A Day in the Life of Bill Matthews ~ Maine Lobsterman

Story and photos by Valerie Marier

For the past 30 years Bill Matthews has worked a major part of each week out on the Atlantic Ocean. His "office" is a 30-foot boat named *Miss Nikki*. His "traditional territory" stretches from Walker's Point in Kennebunkport to Fortunes Rocks south of Biddeford Pool.

His "corporate attire" includes Grundens Herkules dark green waders hoisted by black suspenders, a faded grey sweatshirt, knee-high white rubber boots and thick cotton gloves.

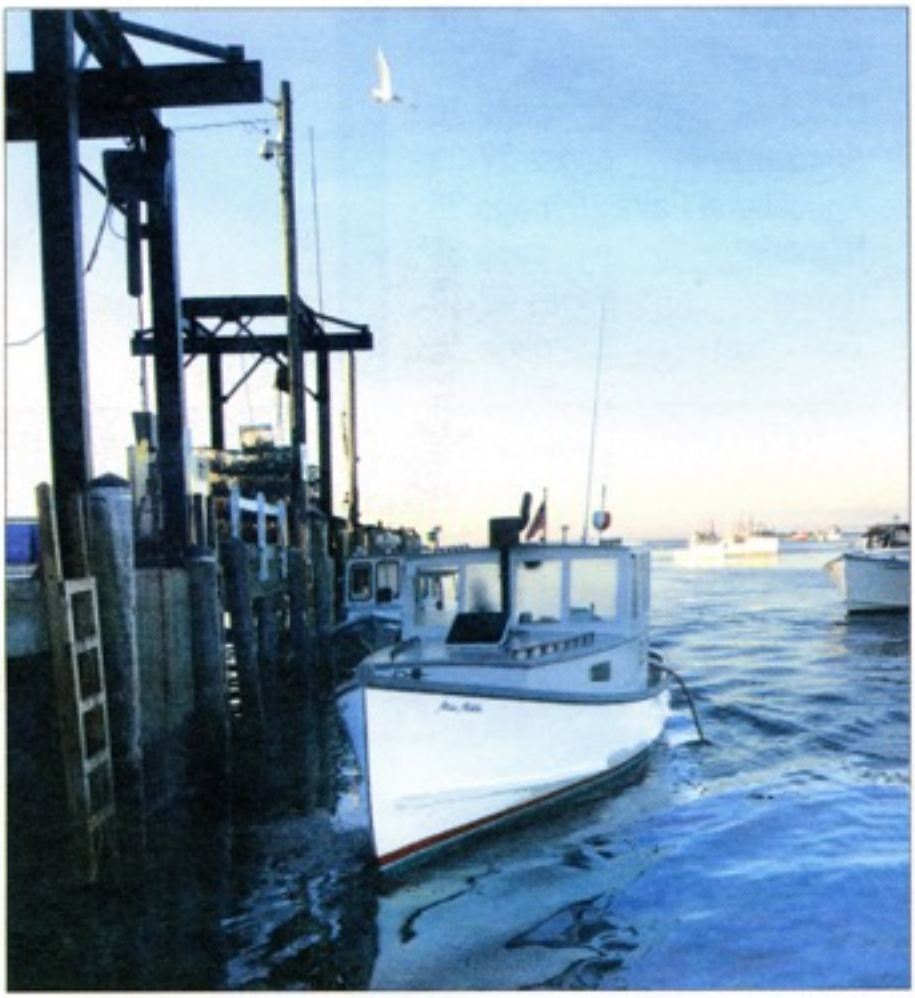
The nearly 60-year-old Cape Porpoise resident is an independent lobsterman who can't imagine doing anything else for a living.

Matthews' day starts before sun-up. He arrives at the Cape Porpoise pier well before 6 AM after downing coffee and a sandwich at Winks in Arundel.

He fires up *Miss Nikki*'s engine and loads two 35-gallon bait barrels filled with salted pogies and herring into the open cockpit.

He turns on the ship-to-shore radio, wipes the outer windshield, activates the Garmin, then navigates his boat through Stage Island Harbor, past bobbing dinghies, colorful lobster buoys and swooping gulls. Early morning sun bathes Goat Island Lighthouse, the sea is calm, there's a slight breeze. Matthews says, "Could be a good day."

Maine lobstermen are known for being taciturn. Their boats are known as "the pickup truck of the Maine coast," and the no-frills *Miss Nikki* aptly fits that description.



Bill Matthews' 30-foot lobster boat *Miss Nikki* at the dock in Cape Porpoise harbor.

Besides the bait barrels, the cockpit holds a "live tank" for the lobsters, a hundred or so feet of spare coiled rope, several hoses and plastic baskets, a Coleman cooler and a buoy washer bucket rigged with an electrical coil that heats the water to 160 degrees.

Oh, and a bottle of Dawn liquid detergent. "Best thing to clean up the boat at the end of the day," Matthews says.

Fifteen minutes later he arrives at his first string of traps. Maine lobstermen have customarily had an

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Matthews fills a bait bag with salted pogies and herring.

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informal, almost unspoken agreement about where each member of the local fishing community can lay his traps.

