

Interviewee Name: Brenda Thomas

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Interview Description:

Brenda Thomas

Rockland, ME

Schooner Boat Captain

Interviewed by Natalie Springuel

Brenda Thomas, a former schooner boat captain from Rockland, ME, sails traditionally on national historic landmark schooners such as the *S/V Isaac Evans*. Thomas, as someone who has spent two decades on the water, speaks about her spectrum of positive and negative experiences of fishermen interacting with the boating communities. She discusses the consistent financial support tourism boat businesses such as hers provide to the lobster industry, the actions she has taken to make sure she does not jeopardize fishermen's gear, and the coexistence of two groups of people trying to make a living in a similar manner, the fishermen and the tourism boats.

Collection Description:

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NS: Natalie Springuel (Interviewer)

BT: Brenda Thomas (Interviewee)

[00:00:00.00]

NS: – just get us rolling here. Just to check the levels and that good stuff. So, why don't we start with you saying your name and if you'd spell it to, that would be great.

BT: Sure. I'm Brenda Thomas. That's B-R-E-N-D-A-T-H-O-M-A-S. I'm a professional sailor and I live in Rockland, Maine. I've been a professional sailor in mid-coast Maine for almost twenty-five years.

NS: Great. What kind of sailing do you do?

BT: I do traditional big boat sailing on national historic landmark schooners.

NS: Great. Your fleece says the *Isaac Evans*.

BT: Right.

NS: I've seen the *Isaac Evans* out on the water. It's a beautiful boat.

BT: Well, thank you. So, the *Isaac Evans* was built in 1886 in Mauricetown, New Jersey. Originally built to be a cargo vessel, a vessel that would work Delaware Bay, harvesting oysters.

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BT: So, she was a sailboat doing that until 1946 when they took her rig out, they put an engine in, so that she could compete with other boats that had engines to do the same thing. She carried on harvesting oysters that way for decades before she was actually sunk in the mud to preserve her. Then, in the early 1970s, Doug and Linda Lee, who now operate the North End Shipyard in Rockland, Maine, and own the schooner *Heritage*, the *Isaac Evans* was their first boat. They pulled her up and they brought her to the Bath Maritime Museum here in Bath, Maine and spent the better part of over two years rebuilding her to carry a different cargo, and that would be guests, passengers, from all over to come sailing here in this beautiful Penobscot Bay area.

NS: That's great. That's great. What do you do today? Do you still have the *Isaac Evans*?

[0:01:59.1]

BT: I just transferred ownership of the boat after owning her for nineteen seasons. I'm now a single mom and I have an almost seven-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter. I was finding that it was impossible really to do two jobs that I would like to give a hundred percent to. Being a schooner captain, it's not just hopping on the boat and saying hi to the guests and raising the sails and going sailing. There's maintenance. Sometimes huge maintenance. It's a hundred and thirty-two year old boat made out of wood. There's varnish, and there's paint, and there's carpentry, and mechanics, and plumbing, and electricity, and all the things that go into maintaining the boat itself. But as a business, there's also all the social media, and the answering the phone, and making reservations, and processing credit cards, and all the stuff that goes into that – bookkeeping, and hiring, and firing, and all that.

[0:03:01.3]

BT: I've always been a one-person show, doing all of that. When I added kids to the mix, being a mom is a one hundred percent all in thing as well. In the summertime, I'd be gone for six days at a time. My parents are two hours away in Wilton, Maine. I would not see my kids for a week at a time. I'd be out on the water doing what I love, but it didn't seem right. I wasn't there like I had been before kids. So, I wasn't doing either job the way I wanted to. So, it's not a job that you exit from quickly or easily. So, took some time to figure out an exit plan. There are new owners at the North End Ship Yard doing a rebuild projects and they have big plans to rename the boat back to what she was originally named. Hopefully, they'll be ready for sailing season this year. I hope they're successful.

[0:04:01.9]

NS: That's great. That's great. I understand the challenges. I have a ten-year-old and it changes everything.

BT: It does. It really does.

NS: You want to be really present for your kids.

BT: Absolutely. I'm just amazed at how fast the time has passed already. You don't get that back.

