

Sharon Slater (SS) interviewing Jim Roberts (JR)

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SS: Today is the 15 May 2017 and I'm Sharon Slater interviewing Jim Roberts on life on the fishery, on the Shannon Estuary and fishing life there. So, Jim what I would like to know first is how long have you been associated with the fishing, was it your family or did you start into it?

JR: No, my family, we all, well I won't say we always, well for a couple of generations we had fished on the river and I started personally when I was ten and I fished every year until the licenses finished up, in eh, about five or six years ago. So like it was a fairly strong tradition in this area, you know, and most people would have done it at some stage, where it be going through school or college or before work or you know, even people who were working fished in the evenings and stuff like that and it was the same with us but like we took it probably a bit more serious than most. We used to fish full time from probably the middle of May right through until the end of the season, you know so that was it basically, fished most, most of the time I fished with Liam Coughlan, I'd say I fished twenty years with him and then fished with other people from time to time

[Interruption]

SS: And what was the season, when was the season?

JR: Well the original salmon season used to start in February but then that was all shortened so they took bits off of it and then from the salmon and the pale season then which was the smaller salmon that used to start around the middle of May, the run would start around the middle of May, maybe the first of June it varied every year you know. Generally you'd get some run of pale, what we used to call pale which were the small salmon, they use to start maybe around any time from the fifteenth of May on and right up then to the 19th or 20th of July we used to fish it. But originally when I started fishing, it used to start the 15th February the season and you could fish for salmon and you could fish right on, then when the pale season would finish in July you could go on and you could fish for flat fish which a lot of people used to do one time like, you know, because they depended on it for money and for food you know, not that awful long ago, we're not talking about several generations, only one, you know maybe back into one and a half generations like. So like the river was a big part, in this area now, there was a man down the road there, another man I used to fish with by the name of Jimmy Guerin his father, a relation of his used to buy all the fish and he used to take them to the town then and they used to be shipped. He used to ice box them and ice them and so on and so forth and he used to take them to town then and sell them on and he had a great history of it and he had a good ledger of all the fish he bought from time to time you know and like it was a great community thing you know, because all the people were together, they gathered like, you could meet, you know, anything up to 25, 30 people on the bank in the mornings when you were going fishing or you know. Even like of a Friday evening now when the fish would go to be sold of a Friday evening like a few fellas, there could be ten or twelve or fifteen or twenty often would meet and go for a pint, you know it was very social thing as well, you know, for an area it was big, for an area like this is was a huge thing like. And also for Coonagh and the same in town you know, I suppose they usedn't to meet as much in town as they were a bit more broken up the people, you know, that were scattered around the town but for Coonagh now the area there was a great

community for it, you know and the same as Newtown the people most of the people at some stage would have fished, you know. Like there was women who fished as well from around here you know. One woman in particular Ann O'Brien, Aidan O'Brien's wife was a great woman for fishing now, she done a lot of it. And em, the women were involved like, they'd, you'd have your food going out and they'd take the fish to be sold and all that was great organization you know. It wasn't just the people that were fishing, it all kind of ran it self, everyone knew their own place, you know, and it just worked, it worked like. It brought a nice bit of money in and great social thing into the community, you know, a lot of people deepened on it as well like. People who had other jobs they'd take holidays at that time of the year and instead of going away they'd fish and try and build up a few pound for Christmas and stuff like that, you know. So it was definitely a huge thing in the area like, it's a big lost out of the area that way, you know.

SS: And what were the family names that fished here?

JR: Well us, we had two licenses Roberts's. There's a first cousin of mine has the other one, Tom. Well we didn't give up our licenses, we didn't take the money so we're same, we till have them like, you know, there was eight of us that didn't take the money when the licenses were bought out we chose not to take the money so we, we still have our licenses well we hope we have anyway [laughs] if it ever means anything you know. It's looking doubtful at this stage now but anyway that's where we are at the moment. So but like, you know, there was O'Briens and there was, all, every family that you could name on the road up, we'll say, all on this area they all had an association with it at one time or another. Whether it was drift netting or shoring, what we call shoring. It was just a net that used to shoot out from the brow and they'd ring it and come back in. It was a different form of fishing from the drift netting. Whereas the drift netting you'd pay out your net and you'd drift along with the tide, you know. More drift nets now on the river than there was draft nets or shoring as the locals used to call it but draft net was the official name for it but everyone, I'd say every, there was no family like O'Briens, Coughlans, you know, they were all involved it it from one time or another. You couldn't pick out just anyone just one in particular you know. Peter Byrnes above on the top of the hill, like, all his family would have been involved in it. Like he's still, Peter is building boats there now, you know. And then of course, not only the fishing like it went on then to the reed in the winter time, you know and people lived off of that as well like and like up to even modern generations it was the same thing like, there's still like in my generation, myself and Liam, now I don't know if you ever met Liam [Coughlan] he died there a month ago. He would have supplied a lot of reed to Bord Failte for their 'Rent and Irish Cottage' and we used to cut that like in the winter time. We'd spend maybe two and a half or three months doing it, d'you know, December January and February when we'd be quiet but, yeah it was good.

