



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLELL GENTHNER

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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DAMARISCOTTA , ME

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TRANSCRIBER: SHANNON HARRINGTON

CLELL GENTHNER: More (Willard?) than I did Charlie. I didn't talk with Charlie a lot.

KEITH LUDDEN: Let me just start with a little bit of housekeeping. It is August 29th, is that right?

CG: I believe, yes.

KL: We are in Damariscotta and we are talking to Clell Genthner, am I pronouncing that right? That is spelled G-E-N-T-H-E-R?

CG: G-E-N-T-H-N-E-R.

KL: Okay, Genthner. Okay Great! Thank you, I did not have that quite correct. We are talking about the (Stinson?) Cannery, and about purse seining, and fishing in general. Do you mind if I ask you what year you were born?

CG: Pardon?

KL: Do you mind if I ask you what year you were born?

CG: May 3, 1936. I'm seventy-five now.

KL: So you saw some of those hard times?

CG: I started fishing with Stinson with Hal Gilbert, we were partners. We stopped seining for Stinson back in the '60s. In '77 or '78, I believe, I started running the *Eva Grace*; the first named (ship?) in Stinson Seafood.

KL: That was named after one of his daughters, is that right?

CG: Pardon?

KL: That was named after one of his daughters, is that right?

CG: Yes.

KL: I understand that all of the ships were named after his daughters?

CG: Yes, [they were named after] all the ladies in the family.

KL: You were captain of the *Eva Grace*?

CG: Yes.

KL: When did you first start going on the boats?

CG: Back in high-school my partner and I went purse seine and (stop seining?) on our own, but we sold the factories; Lubec, North Lubec, and Stinson. Then I started strictly with Stinson in '65, I believe.

KL: You used a term a couple of times that I am not familiar with. Stop seining?

CG: That's shutting the coves off, yes.

KL: Can you explain that to me?

CG: Well, we go out in late afternoon into these coves, and check them out for sardines. We used an airplane so we could spot [the fish]. My partner would fly the plane and I'd do all the work with the nets. [I would] run the twine out to shut the cove off. We'd start on one shore, and go up around and on another piece of shore to block them so they couldn't get back out.

KL: Okay.

CG: Once you did that, you'd put anchors on the twine, and what they'd call pockets, they'd take another piece of twine and run it on the outside, and square it off, and sink the two floats. Come daylight in the morning, the fish would go off into deeper water, and they'd go through that hole and you would pick it up.

The carriers would come and take the fish from us. We would take a little pocket seine and make a circle and then five of us would drive the fish up into the carrier [boat]. It would be alongside us [and the workers would] pump the [sardines] into the carrier, and take them to Prospect, Bath, Belfast, and they'd process them.

KL: How did you get the nets out and pull them back in?

CG: The boats that we had had a hydraulic hauler and net-lift. We would take the twine off the shore, and put that through the power block. Then we would re-store it back into the dorys. Once you got it all made up, you put the dory back on the mooring and leave it until we got ready to use it again.

KL: Now, were these dorks towed behind the boat?

CG: Behind a skiff or a small boat that we would use, yes.

KL: Okay, so the netting would be folded up or stowed in that dory?

CG: Yes, it would be stored in the dory. Then, once we get ready to use them again, we'd go back onto the shore and tie it onto a rock, put an anchor out, start outboard, the little boat up and [my partner] would tell us where to go, how far to go, and "Come ashore!"

KL: Now, were you in communication with somebody in an airplane?

CG: Yes, we had radios.

KL: That must have been something to watch!

CG: Yes. It really was interesting, really. I mean, you'd never know what you would come up with in a load of fish. Sometimes you'd get them and sometimes a tide would come, or wind would come, and there would be a surf or undertow and it'd pick the twine up and the fish would go out on you. You'd lose them.

KL: It sounds like you started going on the boats maybe during World War II or thereabouts?

CG: I was out there '56. I started out of school. Then we got into stop seining in the early '60s. I used to go purse seining. We'd go up to Isle of Shoals off of New Hampshire and around Matinicus and them places in the fall and catch herring; we'd sell them to Stinson, or North Lubec, or (Holmes?); whoever would take some from us, that's the way we started.

