

Mike Grimes (MG), Sharon Slater (SS)

Mike Grimes is a reed cutter and fisherman from Coonagh. He explains the difference in the nets and draft, shore and drift fishing.

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SS: This is Sharon Slater on the 12th of May 2017 and I'm interviewing Mike Grimes on the life on the Shannon. So first I would like to find out about your family connection with the Shannon and with fishing just in general.

MG: Yeah, well my family would have been involved with the fishing and the reed cutting for many generations. My grandfather was also married to Coonagh woman who was Davis and their family as well would have been involved in the fishing and the reed cutting and all belongs to them well say you know.

SS: What families were involved in your area with the fishing and the reed cutting what were their names?

MG: Well em, a lot of the families would have been fishing would have been involved in the reed cutting but not all of them you know so just, just had fishing licenses and they might have had jobs outside of that as well you know but I suppose the fishing license holders I'll give you their names first I hope I don't leave anybody out now. There would have been, there was Hickeys, Considines, Kennys, Farrells, Davis's, Grimes's, Cronins, MacInerneys and that's about it now yeah. I'm actually just going along the creeks [laughs] so there was, so that's about it yeah.

SS: So when you mentioned there about the creeks so each of the families they fished a certain area?

MG: Well, no we all had to fish the same area we'll say from the stent light that was the start of the fishing grounds that was at Coonagh there just below the Coonagh boat bed from there west were the fishing grounds but the creeks they were just kind of boat beds as we used to call them places to keep your boat safe you know, they were kind of, some of them were natural creeks on the shore and more of them were dug out, most of them were actually dug out they were a side by side and each family had their own creek you know So some families would have had two or three boats and we'll say you go back to the forties, thirties, forties, fifties some families w'had three or four licenses, you know, that time you could just go in and get a license. You know, there was no applying for it and going through this process, you could just go in and buy a license at that time but that all changed we'll say I suppose in the sixties it started to become hard to get a license then, you know. If you family didn't have a license you found it very hard then to get a license, you know, so em. Actually in the fifties I think that changed y'know and as you know the fishing's over now, we'll say, since 2006 was our last year fishing.

SS: And the families were they all close knit, did they intermarry?

MG: Emm, not really no there would have been a few cases ok, you know, there would have been a few cases but a lot of he married outside then as well, you know, maybe 50/50 I'm not sure [laughs] but we're probably all related one way or another if you go back far enough, you know.

SS: And the families as well, did they use nicknames for each other or just their given names?

MG: Yeah, well in particular the Grimes families. There would have been maybe 6 different families of Grimes's some related and some not and of course a lot of them had the surname of Micheal,

John or Tom and it ran through a lot of the families you know so there was letters flying everywhere you know. So our own nicknames we were the Aidhg's, the Aidhg Grimes's. You had the White Grimes's, the Bus Grimes's. Suppose there would have been branches of them then, if you know what I mean, they would have been the main Grimes we'll say and we'd kind of distinguish them with those names, you know, so like I mean that does account for my grandfather and father would have been addressed to Michael Grimes and in brackets Aidhg, especially the fishing licenses and application forms when they'd come out to distinguish the different Grimes's, you know, as well but, em, yeah you would, you would have had a good few families the Considine's and the Davis's as well then and they would have had different nicknames as well, you know,. But em, I suppose the Grimes's would have been the most common name out there I suppose yeah it would have been at the time, Davis's now as well but a lot of the Davis's actually were killed in the First World War in the navy, the British Navy, you know, so em, there's still quite a few left like but that took it's toll on them, you know.

SS: And what age were you when you started fishing?

