my first boat that I bought from a local friend (Eric Robbins?). Ever since then, I have been slowly upgrading to a little bigger boat every couple of years. The longest I've had any boat is three or four years. I've upgraded. It's been interesting.

[0:05:07.0]

GK: It's been interesting?

MS: Yeah, because none of the boats were really set up great for me or weren't really that safe or anything. [laughter] Some of them were really scary. The first inboard powerboat that I had was a 1954 wooden boat. I bought it from some old fellow over town here, and it had been sitting in his yard for years and years. It needed tons of work. It was a bunch of planks that needed to be replaced. Blah, blah, blah. It had just been sitting there for ten years. That's what I started out with, and that was crazy. I made that thing work somehow for a couple of years. Looking back on it, it was quite the feat to keep it going throughout the time.

GK: Were you fishing out of it, or was that just the boat to get out to your lobster boat?

[0:06:02.6]

MS: No, that was the lobster boat.

GK: Oh, okay.

MS: It was like thirty-two feet long.

GK: Jeez.

MS: It was a big boat, but the older style boats are really narrow and low sheer. There really wasn't that much room on it for how big of a boat it was. It was a good starter boat. If you weren't paying attention all the time, you are likely to sink it or something. It could start leaking. The engine was always overheating all the time. It was so funny.

GK: Oh, God. Then you had your second boat, and now you are on your third? What was your next boat after that one?

MS: That was the third boat. I got an outboard from (Eric Robbins?) with an electric pot hauler in it. Then after that, I had a next size up outboard that had a small cabin on it, and it had a little gasoline-powered hydraulic hauler on it. That was like twenty feet long. After that, that's when I got the thirty-two-foot wooden boat. I had that for a couple of years. Then I upgraded to a fiberglass boat with a diesel engine in it.

GK: What year was that?

MS: What year the boat was?

GK: No, what year did you upgrade?

[0:07:29.0]

MS: Oh, that was probably 2014, I'd say, or 2013. It kind of blended together.

GK: The years blend together even at this –

MS: So much boat work. Because anytime you buy a boat from somebody, you pretty much have to go over everything just to make sure it's okay. A lot of the time, it's not okay, and you just have to redo everything.

GK: How much did those boats cost?

MS: Well, they were all fairly cheap until I got the inboard diesel. That still wasn't too bad. It was like thirty-three thousand bucks. He gave me a good deal on it because, again, I bought it from (Eric Robbins?), which is funny. I bought my first couple of boats from him. He's been good to me.

GK: What's the name of the boat you are running now?

MS: The one I have now, *Full Pull* – it's an ex-warden boat that I found on Craigslist. I went down to Cushing to go check it out, and it looked like a really good deal. I got it. I bought it. I talked the guy down a little, like 5,000 bucks or whatever from the asking price. I was happy. I bought it right there and have been working on that thing ever since I got it. There was so much extra gear on there and outdated electronics and probably ten miles of extra wiring that I stripped out. It's been quite the project. Finally, this year I have got it pretty much to a brand-new boat. Everything has been replaced, including the engine, electrical, hydraulics. So it feels so much better than it did when I got it. It handles like a dream. It's way more fuel-efficient. Well, before, it was like leaking oil and black smoke pouring out the stern of it. I finally got it dialed in pretty good.

[0:09:37.5]

GK: And you're pretty happy with it now?

MS: Yeah, I am pretty happy with it now. But that's the thing. Once you get it all set up perfect, then it's like, well, this isn't quite what I need. It's a vicious cycle. You need another one now, and then you're going to have to go through it all over again. I'll keep it for a couple years, I imagine, but it's definitely not like the boat I want to have forever just because fiberglass boats are really hard on your body. My knees feel it pretty bad from the vibrations and all that.

GK: That's different than a wooden boat would be?

MS: Yup. Exactly.

GK: Just the way it passes through or something? The vibrations?

MS: Yup. Yeah, the engine is just hard-mounted to the fiberglass; there's no vibration isolator. I don't know. You definitely feel everything. A lot of old-timers will talk about how much more nice, comfortable ride wooden boats are. I am starting to see what they are talking about now.

[0:10:41.4]

GK: Do you already feel a little bit like your age out there?

