

Ralph Hunter
His Early Days of Fishing and Lobstering (1958)
Sally Erath, Interviewer
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Brief Description: This recording takes place at the home of Ralph and Grace Hunter. Ralph discusses his early life and his career as a fisherman. He tells what his and his brother's life was like when they had their own fishing boat. Subjects that are discussed are the average pay of working on a ship, stocking up for winter, the ship Asia, lobstering, cars, WWI, the Mattaquasson, and more.

Erath: Here we are in the pleasant living room in the Hunter home, Mill Pond Road. And with us are Ralph Hunter and his wife, Grace. We have been talking about the old days of Chatham. We think it is going to be interesting to hear a lot about Ralph and Grace's early life, and some of the things that happened to him and his brother, whose name is Alexander, who unfortunately is not with us just now. I asked Mr. Hunter this morning how old he was, and he told me he would be 79 next March, and his brother will be, is it 84? 85. But, they don't look it. These men's memories are keen and they have great many interesting things to tell us. I hope you will start talking to us this morning, Ralph. Mind if I call you that?

Mr. Hunter: Nope.

Erath: But start telling about your first going to see. You must have been a young squirt.

Mr. Hunter: Yes, it was in school time and my father would take me for a boat trip. We were mackerel seining at the time and we would go around Boston Bay, down to the Maine coast as far as Booth Bay and then back along. Of course we had to go into port once in a while to get something to eat and we got quite a few trips while we was on that circuit, and then we would come back to Chatham for a few days, and I would stay to home then for another year, till I got big enough to go as a share.

Erath: Now when you talk about the share, how did they work that?

Mr. Hunter: Well, they took out the expense and then come the vessels part, and then it was divided up amongst the crew. I never knew whether Capt. Bearse got a percentage or not, but generally most captains did get a percentage on the trip.

Erath: What would you say was a good summer's pay?

Mr. Hunter: In them days if you made \$300 you was making a lot of money.

Erath: Each member of the crew would end up that summer's long season of fishing with about \$300. How did you work it at the end of the season? Did you all come back here to Chatham to live?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yes, the last trip they would go to Boston and they would stock up for home. They would buy probably 50 or 60 pounds of beef so they could salt it to have salt beef for the winter. By apples, buy butter in the firkin, three or four would club together and buy it. After they got home, they would get together and divide it up. 'Course most of them had to buy potatoes 'cause when you was fishing all summer you didn't have much time to tend the garden.

Erath: What did you do during the winter?

Mr. Hunter: Well, they did occasionally have a clam chowder.

Erath: So you had to go down and dig some clams?

Mr. Hunter: I think they used to get somewhere around a dollar a barrel for clams. Mr. Ellis down there on the neck used to buy them and ship them away. Clams was very cheap then, you know?

Erath: Not so today. Then, tell me, you stayed at that with Capt. George Bearse for some years. What caused you to leave him?

Mr. Hunter: Well, Capt. Bearse was getting old and he got about of tired of going and it was hard work to get a good crew. He could pick up a crew of old fogies, but he wanted a younger crew, and he was getting along. My father had been with him for 28 years in his vessel. Father kind of acted as Mate for him but – ah - father was getting old then too, so I guess they decided they better stay ashore and dig clams.

Erath: Then what did you do after that?

Mr. Hunter: Then I went with Elmer Mayo, anchor dragging.

Erath: Well now, what is anchor dragging?

Mr. Hunter: Well, you have – ah – the way we done it we had two dories and a coil of 12–thread rope, and we had weights on it about 50 fathom from each end and we would drag right down with the tide, and when this rope caught something on the bottom, that would swing both dories together. And then they would put an iron shackle over the two parts of rope with a small line on it and let it run down, and if it was iron you could hear the *tunk*, or feel the *tunk*. Whichever it was, I couldn't say. I didn't do that part. If it was an anchor, then they would splice on a heavier piece of rope and haul it right around back, hook the vessel up and put down the winch.

Erath: And that would be salvage?

Mr. Hunter: Mhm.

Erath: Do you remember any famous bits and pieces you might have picked up when you were doing that work?