NS: Yeah. I totally get that. So, I know that there was a particular story that you wanted to share.

BT: I have so many stories.

NS: I would love to hear some of your stories. I could ask you a million questions, but I want to make sure we get the stories that you are excited about.

BT: Sure. Well, it's not so much that I'm excited about this story, but it's in the front of my mind because of the Fishermen's Forum. Though I'm not a fisherman – I mean, I have a non-commercial lobster license, which a lot of the fishermen would probably roll their eyes at. My now seven year old son is just – he's thrilled with the idea that he can go down and catch his own lobsters. He's got his own boots and his own gloves. He hauls his trap. It's right there next to shore, so we don't have to go out on a boat or anything.

[0:05:07.9]

BT: I've spent a lot of time on the water. I'm only out there during the summer. We sail from the beginning of June to the beginning of October. There's a lot of water out there and there always seems to be a butting of heads as to who owns that space or how we conduct ourselves in that space. Over the twenty-five years that I've been out there every summer, doing roughly twenty miles of the bay every day, from anchorage to anchorage with people from all over, and all ages – I specialized in family trips. So, I had kids on board almost every trip. Clearly, not in September, but the rest of the season, it was families. One particular case, we had a really big high-dollar New York film crew on board. We had been chartered by the Maine Office of Tourism to host this film crew so they could get footage of the schooner and our beautiful area. All that footage was going to be used, and was used, in the 2017 campaign, countrywide.

[0:06:31.4]

BT: So, we've got this film crew on board. We're at anchor in Owls Head Harbor. The film crew wants to get up to do sunrise shots. Everybody thinks of sunrises and sunsets. Then, people have a vision of Maine, when they think of Maine. They were trying to capture that on film. We figured out what sunrise was going to be, what twilight was going to be. We agreed we were going to meet at five o'clock, on deck, be ready to head out and shoot. Of course, lobstermen are an early bunch. They get up. They've got their boats. They're warming up the engines, making sure they've got their bait and everything they need for the day's haul. Then, they start heading out.

[0:07:21.7]

BT: This one boat, dark hull, really big boat, is revved up before they're even outside of all the other moored boats, coming right at us. They're going fast. We're all on deck. It's really dark still. He comes right by our transom and he throws this huge wake. He's got the music as loud as it will go. As he passes, just by our stern, he steps back away from the wheel, out of that area, and says to his sternman really loudly, "I hope we woke all them up." It was just like – and then he laughed. He's like, [imitates laughter]. He was so proud of himself to think that he was going to rock the boat enough and yell loud enough and have his music on loud enough that he was going to interrupt the morning for these – he doesn't know that it's a film crew, but for these perceived guests that were somehow "interfering" with his space. Or?

[0:08:32.4]

BT: I don't know what the perceived encroachment would have been. So, I put out on Facebook – I know the name of the boat and now I know who it was. I mean, it's a small community. What I wanted was to have a face to face conversation with that person, but learning what I've learned, it wouldn't be a conversation that would benefit anybody. So, what I did was I looked back and I calculated how many lobsters I've purchased in my now nineteen years of ownership. At that point, it was only eighteen years. Then, I expanded that to cover what I do as an industry, which is very specific to our area. There's no collection of traditional sailing ships represented anywhere else in the world like there are between Camden and Rockland. Fourteen, mostly national, historical landmark vessels taking people from all over the world on three to six day vacations.

[0:09:40.1]

BT: These people are flying, driving. They're getting here and they're here to see our Maine, in how they perceive it. Then, they come out and they have an experience like that. It's not just that experience. Keeping in mind I specialize in family trips, the gestures that some of these guys do as they come purposely close so that we can be sure to see their lewd, suggestive gestures, it's embarrassing. It's awkward. It's upsetting to a lot of the guests, especially the mom of the eight-year-old girl who's looking over going, "Mommy, what's he doing with that hose?" You know? This is audio, but you can imagine what they are.

