

MAINE SOUND AND STORY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE FIRST COAST

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVE PEABODY FOR THE FIRST COAST JONESPORT/BEALS
COLLECTION

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY GALEN KOCH

JONESPORT, MAINE, OCTOBER 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY GRIFFIN POLLOCK, GIULIA CARDOSO, GALEN KOCH

Interviewee Name: Steve Peabody

Project/Collection Title: The First Coast Jonesport and Beals

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

Date of Interview: October 2018

Interview Description: Steve Peabody, the Jonesport Lobster Co-op Manager, shares the changes he has seen in the industry from fisheries shifts to bait changes and what it is like to be a manager. He explains the idea of a fisheries co-op and how it affects other parts of the industry. He talks about the patterns of the days, independence and loyalty of fishermen, seasons, sea level change, and some personal ghost stories.

Keywords: Lobster co-op, management, ghost story, social life of industry

Collection Description: Audio interviews from The First Coast's residency in Jonesport and Beals Island, October 2018.

Citation:

Peabody, Steve, The First Coast 2018 Oral History Interview, (October 2018), by Galen Koch, 10 pages, Maine Sound and Story. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcribed By: Griffin Pollock, Galen Koch, Guilia Cardoso

GK: Galen Koch

SP: Steve Peabody

START OF STEVEPEABODY_JONESPORT_TFC_AUDIO_01

[0:00:00.0]

GK: I've done it before! There's a funny... I think it might be a boat, I might do boats. Just gonna have boat sounds. We're in a co-op, that's what it's gonna be like!

SP: It makes sense.

GK: Yep, makes sense. Alright, so I'll just have you say your first and last name.

SP: Steve Peabody.

GK: And Steve, where are we right now?

SP: The Beals-Jonesport Co-op in Jonesport.

GK: And can you just tell me a little bit about how you came to have this position and what your position is?

SP: Well the co-op opened in 1970 and I graduated highschool in '76. So I went fishing for five years, didn't really like the fishing end. Always worked around wharfs all through grammar school and high school, worked for Smith's Lobster for years. And I just ended up--there was an opening here at the co-op for a, just, you know, an employee and I applied for the job, I actually got it with the intention of maybe when the manager retired, I'd like to have the manager's job. And I knew the manager well, Calvin (Last Name). And I worked with him for 6 years and he retired at about 70 years old, and so I took over about--I started in April of 1980 and April of 1986 I took over as manager, and the rest is history! Heh.

[0:01:37.6]

GK: Has it changed a lot since you started in 1980?

SP: Oh, it's absolutely changed, it's changed tremendously. Just every aspect. When I started we had two diesel boats and the rest were gasoline. Now we have two gasoline boats and the rest are diesel. And I use... There's days we put 1,000 cans of bait out the door, we used to figure, y'know, 150 or 200. Back in the early years an average year for the co-op was like 500,000 pounds of lobsters and now an average is anywhere from 2 - 3 million. So it's changed a lot, we had the old wooden crates that had to be weighed individually, handled one by one, 'course now we transformed into the plastic stuff so all the standard weights, so you don't have to weigh the stuff, and the nests you can stack hundreds and hundreds of crates in the same area.

[0:02:49.3]

And with the volume of lobsters, it has to be faster and more efficient to get it all done. And at the time we had one set of scales, and loaded the truck one crate at a time, and we always figured that on a good night with everything working well, we could load 100 crates an hour. And now we have three sets of scales, we buy off three boats at a time, we bait up three boats at a time, and we're loading the truck, y'know, 200 an hour isn't out of the question when things are going good.

GK: 200 crates?

SP: An hour, right. So things have changed significantly. Forklifts and pallets and plastic crates, and the big bait toads, the bait used to be here, and we had four bins, wooden bins that sat on the wharf that held like forty bushel each, so that was 160 bushel capacity, and they were filled maybe twice a week and that's what we used for bait, and now like I say, we put 1,000 cans out the door.