MG: I started fishing when I was twelve with my father now I would have been going out for what we used to call it spins in the boat with him maybe from 6 or 7 on you know if it was a nice day they'd take you out and they might give you an oar just to be fooling around with it. Everyone started off rowing, we'll say, on one oar and if you gave a young fella the two oars he'd choke himself with them, you know [laughs] but yeah I fished my first full season at the age of twelve I was actually going to primary school in Meelick at the time and my grandfather was getting too old to fish the full season so a guy came over from England for two years to fish, he was a Coonagh man Tom Pearl but he was living in England for years and years so my father was stuck for two years I'd been 10 and 11, so em, this man came over and fished two seasons with him and actually unfortunately he actually died after the second season he died young, you know. I took over the following season then I was twelve but my father came up to Meelick school and had a chat with the headmaster about them Mr Cavanagh and I got off three weeks early from school I finished at the end of May and there wasn't a problem with it as a matter of fact about three years later my father was fishing with a guy called Ger Mac from Coonagh outside and they were out one time and it was quite wild, you know, and Jim had a bit of an injury on his shoulder at the time and they got a lot of fish that morning and the wind stayed up, you know, so most boats had to go with three men that evening. I was actually finished with the last exam in the tech and was actually art I was in there only 15 minutes and a knock came to the door and I was wanted down at the reception, my father and Jim they said "Micheal you have to come out with us there's a few pale there and it's a bit wild" d'know, so I was delighted actually so I went back up. I said give me 5 minutes and finished off the little bits and pieces I was doing and I signed my name and I went out and I actually passed the art so that was pure luck now, but em and actually we went out that evening and as soon as we went out the wind died out it was flat calm and the fish were gone as well. So we were out all evening from one to between three of us, but that happens, you know, but em. Yeah, I stayed at it then and the reed as well we'd say, we'd start fishing, we'd start well, what happened actually was years back the fishing was the first of February was the open day and people would be cutting the reed up to then now, but a lot of them might keep going up to Paddy's day, the reed if there was still reed left around to cut, d'know, and all was there for it and when they'd finish they start fishing the spring salmon first and bring it in to the pale season as we'd call it the summer salmon and that would continue on til the end of July it was actually the 19th of July was the finishing date that time and em, we had a couple of slack week then til might could be the middle of September maybe you might go back cutting the reed again but the reed would be fairly leafy at that time, you know, because the green leaves were still on it but it was mostly farmers in thatched cottages that were

buying it so they didn't seem to mind too much about the leaves and things but later on when the thachers started buying it directly they didn't want to have the hassle of having the leaves on the reeds so t'would be the middle of November before you'd start then you know when the leaf would be nearly gone almost died off after a few hard frosts and a breeze of wind most of the leaves would be gone off it then so, it meant less work for the thachers you know.

SS: And how would you cut the reeds, what was the whole process there?

MG: The process, well you'd have a sickle and we'll say sometimes you could just walk down over the bank and just cut local areas and then as time went on when they were cut you'd have to move you'd probably be going be boat then you know. So you'd cut your reed and might be cutting maybe for three hours and then you'd come along and tie it up into sheaves we'd say, bundles, and then you'd em, bring that out to the side of the river for loading onto the boat, load your boat then, tie it down and years back they used to row with the reeds to the bridges but it's all motors now so you'd drive to whatever bridge you were going to then probably the one on the Ennis Road, the sandy bridge there by the Limerick Inn and you'd unload your reeds there and then it's back up over the bank again and over the bank and stacked before your reed would be gone you would have handled it 7 or 8 times, you know, it's hard work, now, real hard work cutting the reed, you couldn't hide down there, you know [laughs] if you didn't put in the work that was it you wouldn't have the reed at the end of the day.

SS: And what age were you when you started that as well?

MG: I was about 16, I'd say starting at the reed yeah but I'd often go down and help my father let's say if he was down, let's say, if he wasn't gone by boat we'd walk down and we'd tie up some reed for him and we'd help him carry it out and that, sometimes go on the boat with him but probably about 16 when I started cutting it myself you know.

SS: And were you ever involved in the thatching as well or

MG: No, we never got involved in the thatching, there was a course ran out 'anchor' at one stage a few of us were thinking about it but we reckoned we wouldn't have the time with fishing to be thatching in the summer which was a mistake at the time now but em, years back when there were lots of thatched houses in Coonagh, we'll say, most of the houses were thatched. Everybody could thatched their own little bit, you know, a lot of it would have been patching, you know what I mean, and they all had their own little area down the marsh as well. Which was em, it was divided let's say by with the sally trees. They would have set a little line of them and you had a section and the next person there was loads for everyone well say, you know, and em, either the trees were divided or different creeks were divided, you know, but the trees are still down there actually.

SS: Was there any, was there ever any disagreements with people crossing over the lines?

