

Interviewee Name: Ernest Kelley, Tuddy Urquhart

Project/Collection Title: Jonesport Historical Society

Interviewer(s): Charlie Alley, Bill Plaskon

Interview Location: Jonesport, Maine

Date of Interview: June 11, 2004

Interview Description: Charlie Alley and Bill Plaskon ask Ernest Kelley and Tuddy Urquhart about the process of getting permission to build a herring weir in the waters surrounding Jonesport, Maine, and about specifics on constructing and using a herring weir. Urquhart also draws a basic diagram of the weir he and Kelley used when they were weir fishermen and provides a simplified explanation of how they work.

Keywords: Maine, Jonesport, fishing, herring, weirs, traditional knowledge, historical fisheries, historical fishing practices.

Collection Description: Audio/Video interviews from The Jonesport Historical Society, transcribed by the Mapping Oceans Stories (College of the Atlantic) class in Fall 2020.

Citation:

Kelley, Ernest and Urquhart, Tuddy, The Jonesport Historical Society Oral History Interview, Transcribed by Mapping Oceans Stories 2020 class in collaboration with The First Coast (June 11, 2004), by Charlie Alley and Bill Plaskon, # of pages, Maine Sound and Story. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcribed By: Truth Muller

EK: Ernest Kelley

TU: Tuddy Urquhart

CA: Charlie Alley

BP: Bill Plaskon

Track 1: [00:12:58]

[START OF TRACK ONE]

Charlie Alley: [0:00:00] This is June 11th, 2004, and we're in Charlie Alley's house, and we're going to do an interview with Tuddy Urquhart and Ernest Kelley. Here they are here, if you want to introduce yourselves.

Tuddy Urquhart: I'm Tuddy Urquhart.

Ernest Kelley: And I'm Ernest Kelley.

CA: Could you explain to us the first thing you do when you decide you want to build a weir?

EK: Well, you have to go to the town office and make out an application to get a permit. And from there, you have to have it in the paper; it has to be published for seven days. And then, if you get the town permit, you have to go to [the] state, and you get a state licence, and then you start to build the weir. [laughter] You got to go and get your brush and your stakes and your (binder?), and that's the start of it. Of course, you've got to give the dimensions of the weir, the length of the wings.

CA: [0:01:16] What is the purpose of putting it in there? Is it solely if someone don't want you to have it, they come and stop it, try to stop you?

EK: Yeah, yeah. We was stopped once.

CA: Do they have an open hearing so everyone can come?

EK: Yeah.

CA: The town has a hearing?

EK: Yeah, that's why it's posted the seven days. They have a hearing in the town office before they'll give you a permit, and [if] no one appears against you, you'll get the permit. And if they do, you probably won't get it.

CA: Now, when you go get this, if you want to build it, and it comes ashore on someone else's land, can they say, "No, I don't want you," or can they make a deal with you or something, or what?

EK: Well, far as I know, we put in for one of [inaudible], and we couldn't build within five hundred feet, wasn't it, Tud?

TU: [00:02:10] Something around that.

EK: We was denied the permit because he had it within five hundred feet of Great Pond Island, so we didn't get the permit.

CA: Now, you say you get the town's, and then you get the state's.

EK: Yeah.

CA: Now, what does the state process? The same thing? Do they have a hearing, too?

EK: No. No, you just make out the blanks, same as you do on any of them.

CA: Okay, just like a licence?

EK: Yeah. But now, I don't know whether you'd ever get one or not because you got to put up a lotta money now. Then you only had to buy the licence. Now, you got –

CA: I can imagine.

EK: Last I knew, it was five hundred dollars, but I don't know how much now.

CA: Which was it –? How much was the licence when you was fishing?

TU: Oh, it wasn't hardly anything.

EK: No.

TU: But the money you put up is so that when the weir goes down, it's for them to take the stakes up.

CA: Take the stakes up. Okay.

Bill Plaskon: Now, who keeps the money? The town?

EK: The state.

BP: [0:03:11] Oh, the state. And then, if you don't dismantle the weir, then the state comes in and does it.

EK: Get your money, and they'll take care of it. Where there are all of these weirs were left, and they never had no money to take them back out over the year.

CA: How do you determine where you want a weir? Do you watch the places and see where herring are tending? How do you determine where you're going to put your weir?