Mr. Hunter: Well – picked up the ship Asia's anchor, but they didn't have any stocks in them. Most generally they put the stocks in when they get in sight of land.

Erath: What's the stock in an anchor?

Mr. Hunter: You have probably seen the thing the anchor sits down on going crossways, and flukes would be the things going up and down that stock makes anchor sit upright.

Erath: How did you – what was the ship Asia? Was that a wreck off this coast?

Mr. Hunter: She overrun the time from Manila and it was cloudy and tiny snow squalls and she run up Great Round Shoal's channel. By-and-by there was a light up in the fog and they could see lights all around them. Well, he started to wear ship to get out to go to see to have more room, and when he did, that's when he hit Great Round Shoal on the Northwest side.

Erath: And then the boat – I suppose you should call it a ship – torn up?

Mr. Hunter: Yes, she broke in half. The captain and his watch and family in the rigging, either starboard or port, I wouldn't say – the captain's half fell over and they was all drowned right there. But, the Mate's half held the same way, and he was picked up by a crew from the Great Round Shoal Lightship. And he was saved.

Erath: Could you remember the year that might have been? Well, never mind. Don't worry about it. It was a long time ago. What happened to the cargo?

Mr. Hunter: Well, that drifted out and a good deal of it floated out into Chatham Bay and landed anywhere to the Weir Shanties and along Monomoy, all the way up to the back of the island, and best way was to get it was if you had a horse and a pair of front wheels, and to back down and hook onto it and run it right up on the beach. You had to tackle that bale of hemp. You had to cut it in half to get it up.

Erath: There were these great, big bales.

Mr. Hunter: Then these great big poles; they weren't long when they was soaked in salt water and the sand gets in with it, then it starts to get kind of soggy you know.

Erath: From then on, anybody who wanted hemp rope had all they wanted?

Mr. Hunter: Anybody who wanted it could go down and get it. I think when they sold it they got two or three cents a pound.

Erath: Now, somewhere along here you and your brother decided you would come back here? Stay here and go lobstering. How did that happen?

Mr. Hunter: Well, I was working in a sawmill up in the town of Rochester, so my brother come down from Boston, he was living in Boston at that time, and he says, "What do you think? We better buy a boat and go home." "Suits me." And we went out and bought a 30 foot whaleboat. It had an engine in it and we went down to Fairhaven and brought it back to Rochester. When it got warm enough to venture out, then we started for home.

Erath: You and your brother and your wife?

Mr. Hunter: I don't think she come with me that time. We made several trips in that boat; we made several trips in that boat back and forth. We owned it, see? If we wanted to go as fast as she could go, it was all right. Or we could just drift along – it was all right.

Erath: If you didn't come down here from New Bedford by boat, how would you come?

Mr. Hunter: We had to come by train; that's when the trains run to Chatham. Trains come right into Chatham and everybody was up to the depot to see who come.

Erath: Where would you live when you came back here?

Mr. Hunter: Anna Snow's house, where Dr. Hopkins lives now. We lived there nine years, and then we built this house here.

Erath: Well, during that time you must have had a camp down at Monomoy?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yes. 1914 I went down there to start to go lobstering and Walter Eldridge went with me to show me how it was done.

Erath: That was the one we always called Wicked Walter?

Mr. Hunter: Yeah. So I went with him that year and I got my meals to his house, but in the meantime I managed to frame up a cottage. And the next year me and my brother went down.

Erath: Tell us about your life down there. It sounds interesting down there.

Mr. Hunter: Well, I'll tell you. We get up early and go out. 'Course you'd have to go on the tide in them days, but everyone was up early, and you would go out. You was probably back in three hours' time and then the rest the day, why you would sit around down on the beach and swap yarns. It was pretty interesting.

Erath: How many families was there?

Mr. Hunter: Well, I don't know exactly, but there was people enough down there so there was two sets. Square dance over in the workshop to the station. John Caton was - furnished music and George W. Bloomer called off. 'Course you didn't have to be in the building to hear him. You could have been outside and hear him just the same.

Erath: Well, tell me. Was there a store there?