MG: I've never heard of that now really if somebody was probably stuck for a bit they could take a bit of someone else's and next year but I mean if you're em, if you're tipping away at it every year or every second year you'd have do kind of cut it every year to keep it new for the following year, you know, you wouldn't want any old stuff through it. Everyone had enough if you know what I mean because they weren't thatching a house completely, we'll say, they were just. Ah, there was plenty there for everyone really, you know.

SS: And how far down river did the reeds grow?

MG: Well the actually start growing at Spillane's Tower, the snuff box, out by Barrington's pier there on the south shore, we'll say. They start there and they'd grow on both shores all the way down as far as Shannon airport. Now some areas would be sparse, we'll say, but mainly on the north shore probably would be more reed on the north shore than the south shore in general, you know, the south shore in areas was very narrow whereas on the north shore you had maybe 400 yards in places from the edge of the river into the bank you know so there would be a lot more reed on that side.

SS: And when you were fishing I know there was salmon but what other kinds of fish?

MG: Salmon was the main catch that what we were fishing for, we were fishing with salmon nets, you know, it'd be five, five and a half inch mesh for the grills for the summer salmon and there would have been six or six and a half inch mesh for the spring salmon but it's seldom you'd be catching any other types of fish when you'd be using those mesh, size meshes, but we used to catch a lot of flat fish now, flounder we'll say, but I've noticed they've got scarce as well towards the end of the fishing, you know, I mean we'll often maybe get a dozen flounder in the day, depending on where you were fishing, if you were fishing on the mud flats a lot you'd be guaranteed we'll say to get a lot of the flounder, you know, and we'd get a lot of trout as well which seems to been, went scarce as well towards the end of it and em a nice few sea trout and we'd catch a lot of the smelt which are the smaller fish, you know. But em, and a lot of eels, but that would be generally it, d'know, an odd time you'd get a mackerel or a herring but it would be very rare, you know.

SS: Did you ever come across a fish called a pollan it looked sort of like a salmon I was told.

MG: Em, it's possible that we've had, they wouldn't be as big as salmon I don't think you know but em, we've often caught smaller fish, you'd just disregard them really without thinking, you know. But em, I couldn't say for definite now that we did, you know, but I'm sure we probably did, you know, I mean a lot of our fishing was done at night time as well and like anything you didn't want was just thrown back in, you know what I mean, you'd probably be a bit busy to be going along checking them and stuff, you know. We got an odd sea bass down there now after a storm. You had a bad, you had a bad gale of wind there now em, a day or two later you could pick up an odd sea bass, you know. And em, they'd be probably blown in with the wind, you know. So that would be about it like in general down there. The odd time you'd catch a pike, it would be just a by catch as well you know but em, that would be the size of it, you know.

SS: What kind of tools did you use for the fishing, what boats and you mentioned a little bit about the nets there.

MG: Yeah well our nets, we would have been using drift nets and there would have been a few shore nets as well but mostly in Coonagh it was drift netting, you know, but it had been all shore fishing we'll say for a long time. I'd say fifties and sixties again when the drifting got more popular. With the shore fishing, it had it's good points and bad points. It's good points were, you knew when you were going out and you knew when you were coming in as soon as the muds bared off you could go fishing, shoring fishing and as soon as they were covered you had to come in, you know, because you had a guy walking the mud, we'll say, with the rope so em with the drifting you could go out anytime. So what happened as far as I know is one or two people started to get the drift nets and when there was a breeze of wind there, they were shore fishing could be awkward, you know. So when you had a good breeze there and the muds were covered they'd go drifting. So I think they found they were actually catching more with the drift net and now the old nets wouldn't be great

quality at the start you know, they would have been flax and that and they wouldn't last maybe two or three weeks. You might have to go through three sets of nets for to fish a season and even the hemp ropes that time they would rot fairly easily, you know, but em as things progressed the nets started to get a bit better the nylon nets then and it's actually nearly all, everything is nearly nylon now, you know, but em there was still a few of the shore net licenses down in Newtown there, down in Clarina we'll say. Draft licenses they were called then, draft fishing, you know.

SS: And where would you get the nets from originally?