KL: How did you negotiate that sale?

CG: Well, we'd call the company and ask them if they wanted any herring. We would go out and go fish for them. Once we got in with Stinson, we stayed with them. If we had excess fish that they couldn't handle, we would call one of the [other] companies and say that, "We got some extra fish here if you would like them, if not we will just hold onto them."

KL: There were associations with other companies, but you worked mainly for Stinson?

CG: Yes. We even sold fish to Canada in Blacks Harbor and other places.

KL: Where exactly is Blacks Harbor? Several people have mentioned that to me.

CG: I can't really tell you because I've never been there. Near Yarmouth, or I think it might be near Nova Scotia. Somewhere near there.

KL: Okay. I understand that there is a big cannery there?

CG: Yes.

KL: Did you spend a lot of time on the boat, I mean overnight?

CG: Nights, or weeks! Sometimes I'd get home at the end of the week to see the family, and get a shower, and some clean clothes and go back again. There's times when I would go seven days a week. Then, you would get a storm or something and we would get a little break. But most (of) the time we were running the clock.

KL: Running the clock? Meaning that you were hurrying?

CG: Well, they would want fish, so we had to stay and keep going right around the clock. I mean you would go at night and catch the fish, bring them in in the morning. Hopefully you got there in time that the plant would open. They would start right on them. They'd want fish for the next night, so we'd have to go again, and keep going.

KL: Is it pretty hard work?

CG: Yes, well, there is a lot of labor to it, but it's not real physical. It's not like working in the woods cutting lumber or digging clams.

KL: [laughter] What was a typical day like?

CG: A typical day for us?

KL: If there is such a thing as a typical day.

CG: We would get what rest we could get once we got the fish out. Like right now, this time of the afternoon, we would be getting ready to set sail depending on how far we had to go to the grounds where we fished. Some days, you might get a few hours to get up town. Go to the store and stuff. We would send one guy to go while the rest of us were working getting the boat cleaned up. Getting things ready for that night.

KL: Sometimes you would stay out for as much as a week?

CG: Well, we were always in every day, usually. But once in a while, if we didn't get any fish, we were offshore out around the other falls, or some places, instead of steaming two three hours back into Rockland or wherever we had to go. We would stay right there if we didn't have any fish. Then we would be there in time for the next night.

KL: Let me check something here. [keyboard typing] What kind of crew did the boat have?

CG: We had myself and five guys. There were six of us, usually. We sometimes would go with five.

[RECORDING STOPS AND STARTS]

KL: Sometimes you would what?

CG: I said sometimes we'd have six guys most the time, because if one guy was sick or something we could get back out with five of us. But it makes it that much harder... I mean [if] things don't go as smooth, it takes six guys. Everybody's got a little job to do, and they take care of it.

KL: So there were six men on the boat?

CG: Yes.

KL: Were there bunks for the men?

CG: Yes there were six bunks. [There was] a galley with a refrigerator and stove, all just like home. There was a shower and everything. A toilet...

So, one guy was engineer, he would take care of the engine. There was a cook aboard. We had an Italian cook, it was excellent! James Orlando. He was really a nice guy.

KL: So you had your own cook!

CG: Yes. We had whatever you would have at home. We had (meister with azsugel?) with the sauce and everything, and steaks. Whatever the guys wanted, they had. Morning breakfast they had eggs, bacon, or whatever.

KL: Tell me about when you would come in with the fish, what would happen there?

CG: Well, once we got the boat loaded with fish, we'd steam into the plant. We'd get in to tie up, and one of the guys from the dock, the night watchman, would come down. If it was during, say, one or two o'clock in the morning, before the plants even started to open up, they'd start pumping the fish out. They'd have somebody there. They would put that pump in, and we'd put water in the hole, and they'd pump them from the boat up to the plants, and put them in the tanks up there. Then, once we got it all, the holes cleaned out, we'd put salt back aboard or ice aboard, and be ready to go back out that next afternoon or night.

KL: You used a lot of salt, did you not?