MS: Yeah, definitely. The past couple of years feeling pretty sore and whatever. I had to haul the

boat out for two months this summer to put a new engine in. Just working on the boat on land and not being on the water at all. All the aches and pains just went away after a little while. I felt the best I've felt in years and years. That definitely was a good experience to learn. I thought it was just arthritis or something, but no, it's just the boat mostly.

GK: How old are you, for the record?

MS: Twenty-eight.

GK: [laughter] So arthritis might not be something you necessarily have.

MS: I know; I was hoping not. I was going fishing over two hundred days a year, maybe two-hundred-and-fifty, because I was scalloping all winter, lobstering, purse seining. Fitting some other things in there as well – urchining, starfishing. So I was on the water a lot. Probably too much.

GK: Is that common that people do that many different fisheries?

[0:12:01.4]

MS: Yeah, pretty common. I would say half the people or something like that. It's getting more common because the other fisheries are becoming a little more lucrative. Scalloping is coming back. More people are doing that. Urchining is not really coming back. Yeah. I don't know. It's a little bit unique being able to say that you have been able to do all the different things. It's cool. I like to try everything. It's nice to have a different job every once in a while, too. It just keeps it exciting.

GK: Yeah. Have you, already in your time on the water, seen changes in who's fishing, how they are fishing, what they are doing out there?

[0:12:59.9]

MS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Surprisingly, yeah. I feel like I have been out there for so long just because I have seen so many changes, but I haven't been out there that long. It's what? I'd say fifteen years or whatever. I have seen a lot of changes. Definitely. A lot of ups and downs.

GK: What's the most significant thing that you have seen over your time on the water?

MS: Well, one of the bigger things is mostly the catch of lobsters. When I first started going out, there wasn't really much to catch out there really where I was going and the people I was fishing with. We weren't catching that many. It's been steadily getting more and more ever since I have been going. That's been exciting definitely, and interesting.

GK: What's interesting about it? What does it make you feel?

[0:14:03.9]

MS: For a while, I was wondering if it was just the fact that people are getting better gear and better electronics and going further and all this. I don't know. I guess it's that there were more lobsters there and more scallops than fifteen years ago. Ten, fifteen years ago, the scalloping was pretty bleak. That's been coming back really crazy. I never thought I would see scalloping like that. It's really exciting to see the scallop drag come up just full of scallops. Like nothing else in there. Same with the lobster traps just coming up completely full with all good lobsters. Before, when I was a lot younger, like in high school, a pound to a trap would be good fishing. Now, you can get ten pounds to a trap, fifteen pounds to a trap.

[0:15:07.3]

GK: Wow

MS: Yeah. Didn't seem right. It felt like something was wrong. It seemed too easy. It was fun.

GK: What do you mean it seems too easy? Does it feel like it's supposed to be hard or something?

MS: I don't know. I guess maybe because that's how I started out. Now, you're just – I don't know. It's coming a little easier. I guess that's a good thing.

GK: What about this past year? How was your year?

MS: It would have been great, except I had to put a new engine in my boat, and that took two months out of the middle of the season. That was really a bummer. Pretty well put a damper on my season.

GK: How much does an engine like that run you?

MS: Just the engine and the transmission is sixty-thousand dollars.

[0:16:00.7]

GK: What? Wow.

MS: Then putting it in there is a couple – twenty, thirty. I did it with a friend of mine – Jeremy Eaton. It probably was about eighty or ninety thousand dollars. But if I had somebody else do it, it was be probably over a hundred thousand.

GK: An additional hundred thousand on top of that sixty or total?

MS: No, total thing. Yeah. But maybe more. It's hard to say because they mark everything up. I don't know. I am glad that I put it in myself just to get the learning experience for it. Sometimes it's not the best thing to do because it takes a little bit more time obviously because you've never done it before. You can't write your own work off, which sucks ...

[0:17:30.1]

GK: Where do you fish? Did you change where you go fishing?

MS: No. Well, I'm ever-expanding a little bit here and there. I mostly stick to the same area, but that area is really big. I like to spread my traps out as much as possible just because you get so much more information that way of where lobsters are. If you happen to do really good in one certain spot, then you can take some from another area that's not doing so good and shift them there. I don't know. That's just how I do it. I like to spread them out really far.