MG: Well for year they'd get them at Rene Cusack the fish buyer would bring in the nets. He'd have a stock of them inside and you could go in that time and pick up a couple of nets and pay him when you started fishing then you know, he would just deduct it from the amount that you were due, we'll say, and em, for the last twenty or thirty, twenty five years of the fishing I recon people were experimenting more, they were sending off or driving to the likes of Glendor in Cork or Waterford even we went as far as Donegal for nets at times, Cork we could, we kind of em, You'd experiment with a net we'll say and if you were happy enough with it you go for it again next year. Sometimes there was problem with the knots running in the nets as well, you know, if you got, if you got caught we'll say on a snag you were fast on a snag in a strong tide at times the knots would run on the net and the meshes wouldn't be open like we'll say it was, you'd lose a lot of fish over that so. You were kind of watching the whole time and learning if you know what I mean so, you kind of em, you wouldn't stay with the same crowd the whole time if you [laughs] got a better net at a better price even, you'd move around you know. But you were saying about the different fish there a minute ago, em, they used to fish for herrings as well which is back a long time now, y'know, and they used to make their own nets, the herring nets, but they would have to travel well down the Estuary for the herrings you know and em, a lot of the Newtown lads would fish for the herrings there as well you know there's even a place down the river passed Shannon there, nice bit passed Shannon actually called Herring Rock so you'd wonder where it's got it's name from you know, so [laughs] but of course the herring died out as well you know, they were over fished, not by the inshore crowd by the crowd on the coast, we'll say, that happened all over the world actually, you know, the herrings. Scotland as well.

SS: And did em, were the boats and the nets were they blessed or was their any folklore around them?

MG: Yeah, there's always very important thing was to have your boat blessed, a new boat when she's be ready you'd get the parish priest out to bless it and most people would have the net blessed as well, believe it or not, yeah and actually I can remember back mounting a net as we used to call it. Tying up a net, you know, and it was on a Friday, just at the start of the fishing and the priest used come around that time every, the first Friday of every month so I remember my father watching out for him 'cause he wouldn't go to every house now it would be the elderly people, would give'm confessions and communions and things. So he was watching out for him all day and he finally got him anyway and while the net was actually hanging on the ropes, we used to tie it onto the oars the two ropes one at each side you'd mount on your net, you know, and put in your floats and things space them out. He got it blessed anyway while it was hanging off the oars, he was very confident now that year with that net [laughs].

SS: Can you tell me a little bit more about that, about the mounting of the net and what the process was there.

MG: Yeah, the old guys used to say mounting a net was a trade in it's own [laughs]. We used to have a laugh at that, you know but em, I suppose I put it this way to you in twenty years time there won't be many around who'd know how to mount the net. See, you get a net, you get a what we used to call a hank of net it would be a hundred yards. Now that would only mount fifty years, it would be a hundred stretched out but when it'd be tied up it would only mount up fifty so you'd want three hanks to mount a new net right so. You had your three hanks of net and you had your cork line, you're top line we'll say which would, years back the boat lines would be hemp the cork lines, the floating line would be a lighter one, and you'd have the old cork floats along it and you'd have a thicker hemp rope then for the lead line the sinking line and then later we started using nylon for the float line, it would nearly float on it's own, you know, and we experimented with different types of lead lines and everybody maybe had two different ropes then for the finishing what ever suited people, you know. But em, yeah well. You'd have to, about a forty yards of a stretch. You'd want a good clean field and you'd make your holes for the oars with a crowbar. You'd put down maybe five or six oars spaced out maybe twelve yards apart or whatever, between nine and twelve and you'd have a string around the top of them then with the hemp. You'd then tie on your two ropes, one above the other, the cork line above the lead line usually tie them on tight and you'd fasten that down then to the crowbar, we'll say the first one. So then you'd have, one guy would go ahead and hold the two ropes with a strain on them, leaving the lead line slightly lower so's you could mount opposite, you know, and then the other guy would come along and tie that, a certain way of tying it. Then onto the next one, on to the next one and then you'd secure it again with a crowbar or a stake at the very end. So it was important to keep them tight and very important to keep them in line that they wouldn't slide past each other because you'd get what we used to call a drag in the net then and it would be pulled one way or the other way but you'd actually notice while you were mounting it then if it was kind of coming off the ground that there was something wrong. They'd say there was a purse in it, you know, it was important to keep an eye on those things, you know, and it was, you'd have your needle then we'll say. That would be filled, you'd have your ball of hemp, fill your needle and nice and tight and you'd dip that in water to stop it blowing around in the wind. So, start off then you'd put up your first hitch off the two guys opposite each other. So one fella would move along and maybe a foot or two ahead so that they wouldn't be hitting each other with. So you just fella on the lead line then would usually lead and it was very important to keep the proper space between each hitch on the rope as well you know. Now when you'd be used to doing it you could just judge it and plus they hang, the depth of it, was usually the width of your hand, you know. So here's the rope and it's down catching into the net here and up [demonstrates] that would be the depth usually 'bout four inches. So yeah, he would move along and the guy coming along on the cork line behind him then would, he would, it was his job to put the floats in as well, you know. So they would space out the floats, the normal was the width of your two arms [demonstrates] plus a foot maybe, a foot or two. So you'd nearly want the same guy mounting the cork line for the whole lot, you know. Now there was some people there that were very particular, I won't mention any names now but they used to have a little measuring stick for the, each hanging and more of them would go along and mark the rope with a bit of cow dung [laughs] didn't have any markers at the time and more of them would measure out the space for the floats, you know but em, in general that's the way it was done. You'd have your tip on one floor here, two hands spread out like that and maybe a foot or two foot depends on what kinds of floats you had as well [demonstrates]. So that it took it, that was a day's work for two or three guys at least. You'd nearly want three, like you know. So every time you mount a stretch of it then, we call that a stretch you would, all up and down the whole lot again then and you'd haul it back up then and into a bag and then start up at your last hitch again. Tie it on and go through the same process again. Normally it would take four or five stretches, as they called it, for to mount a full net. So that was the mounting of the nets anyway.