Mr. Hunter: No, not in my time. They used to have a store there. They used to have these big weir buildings, weir buildings, and some of them used to set out on piles in the Powder Hole and they –ah – they had quite a lot of groceries there. Before my time they used to have a school down there in the summer. Was a lot of families down there. I forgot who was the teacher. In one place down there they had a bowling alley.

Erath: A bowling alley on Monomoy Point?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yes, – a lot of people there one time.

Erath: That's when they had a Life Saving Station. It wasn't called the Coast Guard then.

Mr. Hunter: That was the Monomoy, that was most up to Inward Point.

Erath: Do you remember any exciting things that might have happened while you were down there? Have any wrecks?

Mr. Hunter: Wreck? Wrecks. I guess so. I was in the sloop Percy Taylor. Kimball Howes owned her and Capt. Albert Hammond was captain of her at the time, and he had just come in from the fish grounds. It started making up a storm, as we came over the Shovelful there was a craft ashore there. We went up a little ways and anchored and Capt. Hammond said, "I'll go ashore and go to the pointers (Monomoy), Johnny McKay and I took a dory and we rode down to where this wreck was, so that led us in as one of the shares.

Erath: You mean if you get to the wreck first you could get your share of whatever was on it?

Mr. Hunter: Yes, but if you didn't the others got it till it was all gone. You didn't get in unless you got there first.

Erath: A pretty good idea to be pretty fast with those oars.

Mr. Hunter: Yup. And, well, and we had an awful start on them, see. He had to go ashore and wake them people up, see. By the time he got them all woke up we was down there.

Erath: What happened to the crew?

Mr. Hunter: Crew? Only had the captain, son-in-law and son. That was all the crew there was.

Erath: Where was the ship from?

Mr. Hunter: She was down from some lower of part of Maine, I think, Calais or somewhere down that way. She had lumber on deck and lumber in the hold. Capt. George Bloomer, he took charge of getting her off. But, they run an anchor out; if they hadn't run an anchor out she would've gone off when the tide flowed. You have to have something to hold a bargain (?); that anchor was holding this bargain (?).

Erath: What happened to all that lumber?

Mr. Hunter: It didn't wash off, no, it didn't wash off. Well, lots of them come here like that. Well, when the tides start to flow they get across into the rip, get over into the deep water and keep on going.

Erath: Now, it must have been exciting, exciting for you, but what did your wife do when you are out lobstering?

Mrs. Hunter: Nothing!

Mr. Hunter: Well, of course there was quite a lot to do. She and Mrs. Dunbar, they would go after the small winkles, but you had to go early before the gulls got around. Sometimes the gulls would get 'em, you know.

Mrs. Hunter: –I made \$300.

Erath: Oh, what did they use winkles for?

Mr. Hunter: That's was for drift fishing. Used to be vessels out of Boston went drift fishing. Of course a winkle on your hook was much better than a clam. After hauling it up and down a few times a clam would soon go, but a winkle was tough enough so it would hang on, and I don't know, but what they're going to eat those winkle 'fore long.

Erath: There you go.

Mr. Hunter: They eat them long – tail winkles now. The small conches, they eat them.

Erath: We'll get to it sooner or later. Tell me, I understand there used to be a lot of softshell clams down there.

Mrs. Hunter: Oh, yes, I used to go clamming.

Erath: Were there flats there?

Mr. Hunter: Big flats right inside the harbor. Those there, they wasn't down over – bout six or seven inches down from the top. But, over on the other side, the backside, there was some German barges, they drifted down and they landed on the backside in the sand, the sand build up around them in the clams come there, and they were really three-tiered deep –

Erath: What a find!

Mr. Hunter: –little small clams on the top, medium-size further down, and way down – were they big! You didn't have to have a clam hoe, you could dig them with your hands.

Erath: What's this about the German barges? I don't remember anything about that.