CG: They used to use salt, yes. That pickles them and makes them a little firmer. Then they started using ice and salt. Which was a brine, which was real cold, and that firmed the fish up. These fish has a lot of feed in them, the acid that is in the fish eats the bellies out of the fish, and that's not good for the factory because they don't get no pack out. The fish all break up.

KL: You said that there is acid in the fish?

CG: Well, there's acid in the stomach. I don't know what chemical it is but has to be something that will dissolve the other small fish and stuff they eat.

KL: I see. So, the salt will neutralize that?

CG: Well it would help some. But if they were real feedy, and what they were eating were mostly these little small shrimps and other little (inaudible). When that was that, they seemed to just blow apart, the bellies of them would go. The fish softened right up. But, putting in the ice and water, that would cool that down enough so that the [canneries] could get a few out of it, but a lot of times we'd lose. We'd put in, say, a hundred hogs head, and you might get paid for sixty or fifty hogs head. They'd lose a lot of them.

KL: What did you think was the peak of the sardine industry? When at its liveliest?

CG: I think the '50s and '60s there were a lot of fish because that's when the peak of all of the factories, I think. There were fifty-two factories here on the new England coast at one time. Back in the '60s they were doing good, and when they got into, I don't know, into the '80s or something like that, the plants started falling down. I mean they were closing, different ones.

KL: Why do you think that is?

CG: Well the small sardines weren't hitting the shores like they did back years ago, today they have had, where I used to shut off in Greenland Cove, the past 15 years or so, they might get one or two shut-offs. This year they didn't get one. Last year they had a nice shut off there. The year before that, and then two or three years in between there was none, and then there just wasn't any fish.

KL: Now where the weirs all gone?

CG: The weirs were still going, but not that many when I was going. There used to be over in Wheeler's Bay. [They also had some] down-east. There were a few.

KL: Why did they stop using the weirs?

CG: The fish weren't coming in.

KL: So they had to go farther out there to find them?

CG: Yes, the last of it. I mean, where they were getting all the fish from were from us purse seiners. The seiners were going offshore all around (Monhegan?) outside islands and all out through. They weren't getting the small sardines like they wanted. They'd like to have the six-inch or five-inch fish for sardines. For the last of it, they were using eight through ten-inch fish and just cutting tails off of them. Then they started to steak them. Put steaks in the can instead of the little small sardines. That why they went...

Matter-of-fact, today I just had a can of kippers. I ate sardines today. I love them.

KL: Do you think a lot of people still eat sardines?

CG: Oh, I think so. You see them on the market and stuff. Stinson Seafood still has Beach Cliff. I get them down in Florida. I got a half dozen cans this week and maybe a week or so later I'll buy some more. Quite expensive today, 1.17, I think at some places. Some of them are even higher than that for a can. You might get four pieces of little fish in them.

KL: Was there a lot of competition between the purse seiners?

**19:24**

CG: Back in the end of my stop seining and stuff, there were a little bit of conflicts. But they didn't bother you too bad. Once in a while you would get a guy that would come right up in the mouth of your cove and shut off, purse seine, shutter seine [inaudible] They watched it pretty good they were pretty good about it.

KL: And they pretty much behaved?

CG: Yes.

KL: [laughter] What was Prospect Harbor like in the sixties?

CG: Prospect Harbor?

KL: Yes.

CG: Well, I tell you, back in the '60s I wasn't down there. I was stop seining. I don't think I got there until '79 or '80. We stopped in there a few times when we were out fishing. While I was stop seining I stayed mostly up in this area. We would go to Vinalhaven near North Haven but we stayed up this way mostly because we had all these dories we had to tow behind us. If we got any kind of weather we would take most of the time take the twine out and put it in the big boat and carry it that way. We didn't travel too much that far.

KL: Can you describe the boat for me a little bit?

CG: The first one we had, *The Horizon* was built down in [inaudible]. It was a forty-five foot. It was built these [inaudible] I think [inaudible] offshore lobstering they used it for. We see it in the paper for sale and we had gone down and looked at it, and my partner and I we bought it.

It was a comfortable boat. It had five berths in there. It didn't have the toilets and showers and stuff like we had [in the *Eva Grace*?] But it did have a stove and refrigerator. That was an open boat and we used that for going up and down the coast [inaudible].