SS: And how often would that have to be done?

MG: Well for the last few years with the new gear that they had as regards the nylon mounting twine and nylon ropes and nylon nets you could get five years out of the nets if you minded them, if you didn't get them tore too much, that would probably be their life span but lake if you fished a fairly hard season there and that. You were going the two tides night and day you couldn't avoid getting caught on snags and things at times and the buoys on the river as well if you miss judged that or whatever, they done a lot of damage to the nets, you know. You might, some people had to mount it twice in the year and more people might get away with two or three years between mounting, you know, depends on how much they were being used and how careful and stuff they were you know. But generally speaking probably you'd mount up a new net nearly every year you know.

SS: And you were saying there about night time and day time, was there a difference in how you fished in the day time or in the night time?

MG: No there wouldn't have been any difference in the way we fished, the only difference would be you wouldn't see what you'd be doing in the night time [laughs] and a lot of it was chance you know. You weren't sure what way your net was stretched and things, but. In general you nearly kind of be ok, we'll say, and the other difference would be, we'll say, when you 'd be queuing up for your drift. I mean, I'm talking when it was, when all boats were fishing and all the licences were out, just say you went down fishing at twelve o'clock in the night, you might have to, you mightn't wet your net until two o'clock in the morning because there might be a queue for a certain drift. There could be four or five boats in front of you and it could be worth waiting for that drift you know, so what would happen during the day when the boat would hit a certain point on the land you'd have a mark it could be a tree or something from the position where you lie up to the finish of the drift. You'd take an angle so you'd know it's you're turn to go then but in the night time you couldn't see that so they would light a match or flick a lighter or a torch when they were at that position. Now some people would give it right on time, more would leave it go on. So you'd kind of go by times as well, you know. You know, maybe twenty five minutes a drift kind of would be the norm for the most popular ones, you know. That was always in the going tide, we'll say the ebbing tide. You wouldn't have that much lying up for the flood tide. You'd fish your low water and you'd come back either to the tower or the 'Tine Lamp' as they called it and you'd have your cup of tea, sandwich or whatever and there might be four or five, six boats at each station and might be there for an hour and everyone would go off then in their turn and in the flood tide you'd be fishing all the time until you come to the stent light, you know, and you float most rocks and things as well, you'd only have to watch out for the buoys really and ships that was the other danger in the flood tide, you know, depending on what shore you were, you know, you'd have to be watching out for those as well, especially in the night time, you know.