[0:10:39.4]

BT: The fishermen in Stonington making a t-shirt that they sold right there on the waterfront store with a big rear end with drooped drawers below it saying, "The Deer Isle smile." It's cute and funny on one hand, but there was a time when you couldn't sail around Stonington without getting mooned. So, the gestures, the fishermen that come by – I had an instance near North Haven last September. It was super windy. We were reefed down. We had a reef in the mainsail. We were closed hauled. I was gauging our pass with this lobsterman. We were the only two people out on the water that day. And I'm already behind schedule. I know I've got a long beat back to Rockland from North Haven. The wind was against us the whole way. People are expecting to be back at ten o'clock that morning and we're already well passed that. We're going to have to figure out how we're going to serve them lunch because you can't not feed them, you know? [laughter]

[0:11:51.8]

BT: This guy is hauling traps and I was like, "Okay, if I tack to avoid him –" I can't head up because I'm already head up as high as I can, but if I tack to avoid him, I'm going to add at least another hour to our return time. It's a big old slow boat, and that's just all there is to it. I'm trained to know what my heading is and I can tell if it's a crossing situation or a collision situation. If he had just stayed where he was, we would have been fine. He wasn't even hauling a trap, but he purposely engaged his engine, came over, and hit us. I called the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard came down to the shipyard that afternoon after we got back. He interviewed me. Went over and interviewed him. It was a totally unnecessary collision with no damage. It was done to make a point. My point is: what's the point? What is the point?

[0:12:58.3]

BT: One time, similar area, a lobsterman crossing back and forth in front of us. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, as we're on a constant heading. Finally, comes straight at us and real close by on my starboard side. I'm back aft. It's a ninety-nine foot long boat. So, he finally gets back to me and I raise my hands in a "what gives" gesture because we're not going to be able to have a conversation. In a situation where most people would have given him the finger, like, "Seriously buddy, what's all this about?" But I gave him hands up, "What's going on?" kind of thing. He yells over, "You're playing; I'm working." I was like, "I'll tell you what." If any of those lobstermen who feel that way could take a minute – take a day, take a week – and come see what we're doing, they'll see that there's not a whole lot of play for us.

[0:14:03.1]

BT: We're hosting people that come to Maine to eat their product. We serve lobster every single trip. So, going back to what's the point, I figured, "All right. Well, I'll calculate how many lobsters I've bought in now nineteen years." That doesn't even include the four, five years I was a crew member before then. So, we're serving lobster bakes to these people three, four times a week with my schedule. I have shorter trips than a lot of the other boats. I figured it out. If you calculate what I purchased, which was – got to find my numbers here. So, this was a couple years ago. So, the eighteen seasons that I was doing the calculations for at that point, roughly five hundred and forty times that I served a lobster bake – not leftover lobster in dip or chowder or lobster rolls or anything like that – just the big lobster bake that is advertised as the hook – "Come and eat lobster on an island with melted butter dripping down your chin." That whole thing.

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BT: Five hundred and forty times I had done that. We serve an average of fifty pounds of lobsters every time we do that. So, if you figure all that out, that's thirteen and half tons of lobster. So, then it gets a little more complicated because you have to figure out the average market price during that time. I've paid as much as \$9.90 a pound to as little as \$2.50 a pound. So, what I did was I just averaged that. I said, "Okay. My average was five dollars a pound." I could go back and add up all my receipts for purchase of lobster, but just for the sake of this average, that's \$135,000 dollars of lobsters that I've purchased myself. But if you multiple that out over the industry, from Camden to Rockland, fourteen boats in those just eighteen years – okay? You with me? – it's almost two hundred and fifty tons of lobsters and nearly two and a half million dollars.

NS: Wow.

[0:16:39.6]

BT: We're mooned, sworn at, cut off. We had a guy – another one in Owls Head – come by the stern so fast and through such a wake that my – I don't have an engine in my sailboat; I have a yawl boat. It's set up in a particular way in the stern to push. He went by and he rammed our

yawl boat into the stern so bad that it popped planks. We were heading back to Rockland that morning. We had to have the electric pump on and a hand pump just to keep it afloat to get back to the dock. They think it's funny. They will take our stern on purpose.