Mr. Hunter: There was a German sub come over here, you know; they was looking for that transport that was coming from the west here, somewhere to meet that convoy off Provincetown. It was kind of a hazy day and she didn't see her. What was the name of that tugboat? Well, anyhow she had these two barges in tow, so she sees them coming along a great ways from shore. So they fired on her and set 'em a fire. But the crews got the dories off the barge and got ashore over to Orleans, 'cause it happened to be a smooth time. And –ah – the towboat, she was smashed up quite a lot. Perth Amboy, I think was the name of the tugboat. Then, of course, they set the barges on fire by shooting onto them. That's when the flying field was up here to Nickerson's, you know the old Navy Yard; they went out with the planes. Not a bomb went off; they dropped enough, but not a one went off. I suppose the sub crew knew they wasn't any good. The sub got away, anyhow.

Erath: And the barges drifted around?

Mr. Hunter: The barges drifted down to Monomoy. They went ashore there and sanded up, and that made quite a little harbor in there, made a good harbor for boats, small boats that didn't want to stay on the west side.

Erath: That would've been around 1913 or 1914, wasn't it? The first World War.

Mr. Hunter: It was later than that. Let's see, that must've been 1918 .

Erath: I think you're right. Now, the other day when I saw your brother he revealed himself as an inventor of sorts because he told me that when he got out in that dory to get lobsters, he didn't like pulling those lobster pots. It really made him seasick, so he invented a scheme to get them up. I wish you would tell us about that.

Mr. Hunter: Well, he couldn't hold his head down in a dory. Of course there's a different motion in a dory than there is in a boat. We found that out when we was mackerel netting. He couldn't go in the dory – made him seasick. So, unless it was a smooth day, he used to pull the nets in the boat, then take the fish out of them, but if it was rough, I got the benefit.

Erath: You had to do that job. I wish you would tell us about lobstering – what you had to do, what equipment you had to have. I think lots of people would like to know about it.

Mr. Hunter: Well, that time all the people around Monomoy, they all set the lobster pots on a trawl; a coil of rigging would make one trawl and five pots on a trawl was about all you wanted. There was a lot of tie down there, and if you got too many on, then they would break the anchors out after you left the first pot, maybe for 40 or 50 feet, you would tie a buoy on the line and a buoy on top of that, so you would tell which end to pull on. Well, he couldn't pull in the dory out there. Finally, we got a hold of a trawl – roller and put it over that and let the engine do the work, and it worked out pretty fine with us. We could pull a lot more pots that way than we could the other way.

Erath: How many pots did you have on a string?

Mr. Hunter: You have five pots on a warp, but you would probably have eight or nine strings on a rope. He would have some other place you could set so that you would have to go to, if the ground got full.

Erath: Would you have to bate those pots every day?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, you'd have to bate them pots every day, and another thing – you would have to take them lobsters out, which is the very nice part of it, see? At that time we was getting almost \$.20 a pound for them, \$.20 a pound.

Erath: What would you say would be a good day's haul?

Mr. Hunter: Well, I have gone down there – I had five strings south of the Handkerchief Lightship, and that was before we started to pull with the roller. I said to my brother, "You take the boat and go down and hang on to the last end." It was in the afternoon and I got into the dory and pulled them down; and we had a kit board in the dory, that was a rack in the bottom so the lobsters couldn't get down in the water, and I pulled them five strings down, and I had the stern of that boat rounded right over with lobsters. Some of them pots had as high as five lobsters that would weigh anywhere from three pounds up to six and seven pounders.

Erath: How did you get to market them?

Mr. Hunter: Well, that was –ah – we had about two days in the week, one would be somewhere near Tuesday, then again Saturday, and on those days we would get our provisions that we wanted for the week. Well, Parker, George Parker at the cold storage – there are some of them would sell to George Crowell – but everybody went to George and asked him if he wouldn't raise the price another cent. Well, he didn't seem to want to, so I know I got some orders over here at the Economy Store then, where the post office was. It was E. E. Gray's first, then Economy. I got in there – then I got into Dennis Port and Harwich Port and Yarmouth on the North Shore. Well, 'course had to go there twice a week, and my wife used to come off then in the boat, see, going in the car, see, going to have a ride. And finally commence to take 'em down here to my father and let my father sell 'em, so I stopped selling 'em to the other stores and let my father sell 'em all, till 1936. Then my wife decided she had been down to Sandy Point long enough, so we

moved off and then I started to sell afternoons and finally I had the – I had Mrs. MacDonald – she didn't have the Rose Acres then, she had the Yeaw's place down on Bridge Street. Then she had the Monomoy; not Monomoy but the Mattaquasson. She run that a couple of years or more, then she went over there to that place, the Army or Navy had that place, so when they got through she, went back there, and I sold her lobsters.