SS: With that, with the ships, how much interaction did ye have seeing how there was the docks up in Limerick and ships coming up and down?

MG: Well years back there was no navigation buoys on the river, so they kind of as the fella said they sneaked them in one by one, one here and one there, ah sure, you'd get over it. Next thing there were, nearly every drift there was a buoy so they got, they became very awkward for the fishermen before they finished you know. A lot of nets were lost or damaged on those buoys, you know and the ships themselves, there's plenty old stories of the ships going into nets and cutting them in half but that would be kind of the person's own fault really, d'know.

SS: And did ye have much interaction with the bailiffs?

MG: Yeah, there was a lot of interaction with the bailiffs, well in the earlier years everybody was rowing, fishing and with bailiffs they could always out row them, you know. So it wasn't that much of a problem unless they really got caught red handed, d'know [laughs] but when the bailiffs then got the power boats and that it was em, now what I'm talking about now would be just maybe when your off at six o'clock on a Saturday morning. You had to be off at six until six o'clock Monday morning if there was a few fish running you might leave it down for maybe half an hour or what, waiting for the tide to float in above home and they could make an appearance and you might have an argument with your watch and clocks and everything and an odd time if people might chance to go out on a Saturday night or a Sunday night and they could arrive down, you know, and you'd kind of nearly have to leave your net go then and just try and get away and just leave them the net, d'know. Ah it was, it didn't happen that often we'll say, you know, ah there was a few different cases, one or two cases of people that their net would have run slightly past the stent. Which was kind of the way we fished early, you'd run up there any way and by the time you'd start hauling, by the time, you might be gone twenty yards part the lamp. Which didn't really mean anything but if they were sticklers like which some of them were and they were around they'd could prosecute you for it, you know. Apart from that there wasn't much interaction with them, you know. Although for the last three years we fished we were on the tag system and they were down towards the end of the season checking every bodies tags because if you ran out of tags you couldn't fish but what happened was they most of the, the majority of the tags were going out to the coast and you might have maybe fifty or sixty tags used. You'd just be taking it easy because the seasons weren't great at the time and we'd go down on Monday maybe and get tags, you might go down and they might say all the tags are gone. So where are they gone, of they're gone down the coast. So we'd always keep five or six tags so we still would have time to go out if you know what I mean [laughs] you know, no one actually ran out of tags [laughs].

SS: Were there any accidents, boats tipping over and that sort of thing?

MG: Ah there, not a whole lot but there was a few incidents of people out on bad boats and things and I remember one time there was these guy out fishing there from Limerick and the bottom of their boat actually fell out [laughs] so they were only in a few feet of water at the time which was lucky enough but they were saved anyway but that was just down to negligence again like, you know. There was another incident there was a guy drowned from our place there Gabriel Hickey. He was out fishing with Munchin Kenny and they got a few fish and they went up to Dirty Nelly's to sell the fish because that time you might get a better price in the hotels and places you know and when they leaving Gabriel Hickey was back trying to start the engine or put on the engine or whatever and he got a stumble anyway and he fell out and he got drown there and he was found later on that evening at the, just under the arch of the bridge. It was tragic now he had a young family and at the time. He's actually a relation, he's a first cousin of my father's now you know. His mother would have been, his mother would have been Davis, you know, who would have been my grandmother's people but that was terrible terrible tragedy at the time yeah.

SS: And could, could the fishermen swim?

MG: You know the funny thing about it is most of them couldn't. Now my own generation and that most of us could but my father and grandfather could swim ok but a lot of the other guys believe it or not couldn't swim. I think I've heard a story about a lot of men in the navy that they were told

that they were better off if they couldn't swim if something happened like, if they were in the water, you know, they were only prolonging things like if they could swim. So a lot of them had kind of that way of thinking as well, you know, which is strange but strange I believe anyway.

SS: Where would you get the boats?

MG: Yeah em, there were a few traditional boat builders in Limerick, there was the Dorans, the Farrell's would have been building boats and the Bennis, McInerney's but most people would go to Blacky Doran for their boat, d'know, he used to build a lovely boat. Lovely fishing boat, d'know, lovely sea boat as we used to call it, d'know, but em, and it would be a nice light boat as well but a few stopped it. Nearly in every fishing village there was somebody who would be handy enough at a boat for to build one or repair it, d'know. So even our own place there for the last maybe thirty years we had two or three different people that would be tipping away at the boats and they'd build them for themselves, you know. So most places, Clarecastle as well there was a few boat builders same out in Newtown there you had Roberts and Peter Byrnes and them, they would be building their own boats, d'know.