[0:17:26.3]

BT: It's almost like politics. You talk about Republicans and Democrats and them and they. I don't think it should be like that because clearly not all lobstermen or not all fishermen are that way. Unfortunately, the cases like that are the ones that stick in your mind because they are heightened. Your emotions are heightened and your body is in that fight or flight reaction to something that's totally unexpected, and quite frankly, totally uncalled for. So, not all lobstermen are that way. That same morning that the lobsterman came by our transom and had his music on and was purposely trying to wake us up, we were out in the yawl boat with like, two-hundred thousand dollar piece of equipment filming this underwater shot. Another lobsterman came by to check on us.

[0:18:36.8]

BT: I said, "No, this is what we're doing." He said, "Okay, well, you just look like you were adrift. I just wanted to make sure you were okay." That's the two ends of the spectrum. Same morning, same harbor. What's the point?

NS: You've been on the water for a couple decades or more.

BT: More than two decades, yeah.

NS: Has it changed in that time?

BT: The one thing that I think has changed is I haven't – toward the end of my career with the *Isaac Evans*, I didn't see as much bait on the deck in the morning as we did. But I stopped anchoring near Stonington. Couple reasons. Early in my career, I didn't know better. Some of the other captains in the fleet, who have been doing this way longer than I have, wouldn't anchor in Stonington. They'd stop and they'd do afternoon trips for the guests so they could go stretch their legs and visit a shop or whatever, but then they would move off to one of the anchorages in the nearby islands. I was like, "I wonder why they're doing that. That seems like a lot of extra work." Then, I started just staying overnight in Stonington. All right. So, the lobstermen are getting up depending on what time of the year, but earlier in the season, like June, they're up three o'clock in the morning because the days are so long.

[0:20:04.3]

BT: So, they're typically up before sunrise. They'll run by and they'll just toss some bait on deck. Then, of course, there's so many there. It's a huge amount of lobstermen there. The water gets choppy and things start bouncing around. Of course, there's the ones that make it choppy on purpose, [laughter] like the one in Owls Head. So, I just think – well, I wonder if they perceive beyond the "we're working, you're playing" mentality – I wonder if they think that we're

interfering with their gear. I think that's really important to point out. First of all, I don't have an engine on the schooner. So, we're not chopping things up. Although we have a propeller on our yawl boat, we, through great expense, have a stainless steel cage around that propeller, not only to protect their gear, but to save us a headache. Because there are times you need that yawl boat and you don't want to be in a situation where you pick up a trap and then you're a sitting duck.

[0:21:17.9]

BT: When we occasionally will pick up a trap, I have a chain on my head rig that comes right down to the stem, right where the water line meets the water. There's a big shackle there. So, conditions have to be just right, but sometimes it'll catch right on the shackle pin up there. When it does, I can almost immediately tell because of how the boat handles. Even though she is a big heavy boat, even just one trap, or one buoy with a series of traps, almost acts like an anchor. So, I can tell just by the way the boat handles that we have – we always say – trap on.

[0:22:00.7]

BT: My crew has spent a lot of time making sure we don't just go down with a knife. Because that would be the easy way. Making sure, if we have to cut it, that we've got something that we can hang on to it and tie something onto it so it doesn't get lost because the whole ghost trap thing and clearly, there's a lot of money. Every time you see a buoy, there's the line, there's the trap, there's the bait, there's everything that's lost if that gets cut. I'm aware of that. I'm not out there just going through every place thinking, "So what if we cut a trap?" So, I don't know that fishermen, lobstermen understand the lengths that we go to, to a point where it was 2015, I caught two traps in that spot that I just described. My mate, we were tacking very near a bunch of islands. This is over by Stonington.

[0:23:04.7]

BT: I thought I had enough room to go down into the yawl boat and get the yawl boat started to push myself away from the island. I did that and we were well off the island, but the moment I turned the yawl boat off, those traps dragged me right up into the wind and I couldn't bear off. My mate went down. I said, "You've got to get these traps off. We're getting close." She got one of them off, but not the other one and we ran aground. That grounding caused by lobster gear cost me over sixty-thousand dollars, and I almost lost my boat because it happened about ten minutes after high tide and by the time we had run aground, the water was going fast enough that I couldn't pull her off. So, she was high and dry. Imagine a ninety-nine foot schooner, two-masted topsail rig schooner, laying on her portside on the top of a rock.