SS: The reeds, the reed cutting, what was the process to do that?

JR: It was simple really it was all hand cut so you just cut the reed and you'd leave it in bundles the size of the sheaf, the thatcher would be working on, which was roughly anything from, like the thatcher would order it anything from a nine inch to a twelve inch sheaf and you'd leave, you'd cut along and you've leave it in your bundle and you'd come back when you'd have maybe two hours cutting done and you'd bundle them up and tie them into sheaves then and then you'd take the sheaf to the boat and draw it back and put maybe a load of it together. Whatever a load would be or whatever a person would want and that'd go back then and deliver it whenever. It was quite, it was simple like but it was effective, you know. Like our own house above now is a thatched house it is

very unique it's a two storey thatched house there isn't very many of them in the country, you know and all the reed like used to be cut on the river bank. It was a simple process just a hand hook, cut the reed and bring it up, you know, it was all profit really, you know [laugh].

SS: And what time of year was that you'd do..

JR: Generally you'd have to wait, it grows this time of the year and you harvest then when, when you get a good frost the leaf would fall off of it and when the leaf falls off of it then it gets clean. So you have just the bare reed itself and the sap has gone out of it then. So when it's dry you harvest then from roughly, it all depends on the year as well the same as the fish but like from any time from the 1st of December maybe could be the middle of December some years when it would be properly clean and you could harvest away then for December, January and February until it starts to sprout again maybe mid-March or the first of April. It all depends every spur would be different. Some of the spurs up near the city now would be earlier. Whereas the ones back the river would be later and they'd grow away then and you'd have to come off them then like. Most of it would be cut that time anyway, you know, so you wouldn't be on the spur when it'd be growing. And like there was a lot, a lot of men and a lot of employment on it. Sure you'd have probably seen it yourself out along the Ennis Road there you know. There'd be bundles of reed left there not so much now since the new road when there but when the old road was there you could see the reed stacked up there and inside in the Dock Road. Yeah it was a big part of it was well you know.

SS: Is there anybody still doing it now?

JR: There is yeah, there is yeah, and Tom now, he does a good bit of thatching, the first cousin who has the other license. He thatches a fair bit now as well and he thatched the house above for us and he his own house there is thatched. He built a new house and he thatched it and he does a good bit of thatching in the area, you know, any house that has to be thatched he thatches them but he's good at it now. Good tradesman, you know, he uses mostly local reed unless an owner of the house like looks for reed to be brought in from another area but mostly he uses local reed like. So there is, there's people cut cut a good bit of reed for him and there's people cut a good bit on the Maigne for the same, Bord Failte some of them houses are still being looking for reed and hotels. You'd be surprised at the amount stuff and down around Killarney now there's a lot of thatched houses. They all have to be supplied, you know. A lot of the reed comes from this area here and there's slob in Waterford as well that it comes from, so most of it now comes from this area.

SS: And back to the fishing, what different tools did you use?

JR: Well that was fairly simple as well. Generally in the we'll say, before engines came you had a kinda three seater boats and they were anything form maybe twenty one to twenty four foot and there were two men paddled 'em with oars and like when you'd be traveling then maybe down for your, you go down the river maybe a few miles for low water but that's when the tide goes out and you'd fish it back up then. So if you were traveling a distance you'd have a man each with an oar and then you'd have a man with a pair of paddles pulling with when you'd be traveling and you'd fish it back up with the tide then. But in recent years like when they got the engines started to come more popular then they shortened the boats and then there was only two seater boats and two men instead of three men, there was only

two men in it and generally a pair of paddles and you'd have your engine and just a net. It was fairly basic really, you know, and the few bits of gear that would go with it, ropes and an anchor, you know, simple things like, it was a simple way of life.

SS: And how would you get the fish into the boat?

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