GK: Do you ever encounter issues on the water here in Stonington? Territorial stuff?

MS: Yeah. Yep. I've had a bunch of stuff, territorial issues, but I always just move them or whatever. I'll avoid the conflict if possible.

GK: How do you know? You can have another beer if you want.

MS: Yeah. It's a pretty dead giveaway. A couple times, I've had knives sticking out of my buoys and shit like that.

GK: Really. Woah.

[0:18:30.8]

MS: The thing is that's as far as it ever went. A bunch of times, it was just like, alright, I am just going to set them back because I don't really care. They're crappy traps anyway. So if they cut them off, I don't really care.

GK: Have you ever had anything cut?

MS: No, it's so funny. People are bluffing. They won't actually really do anything. Every once in a while, you will run across that person that will cut you off, but you just got to know how to – it's like, Christ, you are like being a friggin' psychologist out there. It's like a big mind game. It's pretty crazy.

GK: What do you mean?

MS: It's hard to explain.

GK: You are reading people or trying to appease them or something?

MS: Trying not to make anybody mad, but also just playing a game of seniority. I don't know. I usually just, like I said, try to stay out of the way, but it's hard. It's quite something. It's more than just what it appears to be. There's a lot more to it.

GK: Like where you are and who you are?

MS: Yes, and stupid little things that make people mad, I guess. I don't really know.

[0:19:56.9]

GK: I've been seeing some super big boats. Are there people getting into in the last fifteen years that you are surprised by who they are or how they are fishing? Is there anything like that?

MS: Well, yeah. A bunch of times, just mostly people being way aggressive and real pushing and just pushing their way right in and being real aggressive about it. Those people usually come and go. They just keep going bigger and bigger, bigger boats. That's fine because I only have to deal with those people for a year or two, and then they go along their way. I am not trying to go way big. I like fishing inside here and making a living.

GK: Big would mean offshore?

[0:21:00.2]

MS: I guess, yeah. It's funny. People change places they fish every few years. Mostly the younger people coming up are looking to go bigger and bigger and bigger. I guess that is what that's all about. I am just looking to make a living here. I'm not trying to get rich. It's definitely not going to happen. I just like what I am doing. It's pretty awesome.

GK: Do you have concerns about it? Concerns for your future as a fisherman here?

MS: Every once in a while, yeah, a little bit. I know I can do something else. If anything ever happened, I got plenty of other things I can do.

GK: Like what?

MS: Well, I'm just a really hard worker, and whatever I put my mind to, I can do it. Everything I

do, I take pride in and do it really well. Whatever the next thing is, I am sure I will figure it out, and I'll be fine.

[0:22:01.7]

GK: Are you involved in any of the meetings or stuff that's going on with regulations or things that people are doing? Do you want to become involved?

MS: No. I should become involved. The past couple of years, I just really didn't feel like doing it. I don't know. I have been more just trying to have a good time.

GK: Put your head down.

MS: Yeah, working hard and really just trying to have fun in the meantime.

GK: Is it hard to find people to work with you on the boat?

MS: No, I never have a problem because I have a lot of friends and I am always meeting new people. People are always very interested in what I do. A lot of them are like, "Can I get a job with you?" I've gone through a lot of different crews in my short time, but it has all been really good. Never been any hard feelings. We are all good friends. It seems like I never take anybody for more than a year or two. It's been great. I'm lucky to have a lot of people to ask to go with me. I know a lot of people who don't have as many options. That makes it a lot harder.

[0:23:31.2]

GK: Yeah, I have heard some people say it's hard to find sternmen and third-men.

MS: Yeah.

GK: Partially because people say that there's a lot of drugs, but I don't know if that's true.

MS: Maybe.

GK: That it's hard to find folks that are reliable.

MS: Yeah, yeah. There's just not much motivation. Half of it is because the people that are working in the back – they don't really have anything solid. They're working for you, and anything could happen to them; they don't have anything to fall back on. That's probably a lot of the problem. They get paid well, but they get taxed so hard. So that really puts a damper on everything. It seems like you are making damn good money until tax time comes, and then you have got this huge tax bill, and you've spent most of the money already, and it's wintertime, and

you are screwed. It sucks. If the taxes weren't so bad on us, it would be a lot easier to keep workers aboard.