EK: We watched the herring. At night, just after dark, they'll start, and you'll watch them night after night where they go, and you'll have some idea where you're going to build that weir.

CA: Now, you say you have to go in the winter to get your stuff?

EK: Yeah, that's what we done in the early spring.

CA: Yeah.

EK: We went – well, didn't we go in Black Woods one year?

TU: Yeah.

EK: We went up and asked the man, and he wouldn't let us. And then the state was cutting it, and all we had to do was go get it.

TU: [0:04:11] They put –

EK: Yeah, he wouldn't let us cut it.

CA: Now, what was that you got? Was it stakes or brush?

EK: No, this was brush we got up there.

TU: That's brush.

CA: Brush. Okay.

EK: Yeah. We didn't have too many stakes a year. We did go up north and get some one year.

TU: We cut some brush one year over on the – between Jonesboro and Machias. Remember by that pond there?

EK: Oh, yeah.

TU: We got a lot in that area.

EK: (Beasley's Lane?).

BP: What do you call brush?

TU: Most of it we got for nothing.

EK: Just go cut it.

TU: You'd just go cut it.

BP: What do you call brush? What do you use?

EK: Small birch.

BP: Small birch?

EK: Or spruce.

BP: And what's the purpose of that? What does that do?

EK: Well, that would –

CA: Well, why don't we explain how you build a weir, and then you'll understand.

BP: Okay.

CA: Okay, first thing when you go build a weir, tell them what you do.

EK: You go to drive the stakes first. You have it mapped out what you want, and you have to drive the stakes. Usually, you'd drive them, what? Six feet apart?

TU: [0:05:14] Yeah.

EK: About six feet apart.

BP: How do you determine, when you map it out, how big it's going to be, what the shape of it is? Do you do that yourself? You map it out yourself, depending on where you're going to put it?

EK: Yeah, that would be in the application you'd make out to get the permit. When you start it, you start out with two corner poles [inaudible] and then go out round if you wanted a fifteen-fathom swing, they called it. Then you'd putt around, and then you'd drive your stakes around.

CA: Now, how far did you plan on getting your stakes down there when you drove them?

EK: Oh, land, we could drive them five, six, seven feet up in there.

CA: Yeah, just, that was easy to drive?

EK: Yeah.

TU: Yeah.

BP: How do you drive them in?

EK: We made a pile driver, what we called a pile driver. We had a platform. We had a tripod with a [inaudible], and usually, they used a motor, but we done it by hand. Had a maul on the end.

CA: [0:06:24] You have a big square block of –

EK: Square maul.

CA: – of weight –

EK: The way the (shivs?) was – we used Cecil's. Cecil let us have his a lot. Alfred –

TU: Alfred.

EK: [inaudible] But we made one there and used one a year or two.

CA: Now, driving your stakes, how big stakes did you have? How big round were they?

EK: Oh, probably about six, ten inches.

CA: How much did you cut them off at the top when you cut them?

TU: About six inches.

CA: About six inches?

EK: About six, on the top.

CA: And when you cut them off, in the pound – and what tide did you cut them off at? About half tide?

EK: Yeah, just about half tide.

CA: Yup.

EK: Then, we got what they called – they call them ribbons; we called them binders.

CA: Yeah, that's what we called them – binders.

EK: That's why I liked going to Spruce Island; you could go three, four stakes. They had some awful long, narrow [inaudible].

CA: [0:07:26] Yeah.

BP: You weaved these in around the stakes?

CA: No, no.

EK: No, just spread out around them.

BP: Right up around the back side?

EK: [inaudible]

CA: On the inside.

EK: On the inside. Seize them on and spike them.

CA: How many sets of binders did you have on yours?

EK: Two.

CA: Just two.

EK: Top.

CA: I think Cecil had three, probably, down there when I was in. I don't know how you could explain to people – do you know how you explain how you put the binders on?

BP: I just want to hit pause.

[Recording paused.]

Unknown: Nobody today coming to Jonesport would know what a weir is.

EK: No, because there's not a one around now.

Unknown: If they didn't grow up here. So, someone can jot it on there.

EK: There's a good job for you.

[Recording paused.]

TU: Now this is the one up – we had up at [inaudible]. Then we had what you call a [inaudible] that go from here out as far as you want it. And then out here, there's an opening right here and an opening right there. The stakes go out round like that, back to there. The fish would come up on this side and hit that [inaudible], and they'd go in here. Of course, when they get in there, they just keep circling.

