



Bobby Warren Stories

By Cipperly Good, The Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History

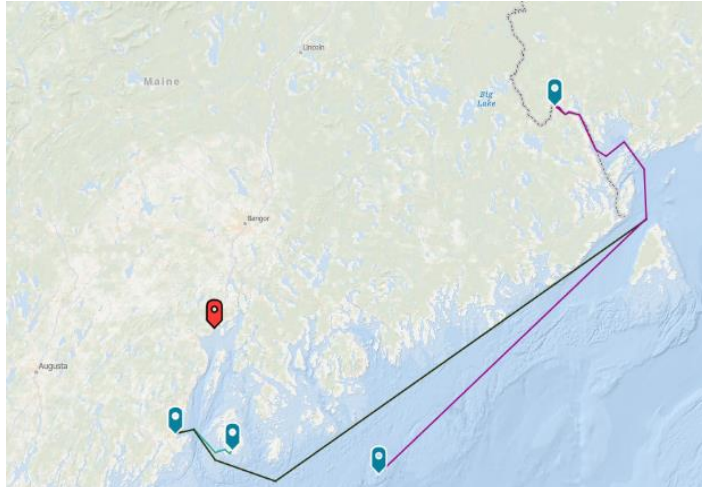


Robert “Bobby” Warren (second from left) hauls in a purse seine net as a sardine carrier pumps out a catch of herring. Image courtesy of Mike Mesko.

Robert “Bobby” Warren started fishing and lobstering with his uncles on Vinalhaven during his summer school breaks as an eleven-year-old. As soon as he graduated from high school in Bucksport, Maine, he moved to Vinalhaven full-time. He has fished for herring in almost all the possible ways: weirs, stop seines, and purse seining. When not fishing for herring during their seasonal migrations to Maine from late spring to late fall, he was following them south to Gloucester, Massachusetts.

We were able to visit Bobby at his home on Vinalhaven and hear the stories of herring fishing in Penobscot Bay and beyond. A successful fisherman, he was willing to tell us some of the mishaps he encountered, as the best fish story is about the one that got away. Here are a few of those tales.

Steaming from Mount Desert Rock, to St. Stephens, New Brunswick, to Rockland



Mount Desert Rock to St. Stephens, New Brunswick (Purple), St. Stephens, New Brunswick to Rockland (Black), and Rockland to Vinalhaven (Green). Searsport is the red marker.

Image courtesy of ArcGIS.

Maine's sardine canneries and herring fishermen had a healthy import/export relationship with their Canadian counterparts. Herring know no international borders, migrating to and from Canadian waters, and canneries on both sides of the border in need of the fish. Bobby recalls the time he got a call from a Canadian sardine company while purse seining for herring off Mount Desert Rock:

"[The manager] said, 'the truck I sent to Rockland broke down, he lost a tire. Can you take the catch into St.

Stephens, New Brunswick?' I said, 'I guess I can. I've never been there before, but I guess I can.' So I did. I took them in there and unloaded them and then we made it back home, went to Rockland.

It was quite a long steam. We were already at Mount Desert Rock and so that was halfway there from here. But by the time we got the fish out, it was midnight, probably more like 1:00 in the morning. Then we sailed back for Rockland and I stopped. And then by the time I got home, it's probably 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning."

Among the biggest predators looking for a meal of herring were whales. Whether Bobby was stop seining juvenile herring entering coves, or purse seining spawning herring further off shore, he was competing with whales. He was unlucky sometimes to catch a whale, as well as a school of herring.

Adventures with whales:

"I set nets off Seal Island on a Friday night and they wouldn't take fish Saturday because the sardine factories weren't open. So we had to hold them till Sunday morning. On Sunday morning I went to check on the herring. We still had them behind twine [of the seine net]. There was a couple of big



Bobby Warren (standing in the dory) heads out of the harbor in a raft of dories to load up a catch of herring at a stop seine he set. Image courtesy of Mike Mesko.

flaps of twine where two whales went in and out together and so we lost the whole summer's worth of fish.”