[0:24:08.5]

BT: So, when the tide came in, she didn't float. I couldn't even tell you what angle she was at. I have a picture of it. When I made it onboard at the next high tide, which was two-thirty the next morning, you could not walk on deck. We had to get ropes to climb up onto the boat. So, when the tide came in, she filled up. She didn't float off. She filled up. So, she was grounded and sunk at the same time, all because of two lobster traps.

NS: Because the traps – you couldn't catch the right wind.

BT: The traps were at the bow and they were pulling us toward the island. I was trying to bear off the island to get around.

NS: Because by then the trap lines had caught?

[0:25:01.8]

BT: Right. Yeah. They were on the bow. Like I said, my mate was able to get one off just less than a minute before we actually ran aground. So, instead of dragging two buoys and whatever was attached to them – I imagine there were more than just one trap per – because the pull was – we were unable to combat the pull of whatever was on those buoys.

NS: Did you have customers on board?

BT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was the first day of a pirate adventure cruise. We were heading to a lobster bake. We got everybody off the boat. We actually had our lobster bake while the tide was going out. We watched the boat –

NS: Just go down.

BT: – come to rest right on top of a rock. Yeah. So, if that's an argument for the behavior, I want it to be very clear that we honor that gear. I think I speak for all the sailing boat captains. We don't pick gear up on purpose. We take it seriously. It's not a joke. It's not a "just cut the damn thing and get it out of here, who cares?" That's not how we view it at all.

[0:26:22.0]

BT: I wish there were a way for the two to coexist with a common understanding that we are out there to make money, we're out there to provide something that our tourists are specifically seeking. They provide the lobsters. We provide a format for them to enjoy it. There's no reason that we can't coexist and be supportive of one another. I don't know how that happens. I had a lobsterman in Stonington moon me one afternoon. We were at anchor. We were right there with all the lobster boats. He zips by in a little skiff with a couple of other guys and he mooned us. I've got kids on board.

[0:27:22.6]

BT: They zip around the harbor and then they go to a lobster boat. We've been watching them the whole time. He goes to his lobster boat. Here I am, I am a woman, [laughter] and he's a big lobsterman. I've had experiences with lobstermen already. It took all that I had to go over, but I went over in my yawl boat. I said, "Look, I'm the captain of that sailboat over there that you've just mooned. If you can't afford one, I'd be happy to buy you belt." "Oh, geez. That wasn't me. I don't know what you're talking about." I'm just trying to find a way to approach them that's not

aggressive, but to get the point across. We're all out there doing the same thing. If anybody thinks that a schooner captain isn't working, they are out of their minds.

[0:28:22.0]

NS: Earlier you were saying that there's less bait on the boat in the morning.

BT: True.

NS: What do you think the trend is in terms of the anxiety between the two industries?

BT: I would have to say that it's probably level. I don't see the less bait on the deck in the morning as a significant change. I think there may be less incidents of the Deer Isle smile as well. Overall, I don't think you could talk to any schooner captain – and I don't know if this translates over into recreational sailors as well. I assume it does, but I don't want to make that step to say that definitively. The crossing situations, the thrown wake situations, the you're anchored too close to my trap, you don't care about our gear, the swearing, the gesturing, hasn't changed. I think mostly it's the younger lobstermen.

[0:29:36.2]

BT: I find a lot more mutual respect from the older lobstermen. The gentleman that came over that morning in Owls Head because he thought we were adrift and he just wanted to make sure we were okay was an older lobsterman. So, don't know if it's a generational thing. I don't know if it's an educational thing. I don't know if it's an entitlement thing. I don't know. It just seems like they're angry about something. [laughter] You know? I think their anger is misdirected, if that's the case.

NS: If we could share your story, who would we share it with?

[0:30:15.7]

BT: Well, you're free to share it with anybody. I would hope that my story comes across as an olive branch. See it from my side too. Like I said, I would love to have a conversation with the person who did that, if it could be done in such a way that there wasn't defensiveness or an attack. It wouldn't be brought that way. It would be like, "I saw you do this. Can you help me understand why you would behave that way?" Certainly, I know I've never done anything to hurt his gear, hurt his boat, hurt him personally. I have no idea who this person even is. Having a conversation about what you're trying to accomplish by that behavior. Maybe there's an educational component that could happen, and come to an understanding that hey, we are all just sharing this water together. There's no reason for that behavior.