SS: And where were the fish sold?

MG: The main fish buyer back in the days would have been Rene Cusack, now there was a few other smaller fish buyers who would come and take a good few but I mean when the season was in full swing and you had boats coming in, you might have ten boats coming in in Coonagh and they could have fifty or sixty fish each. That when you needed a main fish buyer then like Rene Cusack. Rene would send out his vans to Coonagh that time. He would send them. Rene would actually follow the tides that time as well, it wouldn't be unusual for a Rene Cusack van to be up on the road at twelve o'clock at night if that's the time because most boats would all come in within an hour and a half of each other because you needed to come in, you needed to get some sleep and go back out to fish the next tide again, you know. So he would have them, he would come during the day for the day tide and he's come at night or else if it was gone too late in the night, we'll say gone into the early mornings he would come out early in the morning again and take the night's catch, you know. So every, he would leave his fish boxes then and you'd fill your fish boxes. Now you wouldn't be filling them all the time but when there was fish running you'd fill a couple of boxes and you have your name on a tag each box tied on, you know. So he might, he's do all the houses then all the fishing houses and back in with them and he would be back out again. Then when the old fish were getting scarce towards the end of the season he might just take a trip once a day, you know, so he would have been the main fish buyer, but. Now the hotels and stuff they'd buy a few as well, you know, and you had the smaller fish buyer in town that would take a few but when they'd get so many we'd say they'd have enough, you know, but Rene Cusack was exporting the fish at the time so he take it, the more he got the better, you know.

SS: What were the best spots to fish on the river?

MG: [laughs] That's a funny one now. [laughs] Ah you see, different fishermen had different favorite spots you know but speaking from a Coonagh point of view the eddy tied, the going tide we'd say was always great, you'd be nearly guaranteed a few fish there. That's why people would maybe lie up for two hours, wait their turn. You'd want to be very unlucky to miss going down there now and there's a place called Ballindray which would be further down, would have been a great spot for the actual low water, that would have been d'know when the tide would stop and start to flood again

and begin to rise, that would have been a favourite spot as well you know. And em, the Hole would have been another favourite spot though I probably shouldn't be mentioning that [laughs] but em, that would have been in the ebbing tide now we'll say when the flood tide then the flats and over the rocks there that would be near the stent light was a great spot because it was, there was a natural height there of rocks and your net was very close to the bottom most times plus the river kind of narrowed in there at a point you know. What they used to say is you had a chance of both shores up over the rocks you know, you had a chance of fish coming off the south shore as well as the north shore, especially now if there wasn't many boats fishing at the time but if the boats were line south and north down along they had a lot of nets to pass to get up to that point but if you happened to be out maybe at four o'clock in the morning and you had the river fairly quiet yourself it could have been a good spot for the high water, y'know because as I say you'd have run of both shores there and you were on a height it's just one of the best places around for the high water, you know. I can't be giving away all my secrets now. [laughs]

SS: What did you wear, was there particular clothing that you wore?

MG: Ah, no not in particular, the guy on the net would always have leggings on him and an oil skin. It's just something warm for the night time there was not costume as such, you know, whatever was handy, yeah.

SS: When you were on the boats was there much banter, or was it quiet?

MG: There would have been a good old crack when you would be lying up in the mud now. AS I say there could be four, five, six boats there and there was some great banter there on the muds at times, you know, there was often a sing song. Especially in the night time and especially when there was no fish there but when there was plenty of fish around everyone seems to be kind of minding their own little business and keeping away from other boats and stuff you know. But when the Strand Fishermen one or two of 'em used to say when you'd hear the 'Coonack men' as they called them the Coonagh men. When you heard the Coonagh men singing there was no fish there [laughs].

SS: So, even though the licenses are gone is there, was there a noticeable decrease in the fish before the licenses were taken away?