GK: Where did that bait come from when it was being filled in that--

[0:04:03.1]

SP: Back in the early days, it was sardine factories right here on the Maine coast, Prospect Harbor, and Belfast, and Machiasport, and most of the bait was cut in, so leftovers from the factories after they were--after the fish were packed, and, y'know, certain times of year, there was what we called a "whole herring," which was where they were whole fish that were caught. But mostly cut ins. And now the bait comes directly off the trawlers and seiners and it's... You never see any cut ins anymore, 'cause there aren't any factories, the Canadians bought 'em all out and shut 'em down. And most of the fishermen have gotten accustomed to obviously the "whole herring" aspect. And the only variants we see through the years between spawn season and everything, is size, y'know, they'll range from small to huge depending on the time of year.

GK: And have you heard murmurings about the bait, what's happening with herring now and the quotas?

[0:05:15.1]

SP: There's a lot going on, I don't have contact inside enough to know the real, true fundamentals of what the changes are. I don't think any change is good, do one knows for sure and I don't think there's any changes that are going to be good. All I can do is just try to prepare as best I can for it to happen, and the amount of boats I have and the amount of bait I use, I need to be ready.

GK: Would you use something different, or would you...

SP: Well we do use other baits, we use what we call "hard-bait" which is haddock racks, or red fish, or skate, or flounders. Flounders are very scarce nowadays. We have a new form of bait, this pig hide. Back in the early years, they started out with cowhide, which didn't turn out well with the hair on it, y'know.

[0:06:16.5]

But the pig hide is a much better alternative, and I use a tremendous amount of that. I'm not looking at it as a complete alternative to a new source of herring, but they would be a great fill in. And we also use pogies. Back up into the--even the early 2000's, most fishermen wouldn't put a pogie on the trap, and now we load up in the spring when they're available, and we never get through the whole season with what we need, so we're looking to expand our holding capacity to handle more pogies when we can get them. And that all helps out on the herring volume we need for the boats!

GK: And so people wouldn't--Yeah, 'cause I... I think it's kind of funny, 'cause when I was younger, nobody was ever putting pogies on, and now everybody I know...

SP: Y'know, every fisherman, they all have their own ideas about bait, what works for them, and hey, good for them, and we do our best to accommodate 'em, but sometimes I get like six or eight, even ten different kinds of bait, they're all more--if I've got it, they're willing--I'm more than willing to accommodate 'em, give 'em what they want, and try to make 'em happy. And in turn they bring lobster! That's the name of the game.

[0:07:47.0]

GK: So when you were starting doing that in the '80s, was there a lot of other fisheries? Did this co-op handle any other type...

SP: Beef. Well, before I actually started working here, there was a company here that handled groundfish. Trawl fish and stuff like that. The co-op didn't actually buy 'em, they just... Technically the guy that was handlin' the fish, he just paid the co-op so much per pound of wharfage to handle his fish over the co-op dock. And I wasn't here so I don't have a big insight to that, how that actually run, or actually was profitable, or how much work was involved or really anything about it.

GK: But that used to happen down here at a time?

[0:08:36.2]

SP: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and then... Oh, mid-late '80s, the urchins became a gold rush, there was a lot of that going on through the winter months, and real late fall into late spring. And we

handled a lot of urchins, I didn't buy the actual urchins, I had different buyers here that were buying. I did the work for wharfage, and got paid so much a pound. Pretty good little income in the winter time when things were slow. We handled scallops for years, there was a period of ten or twelve years where I kinda backed out of the scallop business just because there wasn't enough scallops to really handle or make any money or anything, and everybody was kinda dispersing. The few boats that were fishing were selling 'em to this guy or that guy. But in the late years, we've kinda gotten back into the scalloping and doing pretty well, I have a pretty good amount of boats, so I can handle some volume and make money at it. 'Cause with all the rules and regulations, generally they have four days a week, Monday through Thursday, they can fish. So it certainly helps make the payroll in the winter time.

GK: And it's--what were the years there that it kind--that the scallops dropped off for you here?

[0:10:02.8]

SP: Uh.... Yeah, I'd have to really look, but I'm thinking like early-mid '90s through the early 2000s, there was quite a few years where I didn't buy at all.