CA: [0:08:53] Going round and round?

TU: Going round and round.

[Recording paused.]

EK: Then we had a pocket off on [inaudible].

TU: Then, over on this side, we had another smaller pound; we called it a pound.

EK: Keeper.

TU: A pocket. I don't know what [inaudible] like that it was, though.

EK: It was pretty well like that. Yeah. [inaudible]

TU: Anyway, you could save up little lots of fish and put them in this pound. We got – what? – hundred hogsheads one time, wasn't it?

EK: We had a hundred hogshead [inaudible].

TU: Charlie Stevens took them. We kept saving up little lots and putting in there.

BP: Now, where would these stakes go in relation to what you just drew? How far apart would each stake be?

TU: Oh, probably – I wouldn't know for sure, but –

EK: I think it was right close to six feet.

BP: Every six feet?

EK: Yeah.

BP: And how big –? That typical diagram that you just drew there, what would be the size of it in diameter?

TU: [0:09:55] Oh, Jiminy.

EK: Probably would be about three hundred feet around it, from one mouth to the other, yeah.

BP: Okay, three hundred circumferences.

CA: [inaudible]

EK: [inaudible] three hundred feet.

BP: Right, okay.

CA: It'd be about a hundred feet across, then.

TU: But we would go up there in the night. I remember when the herring would come in in the evening, and we'd watch them. We'd go out in the morning; we wouldn't have any. So, Ernie says, "Let's go out and seine her right in the night." I said, "All right." We always had lines tied on the weir that we could grab without a flashlight or anything. And we'd know just what – we never had to speak to each other; we knew just what we had to do.

Unknown: Right.

TU: And we seined her. When it got daylight, Ernie says, "Well, we got to pick the mackerel out of the herring." And I said, "You've got to pick the herring out of the mackerel." I said, "We got all mackerel." And what was happening – the mackerel was coming in and driving the herring out. We [inaudible] took the mackerel. We didn't know what we was going to do with them. And this pound here would be built just like this here – same thing.

Unknown: [0:11:05] Same thing.

TU: You'd use the same stakes –

CA: The top binder probably was down, probably about a foot down from the top of the stake.

EK: Oh, no, probably about six inches.

CA: Six inches?

EK: Yeah, we had them quite close to the top of the stake.

CA: And the next one was down almost – it was low water mark?

EK: Almost to low water mark on the common tide.

CA: Common tides.

Unknown: Now, that was just to hold the net?

CA: The stakes together.

EK: The stakes together.

CA: Well, and some to put the brush on –

EK: And then you'd put your brush on the binders.

BP: Okay, and you'd just lash them on?

EK: No, we'd nail them on.

TU: Nail them.

CA: On the pound, you had bottom brush that you'd put on the outside of the binders. You'd put them down and nail them to the binders, and they'd fill that hole between the stakes.

EK: And then on the stakes, you'd cut poles, and you'd peel – they was softwood poles, spruce. We'd peel the bark off them and have them for top poles that we put the twine on the top.

CA: [0:12:13] You'd nail them onto the stakes.

EK: You'd nail them onto the stakes as you went around. And then you'd put your twine on it. The twine was usually about ten feet high.

Unknown: The brush was just to confuse the fish?

[Recording paused.]

CA: Yeah, that was to hold them in.

EK: [inaudible] And that brush would –

CA: Fill in with kelp and all kinds of stuff, so it's dark, and that'd hold fish in the weir. On the weir itself, you only had bottom brush?

EK: Yeah.

CA: But then you went [inaudible] you had –

EK: That was bottom brush

TU: Bottom brush.

CA: - bottom brush.

EK: And top, top brush.

CA: And then you had some brush that went to the top. You didn't use twine on the leaders.

EK: No.

[00:12:58]

[END OF TRACK 1]

CA: [0:00:00] Now, what equipment did you have to have to go stop-seining?

TU: You had to have two or three dories to put your twine in.

CA: You had to have a pretty good-sized boat, didn't you?

EK: What was she? Forty-three. [inaudible] boat we had.

CA: Now, some of these – they stored the twine right in the boat, didn't they? Some of it?

EK: Yeah, we did.

TU: Yeah, we had that.

EK: We did that. We weren't using them during the summer, so we'd store our twine until we used it.

CA: And she was equipped so you could live right aboard?

EK: Yeah.