Erath: You kept at this all these years?

Mr. Hunter: Yup.

Erath: Well, tell me, what happened to the lobster grounds down around Monomoy? Did you have to start going farther and farther?

Mr. Hunter: Oh yes, we had to. The beam trawlers, the small beam trawlers that come down there, they used to drag for flounder – they called 'em yellow-tail – they got a good price for 'em and you could load up, you could load up. Sometimes we would see 40 or 50; some was big enough so they had two masts; they was big boats. Finally, us fellers here would go out there and drag with our small boats and we would get eight or nine barrels during the day, but them big fellers, they would load up.

Erath: Well, they would interfere with your lobster lines.

Mr. Hunter: Well, no, that was after the lobster season got over with. The lobsters didn't hang around there any, after, well, after 20th September there wasn't many lobsters up around Butler's Cove; up around that country they would work off where the water was deeper for an even temperature, 'cause up there, you know, there was ice come down that Sound that chills way down to the bottom.

Erath: How far afield did you finally go?

Mr. Hunter: We come out here to what they called New Ledge which is just inside the Pollick Rip Lightboat, the new Pollick Rip Lightboat. It was quite a little ways to go from the Mill Pond, way around out there, but we went. But finally we – after the cut, they are broke through in good shape, we come through the cut through. If it was low tide when we got there we would go up

to the fish pier and truck over in a car. We would work that way back and forth, but we had rather come right here, you know you don't want to keep lobsters out too long – in the warm weather, they get weak.

Erath: You had to put those little wooden pegs in their claws?

Mr. Hunter: Yup. I put pegs in 'em. But, before this law come on I could get rubber bands and those bands, they come by the pound. You could take them on your thumb and finger and slide them right on over the claws. It didn't hurt the lobster any and they were so much easier to put on.

Erath: You had to be pretty quick to do that, didn't you?

Mr. Hunter: Yes, you had to have your eye on the job, 'cause he had one other claw there that was still working. Oh, I got bit; I got bit enough. I had two fingers split right open. But, stick them in a pale of saltwater. There's something in that saltwater that is awful good for things like that. I don't know about everybody, but for me. Bit a piece about as big as a five cent piece right off of that sum. I hung it down in the saltwater till it stopped, I plucked it back and put a rubber stall on one. It worked just beautiful.

Erath: Now, Mr. Hunter, you are a man who was born in Chatham and lived here all your life?

Mrs. Hunter: He hasn't lived here all of his life –

Mr. Hunter: Now careful; don't bust in like that –

Erath: Well, you have lived here the greatest share of your life. What would you say was the most exciting thing ever happened to you – aside from getting married, of course?

Mrs. Hunter: We've been married 50 years.

Mr. Hunter: Yes, 50 years. You're an old woman, remember. I guess the most exciting was when that submarine fired that shell and she missed the barge and it went over into a little bay up by Pleasant Bay and all those students down there at Camp Quanset, and that slug landed right there in the water, right there with them. That was stirring things up in Chatham Sound, you know.

Erath: Well, I should say so.

Mr. Hunter: Of course, we heard the report of the gun on Monomoy.

Erath: Did you really?

Mr. Hunter: We was out after turbot and we got enough to make a shipment so we started for town. And when we got to town they told us what had happened and everybody was all up in arms then, but not so much after that did they think so much about subs. Of course, they used to say if you see any oil slicks coming up from the bottom when we was going out there. There were no subs in there, not where we was fishing.

Erath: During the war – did you keep up the fishing during the war?