MG: Yeah fish were, had been decreasing there for a few years but funny enough the last year, the last year we fished 2006 it seemed to have been a very good year strangely enough. I don't know if that trend is continued or not but I caught fifty fish with Mike Davies on the 7th of July 2006 and I hadn't caught fifty in a tide before that since the eighties. So, that was the 7th July as I say and the fish started to come a little bit later each season, you know, but there was fish lasted right to the end of the season till the end of July there was plenty of fish about but em, people didn't believe that we caught fifty and we actually hadn't enough tags for us so we had to go down to the Ashbourne Park to the fisheries board office below to get the tags and she asked how much do you want and we said we're short thirty tags, she said have you none left we said we had twenty so she didn't believe us, so she came out and she looked in the back of the van and she actually called a few more out of the office and they took scales and things from maybe half the fish just to test them and to find out, the scale of a fish tells an awful lot about his history and life cycle, you know, but yeah that was the 7th of July so em that was 2006 so I don't know. I mean there should be a lot more fish around with the fact that the trawlers on the coast are gone as well but it doesn't seem to be that way so there must be some other factors that we're not sure about, y'know. I, as I said to you fish

started to come back later and smaller. Like fish that should be there, we'll say second or third week of June weren't coming until the second week of July and fish that we caught in July were always a bigger fish, y'know. Early, the first few fish you get in May you might get a few four pounders or four and half pounders in June that would be increasing up to the six average mark and in July the average would be seven and eight pound weight, y'know. These would have been fish that would have stayed feeding at sea long and they'd have been that bit bigger coming in the brown backs, the brown backs as we used to call them as they tended to have kind of a brown sheen to their back, y'know, but em. Yeah, that's the story with the fish anyway.

SS: One last question, what was the biggest fish that you caught?

MG: The biggest fish that I caught was 22 pound weight, my father caught, the biggest one I saw was 25 pound weight my father caught with a chap called Anthony Kenny and my grandfather caught a 52 pounder, I would say I wasn't around that time and like fifty plus fish wouldn't have been a rare thing, well it probably would have been a rare thing but the average fish that time for spring salmon would have been around, always over twenty and around twenty five. I remember my grandfather told me that the fish one time, one night in particular in a place called, just the name lose me now for a minute, I think it was the Half Door was the place it would have been up towards Limerick, it was during the time of the Troubles (1920s) and the Coonagh fishermen were trying to reclaim that stretch of the river so they took it in their turns they rotated with six crews and there was six draws, it was all shore fishing that time and the dangerous draw was the far up one, we'll say up near Barrington's Pier so the next night you would move down a draw and down 'til eventually you'd be back in Coonagh but he said they went up one night and they made a draw and there was so much fish in their net that they tore away the belly piece of the net and just, they ended up with nothing and another night they fished up there, this is spring salmon now bear in mind, and they made their couple of draws and they had ten fish, ten spring salmon and the smallest of fish, the smallest weight was 25 pound weight. Now if you see a 25 pound fish now you'd be taking photographs of it and getting him stuffed and everything, y'know but. The Ardnacrusha power station had a lot to do with that believe it or not yeah, they kind of they started the decline of the spring fish. They almost wiped them out at one stage. It's slowly coming back again now but not in those kind of numbers because actually back in that time, my grandfather's time, the spring fishing was more important fishing than the pale fishing as we call'm because em, they were actually more plentiful the spring salmon and you'd need four or five of the pale to make up one spring salmon, y'know and can you picture the steaks now with a 25 pound fish compared to a four pounder. The four pound fish would be like the little thing you get in the tin, the steaks that size, you know but em. Yeah it's such a pity, the spring salmon that time they used an eight inch mesh, drifting in my grandfather's time, an eight inch mesh. Now the average mesh now at the moment is five inches for spring you know, or for em summer fish and six for spring. Two inches that's an awful lot in the size of a fish's head, weight wise then as well, y'know, so that then came down to seven after the, a few years after the power station was built. Then the last years we fished it was a six inch mesh we'd use, y'know, and if you were going out today it's a six inch you'd use, y'know, so as I say Ardnacrusha has a lot to account for in that sense [laughs] isn't much you can do about it now I suppose, you know.

SS: Thank you very much for taking your time to speak to me.

MG: No problem, no problem.