CA: You could cook, and you slept in your bunks in there. You could sleep right there.

EK: We had everything. We lived right aboard, just in the cabin. I mean, the [inaudible].

CA: [00:01:04] And how much twine did the average stop-seiner take with him when he left?

EK: We had eight hundred pounds, didn't we? And a purse seiner, two purse seiners. That's what we had. Some had more, and some had less.

TU: We had three dories, didn't we?

EK: Yeah, and a seine boat.

TU: [inaudible]

EK: We had three dories and a seine boat.

CA: How did you determine who was going to have a cove?

EK: Well, whoever got there first, the way we looked at it. Some people went and put a dory in.

CA: Yeah, that's what I was going to say. Didn't they put a dory to try and hold the cove?

EK: Of course, we had to have plenty of anchor. We had to have – we kept one piece of twine, or two pieces for a pocket if we did run the twine out.

CA: Did most people observe that if you put a dory in a cove [inaudible]?

EK: Oh, yeah, they all did.

CA: They'd never shut that cove off if they knew you was tending it with that dory?

EK: Nope, that was it. We had a lot of seiners here at one time, and they had dories in a lot of the coves. You couldn't –

Unknown: [0:02:15] About how long was a dory?

EK: 22', 23' over on the top.

Unknown: From end to end?

TU: Yeah.

EK: Yeah.

Unknown: About how wide were they?

EK: Well, the one we got over to Canada was only about what, four feet wide?

CA: She was narrow, wasn't she?

EK: Yeah. she was. She was a big dory. She'd lug.

CA: When you started looking for them, what did you first – what time did you leave to go looking?

EK: Oh, him and I left here at five o'clock, up around the head of the bay and around Spruce Island, so we'd be there just the edge of that.

CA: About what time did you get out around the coves to look? After that?

EK: Oh, right at the edge of dark or after.

CA: And how long would you work looking at coves before you gave up?

EK: We'd give [inaudible]. You could tell if there's going to be any around. I mean, you can see –

CA: You must have had several coves you went in one night.

EK: Oh, yeah.

CA: [0:03:16] Okay. Now you go out in the evening, and you've found some herring. What did you do?

EK: Well, usually we had the dories right there, and we would go ashore –

CA: You'd go ashore?

EK: – and then we'd check them over again before we'd run the twine.

CA: Now, you'd tie it on the bank somewhere?

EK: Around a rock or something, a dock tie.

TU: A tree or something.

CA: Now, how did you get it out? Did you row it out? Did you have a motor?

EK: No, we towed it with an outboard.

CA: With an outboard? Towed around and then back to shore?

TU: Yeah.

EK: When I first started, you rowed it out. When I first started seining with my brother, you had to row it out. There were no outboards back then.

CA: Did the noise of the outboards scare the herring?

EK: Didn't seem to, no. We always towed it out with an outboard, him and I.

CA: Now, after you'd shut off and leave, what do you do? Go right back and just go to sleep until morning?

EK: Have a nap, and just before daylight, usually, we'd put a pocket on.

CA: Okay, explain –

EK: [0:04:17] You'd have a piece of twine –

CA: Explain [inaudible]

EK: – and then after that, then we'd [inaudible].

CA: A pocket is just – you make a big circle.

EK: Just like a weir.

CA: You make a big circle with the twine.

EK: Yep, put the anchors out.

CA: Anchor it out so you've got – and now explain how you got them off of that stop-seine and into that pocket.

EK: You add some rocks to it, and you sunk the mouth down, and they'd go out of that twin –

CA: When daylight come [inaudible]

EK: Daylight come; they go right into that pocket.

CA: And you'd bring the twine back up.

EK: And you haul that up, and you had them. Then the boat would come. We'd load it. Or take out what we [inaudible].

CA: What's the most pockets you ever put on for one set?

EK: We had seven down there in [inaudible] cove.

CA: In one set, you got seven pockets-full?

EK: No, we had four up in Great Cove once, wasn't it? We put two down and then two behind them.

TU: Yep.

EK: Because we never had no water up there, and we had about five hundred hogsheads there. And we never had no water, so we put two down, and then we put two more behind them and just run them right through, so we had the four pockets.

CA: [0:05:18] Now, did you ever have a situation that you had your pockets full, and your stop seine still had a lot of herring? What did you do? Just leave them in the stop seine?