Then in '72 we had a steel one built there at Harvey Gamage, in South Bristol. We had a forty-five foot. *Four Girls*, we named it. After my partners two girls and my two daughters. That had five berths and was a steel boat. We used that for purse seining and carrying pogies and stuff. We sent purse seining for ponies in the summer because there was no herring around.

KL: You went purse seining for what?

CG: For pogies. Menhaden. They're like an alewife. They catch them mostly down south but they do come up here. But the last few years, there hasn't been any around here. There has been just as far as Massachusetts and Casco Bay I think last year or the year before. They caught a few up there. But years back, they caught them down in Blue Hill, everywhere, Belfast, I mean. I think even Prospect Harbor had them down there. We used to sell those for lobster bait, really good lobster bait too.

KL: Were there some pretty long days on the boat?

CG: Oh yes, we would spend some days, we would go seining all day long. We would catch fish and take them in and go back out and get another. Fish six to eight hours a day most the time. Sometimes longer or more.

KL: That must have been kind of hard on the family life.

CG: [laughter] Yes it's kind of hard. "Got to make hay while the sun shines," they say.

KL: Yes. Do you think it was just the fact that the fish were not coming in anymore that made the factories decline?

CG: Well, I think that it had something to do with it, but, the economy and the way people today are. I don't know, they just don't want to work. There's plenty of work around if people want to work. They can find jobs. It was hard to sometimes get a crew because you go days—

One week we were fishing off of Gloucester out on Jeffrey's bank [Jeffrey's Ledge?], and a week we would sail out there and there would be miles of fish on bottom. We'd stay there practically all night, watching them because figured they'd come up. For one solid week, they never came.

This friend of mine Joe from Gloucester, and I, and (Varnegat?) steamed back off there and we got there probably about six o'clock or so. It looked just like the bottom had come up from the ocean had come up. There was thirty fathom of solid fish for miles. After that we fished on them for probably a month. Then they started breaking up and moving south because it was getting late in the fall. They would work down towards the cape and over around to the other side of the cape.

KL: Is that the biggest haul you ever made?

CG: Yes. We'd catch a boat load and we carried, at that time 200,000. 190,000 each night.

KL: Pounds?

CG: Pounds, yeah. But outside of Monhegan there, one night, I had close to a million pounds there. I loaded some carriers and myself, and some other small boats. We had four or five hundred thousand sets a lot of times. A lot of times we would be out there alone and have a big set, fill our boat, and we would have to let the rest go.

If there were other boats around there, they'd call and say, "Don't bother to set, we got a big set." We would help each other that way. We would put our crew aboard to help them dry them up, and everything to get ready, so we could...

KL: What do you mean by a set?

CG: A set? That's the catch of fish in the net. Like I say if it's a big set we'd call one of the other boats. There usually were five or six other boats right around there. The other guy didn't get them, we'd say, "Well, we've got some extra here. Come on over, you can have them."

KL: Plenty for everyone. [laughter]

CG: Yes.

KL: Was there kind of a code between the fisherman?

CG: We just kept communication, talking. Once in a while it would get a little tough. The guys would keep quiet. If you called them, and they were in another area and there were some fish and they got that fish, they wouldn't let you know. After a while it would leak out where they were, you know? You would find out that way. But, some of them were pretty close, so most the time the guys were really good about it.

KL: Were there some, for a lack of a better word, legendary fisherman around the area?

CG: I don't know, there were a few. Maybe one or two.

KL: Really good?

CG: But most the time, like I said they were pretty up enough about it.

KL: What did you like about the job?

CG: I just loved being on the water. I loved fishing. I loved being my, well I wasn't my own boss, but I had bosses (inaudible) who wanted fish. Just being on the water and outside working.

KL: What was the toughest part of the job?

CG: Toughest part? Trying to keep the factories happy (laughter).

KL: What would they get upset about?

CG: Well, if you were out there and they figured you should have caught fish and stuff they... A few times I mean I kind of stressed out. I don't know what to say. How to say it (laughter).

KL: Now fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations, is that right?