Mr. Hunter: Just the same, but these fellers on this side, they stopped them one time from going out, but Mr. Kidder I think was the head of it at that time down here, and he says, "You fellers going down Chatham Bay, you can go. You probably won't see any subs or no subs will see you." So we went right along down there, but them fellers over on the North Shore, Old Harbor they couldn't go 'cause they went right out into the ocean. We went out into the ocean too.

Erath: Do you think Chatham has changed a lot since you are a boy?

Mr. Hunter: I guess so! I should say it has changed. You know when you walk down the main street the roads was hardened with clay. When one horse and team went down there was a cloud of clay went 'round with it. Anybody that lived on the north side of the road, why, they got the benefit. Oh, that was terrible.

Erath: Remember when the first cars came here?

Mrs. Hunter: I don't remember, do you Ralph?

Mr. Hunter: Yes. I went to Boston with Johnny Ryder and bought that great big car – I don't know – oh, yes, a Hudson. Went way up there and drove it down with Johnny Ryder. Don't know if he had a license; he probably did. Then John, he used to take parties out, carry them to Hyannis, New Bedford, or Plymouth, around like that. But finally, them old cars had their day in the city. When they got down on these country roads they wasn't used to it. I don't know how many

times I've helped them haul a tire off and patch the tube between here and New Bedford, and I almost could walk it in the time it took them to get there.

Erath: How long would it take you to come up from Monomoy by boat?

Mr. Hunter: Well, we could come – we could come in 40 minutes, yes, about 40 minutes.

Erath: And you used to come into Stage Harbor?

Mr. Hunter: Yep, come into Stage Harbor and had a mooring right down here at the end of the road at the Mill Pond here. Wasn't very far to walk, but that hill – that hill, you know! I have seen so many, by the time they got to the top of that hill, stop. I don't know if they was all out of wind or what. (Laughter)

Erath: Well, if you had your life to live over again, would you do the same thing?

Mr. Hunter: Just the same – just the same. 'Course you would say now you would know more –

Erath: Yes, I think that happens to all of us.

Mr. Hunter: I don't know if it would do you any good if you did know more; you might not be so well off as you are.

Erath: Well, now, your brother never married?

Mr. Hunter: No.

Erath: And he's lived with you a good many years?

Mr. Hunter: He's lived with me since 1908.

Erath: He's perfectly happy to live here in Chatham?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yes, yes. He wanted to come, he wanted to come home. I'll tell you, he lived with my sister quite a while. They lived up in Wakefield and –ah – he didn't know too many, know too many there. He worked for my sister, see? He didn't get a chance to go out and meet other people. He got to go down to one of the livery stables and meet the fellers around there, but down here he meets them all around, see. 'Course he can go down here to the fish pier, he

goes to the fire station, he can go to Manson's Garage, then he can go down to Alton Kenny's. By the time he's got back he's picked up some.

Erath: He's got all the local news? Are you all through with that?

Mr. Hunter: I've been down to the pond twice in two years. Now, the quahogs – I don't think I've dug a quahog. I haven't dug a clam. But, I've been out and got four or five messes of scallops. But my nephew will come around and he'll say, "How's the oysters?" "Well," I will say, "We're just out." Well, the next day he comes down with a great big bucket full of oysters and then he says, "It's kind of cold for you to go scalloping." So he fetches me two or three buckets of scallops.

Erath: I can't think of a nicer life; here you are inside of the Mill Pond where you've had so many happy experiences, a comfortable house to live in and pleasant company. I think you've had a wonderful life.

Mr. Hunter: Well, you see, Hunter and his wife come down here, there down about every other night and he's –ah – he's a pretty good feller I'll tell you, yes, he is. My nephew.

Erath: He takes the place of a son?

Mr. Hunter: Oh, yah, yah, he's good. Then Arlene is nice too. They're in the old junk business.

Erath: Well I am very fond of both Hunter and his wife. I see them frequently. They're just as busy and active as you are.

Mr. Hunter: Oh yes, they're terrible, those two.

Erath: Well, this is a very interesting talk and I think it has taken us back all around, a good many years in Chatham. And this record we are delighted to have this for the Chatham Historical Society. Thank you very much, sir.

END OF TALK