EK: Just leave them in there. You [inaudible] –

CA: Until you got a chance to –

EK: Usually, some of the – most of the time, before the factories started closing, you didn't have to worry too much about a boat. In a day or two, you'd have a boat, and you'd take out. With some of them.

CA: Now, when you got herring, the first thing they'd do is they'd check them for feed.

EK: Yeah.

CA: Now, if they was (feedy?), could you leave them in those pockets, and they'd clean themselves up in a few days?

EK: Yeah, they'd clean themselves up. They'd clean up in two or three days.

CA: And I guess [inaudible] (feedy?), they'd been eating, and in their stomachs would be some of that stuff they'd been eating.

EK: Usually, it's when the moon's up, is when they'd be feeding.

CA: Now, when is the best time to go catching herring? It's when there isn't any moon, isn't there?

EK: Yeah.

CA: When it's perfectly dark. The moon isn't full.

EK: [0:06:20] But usually, it didn't matter. What I always saw, you never knew when you were going to see a herring in the cove or not.

CA: But I remember they always used to talk about – I think it was the August [inaudible].

EK: August [inaudible].

CA: That's when they [inaudible].

EK: [inaudible] be looking for them. But a lot of times, there'd be a lot of herring caught before the [inaudible].

Unknown: I've never heard that term before.

EK: Oh yeah, the August [inaudible].

CA: Now, when you went seining, you had to stay away, so far away from weirs, unless it was your own weir.

EK: Yeah.

CA: What was it? A thousand feet?

EK: You had to stay two thousand feet.

BP: Did the weather affect the fish? Would you catch as many fish if it was raining as if it was clear weather?

TU: I don't know if it made much difference.

EK: Yeah, no, I was going to say we got wet a lot of the time.

TU: We shut off – going into [inaudible], and you went somewhere, and your boys and I was –

EK: I went down to – was it Prince Edward Island?

TU: [07:23] I don't know.

EK: I went somewhere.

TU: I don't know – [inaudible] and (Carl?) –

EK: [inaudible]

TU: I was helping put the pocket on. I was running the outboard, and what we did – we'd tow the – when we'd get to the leader, we'd be going – try to be going fast enough that we could tip the outboard up and go in over it, and then let her drop back and pull it some more so you could bring it right up the leader. There was blowing all west, a gale of wind, and when I went in, to go in over that leader, I didn't get it in over far enough, and she got the wheel caught in the twine.

Unknown: Oh, boy.

TU: Well, I tipped the outboard up and locked it and was reaching out over clearing the twine out the outboard, and the lock slipped or something, and that outboard tipped back and went so quick, threw me right over. I lost my balance. I went overboard – [inaudible] clothes, boots, and all.

CA: [laughter]

Unknown: [laughter]

BP: [laughter]

EK: [0:08:25] When I got back, that's what I heard, and I said, "You can't trust him for a minute."

CA: Now, did most seiners own their own twine, or did most of them –? Did the factories supply the twine to them?

EK: Most of them, the factories supplied it so they could get the – so they could get the first –

CA: That way, they had digs into them?

EK: Yeah, they had the first refusal.

CA: Like the weir fishermen. Now, Harold, Al, and those fellows, they always had their first digs on the cuttings up at the co-op – up to Underwood's.

EK: Underwood. I had a barrel right there, my name right on it.

CA: Everyone had a weir – if you come in –

EK: [inaudible]

CA: You could get bait quicker than – just for ordinary lobster fishing.

EK: Well, usually Uncle Albert would have the barrels set out, and he'd fill them up during the day and have your names on them.

Unknown: Most of the bait came from the sardine factories?

EK: Yeah.

CA: Yeah.

CA: I don't know what year it was. It must have been the late '40s, but there was one charge of herring in the Eastern Bay that year. That was the year that they ran all the factories in Eastern –

EK: [0:09:30] Well, they had twenty-eight weirs in that bay, one.

CA: How long would you stay aboard the boat at a time, usually?

EK: Oh, the next day, you'd go home –

CA: You didn't use –

EK: – unless you had herring. Some had –

CA: If you had herring, would you stay there a week at a time?

TU: Yeah.

EK: Some would stay there, and the other ones would go home; you'd take turns. But if you never had no herring, you'd all go home, go clamming, tend your traps, or whatever.

CA: Okay, is that – I guess that's about it. Is there anything to wind this up?

[0:10:04]

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