They often lay their strings in one direction, such as north to south, so they don't tangle their lines in someone else's. "I've got 440 in the water and usually do 110 in a day," Matthews says.

Lobstermen must register their specific trap colors with the state; Matthews' are a striped combo of red, green and white, "the colors of the Italian flag because my wife is of Italian heritage," he says.

He cuts the motor to idle and begins the time-honored tradition of hauling lobsters. Matthews is methodically and meticulously organized. Every haul exhibits the purposeful and well-practiced steps of a finely tuned dance routine.

Using a four-foot-long gaff, he hooks the rope holding the trap onto an electronic winch, which mechanically hauls a three- or four-foot orange wire trap up from the deep.

He settles the trap on the gunnels, tosses the toggle buoy (or bobber) towards the back of the boat, and drops the main buoy into the buoy washer to rid it of algae.

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Bait bag in place, Matthews gets ready to put the trap back in water.

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Rugosa Lobster Tours leave from Nonantum Resort, 95 Ocean Avenue, Kennebunkport; hour-and-a-half tours daily at 10:30 AM, 1 PM and 3:30 PM; $80 adults, $20 children, 12 and under; for reservations or FMI call 207-468-4095.

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Matthews opens the trap, removes the depleted bait bag and replaces it with a new one. Then it's time to assess his catch. Small lobsters, or "shorts," are immediately thrown back into the sea.

Others are carefully measured to be sure they are legal-size keepers (the carapace or body shell length must measure between 3 ¼ and 5 inches). Matthews inspects the crustaceans closely to be sure none of the lobsters has a V-notch (indicating it's a female breeder) or is "berried" (coated with eggs). Both types must stay in the water.

Using a metal bander, he slips a thick elastic band around the claws of the keeper and tosses it into the live tank. Then, steering *Miss Nikki* with his left hand and feeding the rope, trap and buoy back into the water with his right, he eyeballs the depth monitor and heads on to the next trap. Before arriving there, he has already packed a new bait bag.

It's grindingly repetitive work — gaff the rope, haul the trap, keep or toss lobsters, drop the trap, refill the bait bag, over and over again. The only surprise is discovering what's inside the trap.

On some hauls it could be one keeper and five tossed back; or two keepers and two tossed back; or four tossed back and one keeper; or all tossed back. Maine lobstermen live by the old adage: if today's catch disappoints, tomorrow's will be better.

At one point his trap is filled with six twitching and jumping lobsters. He says, "Ah, just a bunch of feisty females. Oh, and some shedders too."

On that mid-July day his dealer, Allen Daggett of the Cape Porpoise Lobster Co., will pay $3.85 for shedders and $6 for hard shells.

Matthews says, "That's pretty much what all the dealers pay. They must be talking to each other about the price!"

Matthews says that his major expenses are for bait and traps. "Bait runs about $60 a barrel, and that's a constant because you can't lobster without bait," he says. Three-foot traps cost $55 and four-footers cost nearly $100.

Matthews says, "I lost 150 traps in Hurricane Sandy a few years ago, and there's no insurance for traps. I like to buy new, but I couldn't replace that many with new ones then, it was just too expensive."

His ropes (lines) are "usually good for a season or more, but if a storm comes up they might get chafed. Gotta check them all the time too."

The hardest part of being a Maine lobsterman, Matthews says, is "You can't plan on anything. If my wife and I want to go somewhere on Saturday, but it blew big on Thursday, and Friday and I couldn't get out, we have to cancel our plans. If it's foggy for a few days, I might not get out. After a big storm, there might be too many rollers. You have to follow the weather and be flexible."

He also has terse but savvy advice to a wanna-be lobsterman. He says, "Stay in school. Then, if you think you really want to do it, hire on as a stern man first to see if you like it."

The constant lifting of traps takes a toll on his back. He says, "I go to a chiropractor occasionally and take a lot of Advil. But I like being my own boss. I take off January to April, paint some buoys, rest up."

And on a sunny warm July day like this, Matthews' perks are obvious – and resonant. He enjoys scenic vistas of Horseshoe Cove and Timber Island, of a grey-green sea stippled with colorful buoys. He's serenaded by cawing gulls and the splash of water against *Miss Nikki*'s white hull, plus the rhythmic chime of a nearby bell buoy. And he answers only to himself.

By noon the live tank was nearly full, and the bait barrels were almost empty. "Time to head back to the pier to drop my haul at the lobster car," he says.

At the Cape Porpoise Lobster Co. lobster car (a frame in which lobsters are kept under water awaiting sale or transport), Matthews loads his catch into two large crates, separating hard shells and shedders, that are then weighed on a digital scale.

A clerk hands him a slip. "I'll take this up to the plant on Thursday, pay my bait bill and get my check," Matthew says.

The Cape Porpoise lobsterman's work is done for the day.

After measuring each lobster to make sure it is within the guidelines, Bill Matthews uses metal banding pliers to place rubber bands around the lobster's claws.

Before heading back to the pier, Matthews makes a stop at the Cape Porpoise Lobster Company "car" (where the lobsters are stored underwater) to sort and weigh his haul.