CG: Well fishing is. You have got to watch the weather. There were a lot of them that took some pretty bad chances. I mean there were a few times coming in with fish, we would be loaded, and the boat started leveling like this, set like this, and the back end, the seas were breaking over, and the seine and stuff, the water would pick at, and it was moving on deck, So you have got to watch it.

A few times I got kinda upset because we had to steam from Mount Desert or we were down off of Seal Island, coming to Bath with fish. When the weather, I mean, I just kept telling them. I said, "We're putting water over the stern here, and things are moving." I said, "I don't think we ought a keep on going, I don't want to lose this boat. I don't want to lose the crew." I said, "I think we better go into Rockland or Belfast with these fish." Finally, they gave me the okay. I was about ready to just turn the boat and head north anyway and let them do what they want to do with them. Take them into Rockland, there they are.

KL: Did you have some pretty close calls?

CG: Well there were a few times that I was a little worried. We had one time down off of Chatham, down off of the cape, towards the cape, there, and it was right glassy calm when we went. It was beautiful, but there was (inaudible) storm that night, a "nor'easter" coming. We have got to fish, and about ten o'clock or so it started coming on. We were loaded, I mean loaded. We got up off of the (inaudible), and she really coming on; snow and heavy sleet. Everything froze up. Radar wasn't working. Rams went out. Everything was just icing up too, and the seas kept on getting bigger and bigger. I took a compass bearing for the Gloucester Harbor and figured the time. It was hard to say because the wind was so strong and everything. We only did about eight knots with the boat anyway. When she was loaded, we drew on that much more water dragging it, probably seven and a half; sometimes six.

It was a long steam to get up off Gloucester Harbor, and when I seen that light flash, at once I said, "Oh boy, we ain't got too much farther to go!" We never took any water on, went in the

boat or anything in the [inaudible] or any of that. It's scary, especially with the ice building up. You get one side heavy and they start lowering down.

KL: I imagine it gets pretty cold out there.

CG: Yea you take and make a set on purse seining. We were—times we set out on a school of fish and guide them up, and would be about a half to three quarters of an hour. We'd be ready to go head for home. An hour at the longest.

KL: It would take you about an hour to collect the fish?

CG: To take and collect the fish, yes.

That one time with my arm here, I had four surgeries on it. I had a big set up off of Gloucester up to Jeffreys, just about ten miles northeast of Rockport Harbor, and Thatchers Blight. We got the fish all aboard and I called a friend of mine, Alfred Osgood from Vinalhaven to, "Come if he needed more fish." He said, "Yes." "I got just a few left here." He says, "I'll be right down." We probably had another hundred, 150,000 left in the seine.

I had gloves on, and what had happened was one of the run-ups, one of the holes that we'd run it up had come untied, and I didn't know it. It had got wrapped around my glove finger. We were tucking the net into to hold the fish so the boys could go in and get warm and get a cup of coffee, whatever they wanted.

That hauled my finger into the roller, took my arm in under the roller, had it way up to here, it busted this here right open. The bone was right out through here, and I got it stopped and they backed it up, and I stood right there and told them, "Do anything that you got to do. I'm going in to go lay on the galley floor, lay down."

The minute I got in there I took this ring and worked it off my finger, because I knew if I didn't they would have to cut it off. They came in, my son, and says, "Are you okay?" I say, "Yeah I'm fine." I said, "Cut that goddamned net, whatever you have to do, dump the fish, and call the coast guard and tell them that you've got a patient that has got to be taken off of the boat and get to the hospital!" They get the coast guard coming, and we started steaming down there, coming off northwest blowing probably twenty, twenty-five. Finally, the coast guard got up alongside of us. They got a couple of medics aboard and asked me if I could get up, can they help me get up, stand up, I said, "I can walk."

I walked out and they put me into one of those high end chutes and they got me all strapped in and everything, and the coast guard boat go up this way, we go up this way, we were steaming along. I said, "How we going to do this?" Well the guy says, "When they start getting close, push the cage over onto the boat." When they shoved me over I screamed at the top of my lungs

because of the movement. I told the boys, I says, "I'll see ya, this is probably my last trip seeing you boys."