GK: Wow, and they just weren't catching 'em? Is that--

SP: Well no, there were a few people catching scallops, but there was always somebody on every corner in a pickup with a nickel more and a penny more, and whatever. And people would lug their scallops to this other guy and I'm sittin' here all day long waiting, and it just came down that this wasn't enough volume to justify being here at night. I just kinda backed out of it, and after a few years, of course, the state has been working on the scallop catch, trying to improve it, good bad or indifferent, I don't know. Obviously the last few years of scalloping has been a little better, there's a lot more people in it, and I in turn can handle a little volume and it makes sense to do it.

[0:11:20.4]

GK: Yeah, can you just, for someone who may not know, kind of explain, 'cause you just said something that I think people don't always understand. Like alright, you could be buying scallops, and that fisherman could decide sell 'em to someone else, right?

SP: Mhm.

GK: So kind of explaining that they're free agents essentially.

SP: Yeah, absolutely. A fisherman is very independent, and that's why that fisherman, and God bless 'em, they are unique people, and again, just like with the bait, they have their own ideas, and to get a group of guys together and actually form a co-op and have a 99% participation is a pretty good trick to keep 'em all together, but we seem to be doing a pretty good job.

GK: And what does the co-op provide that other places might not provide?

[0:12:14.4]

SP: Uh, well... In these times there's really nothing. 'Cause the concept of the co-op was the fishermen were all selling to independent dealers, and the dealer was putting the profit that he made in his own pockets, so a bunch of fishermen got together and said "hey, let's put this profit in our own pocket," so they got together and formed this co-op. And with the object of basically selling their lobsters to themselves, reselling 'em on the market, and at the end of the year, whatever they made for the profit went in their own pocket after the business expense. And it was never intended to hurt or degrade the independent wharfs and buyers, that was never their intention, but it was a fact of the industry, so the independents had to step up and start paying their profits back to keep their boats, they kinda had to do it. And I get it, it wasn't an easy thing to do.

[0:13:23.0]

GK: Did the power just go off!?

SP: Yeah, it did. But y'know, (electrical sounds) they've all done pretty well considering all the uh...

GK: Here, we'll wait for this sound.

(laughs)

SP: Yeah, it's just my printer recycling. But, y'know, again we're not in business to harm anybody else, that's definitely not our intentions, but there's a lot of people in the world that don't like us because we kinda set the standard and mandate that they do what they do.

GK: Yeah, it's kind of like it's almost like an unintended...

SP: Consequence of owning your own business.

GK: Right, but then it's not really--I mean and if anything that I say or you don't wanna talk about something, that's totally fine, I sort of just will talk and talk. But you know, it's not--(phone rings) do you need to get that?

SP: Yeah, maybe.

GK: Okay, I'll turn this off for a second.

[0:14:24.8]

(Tape cuts)

SP: --I'll let him pull the trigger, if he won't send a truck down here today.

GK: Yeah.

SP: If I decide to hold onto 'em and something bad happens, I'm responsible, but if he decides to leave 'em, I go home and go to sleep and don't worry about it. He owns 'em.

(both laugh)

GK: Oh I see, yep. So he's got--you have a regular pickup person?

SP: Yep, yeah. I've been... Well, in my early career I sold for a number of different lobster companies. Probably high seven or eight different contacts. Early on in my career I kinda discovered on my own and my own way of doing things. I like to surround myself with one outfit that does really good, it's worked for me. A lot of the fishermen, a lot of other lobster buyers don't believe in that concept, they think the more people they have the better off they are. But in my particular cases, I think I've done just as well if not better by... Oh, I'm thinking it was like late '80s, early '90s, I started selling to Trenton Bridge Lobster, and I've been with 'em ever since.

[0:15:48.0]

And I do have a local pound, but the co-op has always had some fishermen that belong to it that own their own lobster pound. And they've always sold lobsters to these pounds for their fall fill. Which we still do, Trenton doesn't have an exclusive on every lobster by any means, but generally we're... They're buying my lobsters. I've had lots of people in the world want to, and I mean no offense, I told a lot of people "no" over the years because people used me good. And loyalty is something there isn't a lot of in this business. But I have it in every aspect. I have loyalty in my bay, I have loyalty in my lobsters, my fuel supply, everything I do. I try to surround myself with the best people. I take care of them and they in turn take care of me.