[0:24:53.8]

GK: Yeah. What's your tax rate?

MS: Well, the first bracket isn't too bad. But if you get into the second tax bracket, it's like thirty percent or something. If you don't have a lot of things to write off, which you wouldn't as a sternman – you might have five thousand dollars. Yeah. Thirty percent of whatever you made – that's crazy. If you are not experienced with having to plan ahead for that and put the money aside, if you're not ready to do that, then when tax time comes, it's a huge shock. It pretty much takes away all the money that you thought was yours.

GK: Yeah, you might owe 30 K.

MS: Yeah, easy. And you don't have it because it's springtime or whatever. It's pretty bad.

[0:25:51.8]

GK: What do you love about it out there?

MS: A lot of things. I don't know. Getting to see all the friggin' awesome sunrises and sunsets. You are just out there for the nicest of the weather usually, but sometimes, the rough weather is exciting too, just something different. I like the freedom. One of my favorite things about it is the more you put into it, the more you get out. It's just pretty simple. The harder you work, the more you make. It's pretty cool.

GK: Let me take that can away from you.

MS: Oh, sorry. Oh, God. It's not empty yet.

GK: What do you value? You've lived here your whole life, right?

MS: Yes.

GK: What do you value about living here? It's a two-fold question. What's good about living here? And then also what's difficult and what do you hope this place is like in the next ten years?

[0:28:02.0]

MS: Well, for the past few years, there haven't been many of my friends around that I grew up

with. That's been kind of a bummer.

GK: Is that changing?

MS: It's actually changing. It seems like a few of my friends are coming back and learning to make it a good time no matter what. That's pretty much what you got to do. You just got to go out and seek your own fun. I think it eventually will be more of a desirable place for people to come back to and live.

GK: Why do you think that?

[0:28:40.2]

MS: Well, I feel like a lot of my friends went off to college or moved to a city, but deep down inside, they definitely miss this place probably. I know I do after I leave here for a while. I can't even explain it, but when you drive back over the bridge or whatever, you just get all excited. It doesn't take long for me to miss this place. I think it's just because you definitely feel like it's your town. I don't know. You can do whatever you desire to do, really, and nobody is going to tell you anything. Not like you're doing anything wrong, but you just feel free to do whatever. You know everybody. People are all real friendly and whatnot. It's so funny how everybody you drive by on the road is waving to you and shit. Sometimes, I'll be somewhere else, and I'll just get excited, and I'll start waving to people on the road, and nobody ever waves back. They just don't get it. [laughter] Around here, it's different. I guess people are really – I don't know how to say it, but there's great attention to detail around here. People can spot you from a mile off, and they're just waving. It's so awesome. [laughter]

[0:30:11.2]

GK: I know. I feel like if I come for a couple days, I get waves. Now that I have been here for almost a month, now I get more waves because this is a recognizable car, obviously. I get a lot of waves anyways because people are like, "Oh, she's on the island." But then you get into – I went by (Herbie?) the other day, and I have seen him so many times. He's just in the front of his car like this.

MS: [laughter] You got to love that. That just makes you feel good.

GK: Yeah, it does.

MS: That's awesome.

GK: Do you think it's the land itself, too? The way it looks or feels or sounds?

MS: Sure, yeah. There's all kinds of cool sounds. For what a small town it is, it's a fast-paced

town; there's a lot of action. It's exciting. There's always something new going on. Other places that I have been or visited – I lived in Florida for a couple months in the winter for a little while, and there's just not that kind of action around. People just aren't that motivated. I don't know. There's a different energy to it, that's for sure ...

GK: Well, is there anything else that you wanted to say while you were in here?

MS: Maybe, I don't know.

GK: I mean, there's lots. That was already thirty minutes.

MS: Wow.

GK: Can you believe it?

MS: That's crazy.

GK: I know. It goes by really quick. I always feel like there's a ton of stuff. I think it would be fun to have you and Jared in here.

MS: I know. It would be nice to have a couple different people to feed off of each other.

GK: Wouldn't it be fun?

MS: Yeah. And (Sy?).

GK: Yeah, let's do that.

MS: Let's do that.

GK: The girls are gone.

[00:32:17.1]

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 5/31/2022