NS: Yeah. What do you love about being a schooner captain?

[0:31:30.1]

BT: [laughter] There's so much. A lot of the guests think that I step onto the boat in early June and just go sailing. I've worked for a lot of different captains who have different philosophies of how to be a captain. I've tried to cherry pick the things that I found admirable from all of those captains and mush it into one. I can't even explain. There's no way in words. Or even if the words were combined with images, there's no way to explain, especially that first time we go sailing every season because it is a very cyclical business. There's a mourning in the fall when we're approaching that last trip and I know it's going to be months before I sail again.

[0:32:28.5]

BT: Although, at the same time, I'm looking forward to – I just want to be home in my own bed and I don't want to say hello to another guest and I don't want to answer that question for the thousandth time this season. So, I'm ready for a break. I'm ready for some privacy. I'm ready to not be that crazy busy stressful. But that first trip in June when the sail goes up and the yawl boat engine goes down and I fall off the wind, and the sail stretches, and those lines stretch, there's a sound, and there's an absence of sound that goes with that sound that I can't – and there's the feel of my hand on the spoke of that varnished wheel. I can feel that whole boat. That's what made me become a sailor. I went to school for economics and accounting.

[0:33:34.1]

BT: I'm supposed to be in a bank somewhere with a business suit and high heels. The first time I ever went sailing – I didn't sail as a kid. So, the first time I ever went sailing I was in my early twenties. It was actually a payment for doing some bookkeeping for one of the boats. I was moonlighting. I was working at a bank, Camden National Bank. I worked at a bank for six years. Just to earn some extra money I started moonlighting for a schooner called the *Wendameen*. She used to be up here. She's now down in Portland. That was my first sailing trip of my life. It was a one night trip, August 13th and 14th of 2000 – excuse me – get my decades right – 1993. It changed my life. I was just like, “You make a living doing this?” It was so far beyond my scope of experience that I was just – “I don't have to sit inside and shuffle papers around all day? I can go out and make a living doing this?” If you've not felt it, there's no way I could explain what it is to love about being a schooner captain. I love being my own boss. I love varnishing. I love sanding and painting and varnishing.

[0:34:55.7]

BT: Most people wouldn't, but I love that. There's something about maintaining an old wooden boat that is so fulfilling to me. Sitting in a boatswain's chair scraping grease off a Douglas Fir mast that's eighty-two feet above the water, I love that. [laughter] It may sound crazy to especially most of the women around, but I love that. I don't mind getting dirty. I love troubleshooting engines. I love plumbing. I love power tools. I love meeting all those people. I'm an introvert, so to be in that job for as long as I was in, it took a huge amount of energy. I had to learn ways to protect myself. Protect isn't probably the right word. But preserve myself, because from early June to early October, you're on. It's almost like a theatrical performance every time.

[0:36:01.4]

BT: You can't have just had a miscarriage. You can't have just had a fight with your husband. You can't be sick. None of those things matter to these people. They're coming here for their version of a Maine experience and you have to provide it. It doesn't matter how you feel or what you're thinking or what you're going through. You have to be that extrovert. You have to keep them safe. You have to provide the platform for their expectation. I love that part too. I love problem solving. I love being versatile. There's just so much. I could go on and on and on.

NS: Having spent the last couple of days interviewing people here at the Maine Fishermen's Forum, I've been asking what do people love about the work that they do. There are so many parallels with what you love about being a schooner captain to what many fishermen are saying that they love about being a fisherman – the hard work, the troubleshooting, the problem solving the getting dirty, the being your own boss, the freedom of the sea, all those pieces. There's so much commonality there.

[0:37:13.1]

BT: Wouldn't it be great if we could meet on that common ground and go from there? That's all I'm saying. So, if you can see that through those interviews, maybe this interview can somehow be the groundwork for that platform. I hope it is.

NS: Great. Thank you so much –

BT: You're very welcome.

NS: – for coming in and telling your story.

BT: Thank you. Thank you.

NS: Yeah.

[0:37:42.6]

END OF TAPE