“Victor Ames was one guy I went with and we seen the whole length of coast at that time. We went down to Down East stop seining. It was early [in the year] and there wasn’t usually herring here [as they] don’t hit the shore that early but there was a bunch of whales that that had drove them up into this Cove. And the whales were circling outside and kept them right there. We heard about it. We went down in all you had to do was just make a circle and you had all you wanted. And we had a boat come out of Lubec. [It was a] small boat [that] only held 50 hogsheads. He come out and we loaded him and then he said, well, if you guys still here, when I get unloaded, I’ll be right back. And he did, he come back for a second load and we loaded him again. But he had other boats beside that.”

“One night I set [the seine] and I had two big whales in the seine and I didn’t realize it when I set it. [My crew member] Mike Mesco was with me. He went up on the bow to take the twine and he said, ‘Bobby, I think as a whale in there.’ And I said, ‘jeez, I hope not, Mike.’ He was wrong. There’s two whales in there so we didn’t dare let them go. It was pretty near daylight then we didn’t have time set again. So I was hoping they’d go out the first end of the twine and then we’d save the boat load. But no, they waited until it was in the down in the bunt and they both decided they had enough and they both went out different holes and they made a hole big as this room each one of them. So we lost all the fish. We had to come in and mend all day, but we used to mending. Yeah, but now we’ve had quite a few escapades like that, you know.”

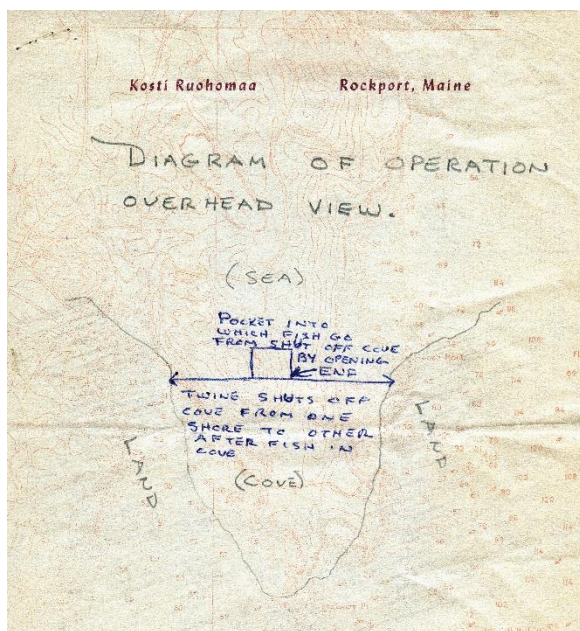


Diagram of “shutting off a cove”
Kosti Ruohomaa Collection, PMM 48-71.

It was common to “shut off a cove” with a stop seine net behind a large school of fish and sell them off little by little over a month or two to supply the canneries’ needs. Bobby employed herring spotter planes to help find these large schools of herring.

Stop Seining Mishap

“[We were] stop seining up Crockett’s River there and we had a hell of a bunch of fish. A lot more than I realized. Spencer Fuller was flying for me and he said ‘Bobby, you’ve got a good bunch coming. But don’t shut off yet because you have a lot more coming. Wait’ll dark and

then shut off.' So we did, but we're too far up the Cove. Had we'd been out at the head of the Cove, we'd had a summer's work.

So we run the running twine, put a pocket on, sunk the twine. And this was when fish were still coming, but there was so many of them. We put on 4 pockets and sunk them. And each one of them filled right up with so many fish and I should have taken the twine up, you know, on the ends. But I didn't. We was pooched by the time we finished, it's probably close to midnight by the time we get to everything all set and I told the guys we should take up the twine on this. 'Oh, no. Let's wait and do it in the morning.' So we did. We waited.

I got up there just about daylight and there was a clammer from from Deer Isle that come down in an outboard boat. He come in over the caulk line and he went in on the shore and he tried to go clamming. There's so many dead fish on the shore. He give it up. So that was terrible. That was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made."

To read, or hear, more stories from Bobby, visit our new exhibit *Sardineland*, or schedule a visit to our Museum Archives where his contributions have been saved.

If you have a story about herring fishing, we'd love to hear from you. Please contact Cipperly Good at 207-548-2529, by email at cgood@pmm-maine.org, or write it down: Penobscot Marine Museum, PO Box 498, Searsport, ME 04974 or fill out this online form: <https://form.jotform.com/250515210495147>.