GK: Yep. And so when you say that, are there pounds that you sell to, are those the ones on Beals? There are some pounds on Beals.

[0:16:53.6]

SP: Yeah, I sell to Long Point Lobster on Beals, and like I said the co-op has since start in 1970, 'cause the owners were members of the co-op and now their heirs, children and grandchildren are all members and same principle, I gladly sell 'em what they need for lobsters.

GK: And so on a day like today, you've got, what did you just say on the phone? You have two people out?

SP: I got two boats haulin' and one boat taking out traps, which the tide is up so he'll be coming before too long. And the two that's haulin', it's hard to say, they might be here at noon time or they might be here at six o'clock.

GK: It's been super windy this month.

[00:17:49.24]

SP: Yeah, this fall has been one of the worst I can remember for steady wind, I mean it's been east, southeast, you know, these bad directions the whole time.

GK: And it changes on a dime it seems like. Have you noticed that?

SP: Yep, absolutely. We had an extraordinary summer, usually as far as heat, humidity, you might get a week in August that's a little uncomfortable. This summer, my God we had three months of nothing but extreme heat and humidity. It was actually really good weather so this is some sort of payback, whatever you wanna call it, but...

GK: Yeah, it's like I wonder if we'll get some sort of insane blizzard season. Probably! We did last year.

[0:18:40.4]

SP: You can't tell a thing, we had a lot of rain, maybe there's not a lot of moisture left that's gonna fall as snow! And I've seen it, you take this southerly, southeast, Sou'west wind and you don't get as much snow accumulation in the winter like that. And generally when you do get a big snowstorm, the wind'll come from the southern and rain it off, and the temperatures are definitely warmer. Those southerly winds are cold! It'll freeze a man and thaw a potato, but it makes for a wet winter, but I don't like snow. If I could avoid it, I will.

GK: Do you worry on days like this when you have people out there? I mean it's not so crazy, but do you ever have days when there's people out in their boats and you're worried that they're--

SP: Concerned for their safety?

GK: Yeah.

SP: Oh, not... Not on a personal level, I mean they're very independent people, they do what they want. Yeah, you have concern for everybody, you like everybody. If they're out, I'm assuming they wanna be there, and everybody--absolutely no one wants to see anything bad happen, everybody come back home tonight.

[0:20:04.0]

GK: But it is that sense of people--yeah, they make their own choices.

SP: Yeah, they absolutely make their own choices, yep. I've got a fisherman who's in actually a small outboard, and as long as I've known him, he'll come over here in some pretty rough weather in this little small outboard, and one time, seven or eight years ago, we had this one day in the fall and it came up screaming wind, I don't even remember what direction. But I basically made him leave his boat instead of sailing back across the reach over to Beals, wherever he puts it on the mooring or wherever. I was really worried about him going out, and it was so rough and choppy, so he tied it up and left it until the weather subsided a little bit. But very often I make people do things. (both laugh)

[0:21:02.7]

GK: That's good, taking a little control once in a while.

SP: Yeah, a little bit doesn't hurt I guess, in the right circumstance.

GK: When did you start seeing bigger boats? People start to get these really big--

SP: Oh, it was into the 2000's I mean. Used to be a 36' boat was an average boat, yeah there was some 38s, some 40s, but it wasn't like now, a 5 footer is a small guy, so to speak, 'cause we still do have a wide range of boats, but most of the new bigger fishermen are now 40+ boats. Used to have one lobster float, it was, oh I forget, they were like 18' wide and 40' long, and we handled one boat at a time, well now my float system is over 90' long on the south side, I have two sets of scales. And there's times that two boats have a struggle getting in there, you know! And then up on the western bridge end--(tape cuts)

[0:22:16.0]

END OF STEVEPEABODY_JONESPORT_TFC_AUDIO_01