I figured that I'd go down in between the boats, but we made it. They took me into Rockport Harbor. They finally came out and looked at me, all the crew went inside, and I was outside of one of them forty-one footers. They were hitting them waves going right into it, the water was just coming right out over it. One of them finally come out and looked and says, "Wow, you're getting wet." I says, "Yes, I know I'm getting wet." These guys in there are all dry.

Finally got into the harbor and they stopped and I said, "What are you doing now?" He says "Oh we have got to take a course bearing from this buoy (inaudible)" I said, "Well let me get in there I'll take care of him, I don't need this course." Some of them I don't know... They got radar and everything right there in front of them, they can't read one of those. Not have the bearings marked out beforehand too.

No, four operations I still got use of the old fella. That happened November 10, I think it was somewhere... It was the first of November. I told the coastguard, "You call my wife and tell her that I've got a possible broken arm." I knew what I had, but this way she won't worry so bad. Just a broken arm, ya know? So when we got into the place, she was waiting at the emergency door.

[inaudible] She looked at me, she says, "You've got more than a broken arm." I said, "Yes, dear." But I didn't want her to worry. That was two and half hours before the doctor got there, before they would give me any pain killer or anything, morphine.

Then the end of that, late '94 into '95, I started getting sleep apnea. I'd fall asleep, my head right into the table. I wasn't getting the sleep, sleep apnea, you can't wake yourself up, snoring and gyrating. I had to go and have a test. They said, "You have severe sleep apnea. So, I have a machine today that I use every day. Every once in a while the power goes out, and I lose out on it, but I use it regular and today I can work all day and stay up and not fall asleep. Drive a car! But they said I can't do it anymore. I had to get out of it.

KL: What was your last day on like?

CG: Pardon?

KL: What was your last day on the boats like?

CG: Oh that was in '95. I can't guess what day it was, I went, matter-of-fact one of the Cookaru boys, Jerry—no, not Jerry, he was taking Stinson's boat, the one that I had, the *Weston Lane*. The Stinsons wanted me to go out with him a few times and I went out a couple of times with him, and I told him that he was doing a good job, and that was my last trip on the boat.

KL: Do you remember your first day on one of the boats?

CG: First day was, uh, come out of Rockland that would be September of '78.

KL: What was that day like?

CG: It was a beautiful day, we were fishing right off of Pemaquid Point down here on the big sea herring. Matter-of-fact, it was the night my partner was killed in a freak accident. He stopped to help these uh young kids from Connecticut I believe. They had gone off the road.

He had a jeep with a winch on it. He was standing in front of the jeep pulling the wire off of and the young fella had the end of it, couldn't hook it onto the car. This girl took and had a small child with her, and it dropped something and started crying so she reached down to pick it up and took her eyes off the road. [snaps] Right in the back end of the jeep and it drove the plow. He went forty feet flying. He was dead on impact.

They called me up down there, on the radio asked me where Ed was. I said, "he's been gone an hour or more," I said, "he should be on the pond already home."

That was his wife talking to me. She says, "Well, I don't know, I'll call up to Frank, to my brothers on Biscay Pond." Which is just below here. That's where we kept the plane, down there. He took and finally got a hold of someone and somebody come by and see the accident and then they finally got a hold of her and told her and then she called me. I couldn't fish for the rest of the night. I had to give that night up. I called the company and I told the company what had happened. They says, "Okay well you tie the boat up."

KL: What was your partner's name?

CG: Ed Gilbert.

KL: Gilbert?

CG: Yes. He and I were partners since '58, '59. We were partners up until he was killed in '78.

KL: So you started fishing in the early '50's, you say? So that was during the Korean War?

CG: I was in the service for two years, '58 to '60. Then I had active duty after that for four or five years.

KL: Were they packing a lot of fish for the service men?

CG: Back then, I think what the service men mostly had were the ocean perch, the red fish. I supposed they did get a few sardines, I don't know.

Been on the water all my life (laughter)

KL: Well, you have been very generous with your time. I appreciate you taking this time for me.

CG: You're welcome.

KL: I do want to see if I can get a photo, if that's alright?

CG: Yes.

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