

FISHERMEN SPOTLIGHT: SKILLIGALEE SEAFOOD



An interview with Sonny Gwin where he explains his background, his business, and the challenges that stand in the way of small-scale fishermen.

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While Ocean City (OC) is loved by locals and visitors alike for its decadent seafood, the entire array of OC's seafood often goes unnoticed and underappreciated. Most associate lobster with the chilly waters of New England rather than the coast of Ocean City, Maryland. However, miles off the Ocean City beach, a bounty of lobster dwells in the depths. No one knows this better than Sonny Gwin, owner of Skilligalee Seafood. Sonny is a dedicated waterman who ensures the local community gets to experience the best seafood OC has to offer - especially the little-known lobsters.

Sonny's fishing career stemmed from his undeniable love for the water. Born in Virginia Beach, he grew up boating, surfing, and sportfishing with his grandfather. After school, Sonny explored fishing in the Outer Banks and Virginia until he met a man by the name of George Topping who would end up changing the course of Sonny's life forever. Toppman ran a boat named the Original Jackson and told Sonny stories of the lobsters off the coast of Ocean City, Maryland, and that he needed help to catch them. It was an appealing offer for Sonny, so 33 years ago he packed up all his belongings into a wooden fish box and left by boat for Ocean City. He arrived on a chilly February night, and as Sonny says, "Seven dogs, five cats, three kids, and a wife later, and I'm still here!" He was immediately charmed by the quiet beach town Ocean City was in the 1980s and never looked back.

Working for George Topping prepared Sonny to eventually captain a boat himself, the Tina Marie. He bought his very own boat, the Skilligalee, a 1974 lobster boat built in Boot Bay, Maine, with the help of his mom, who saw an ad in the Virginian-Pilot newspaper.

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Sonny Gwin smiles as he ties a knot in preparation for setting pots.

Sonny did not believe the ad was true, as it was such a rare find in Virginia. When Sonny finally saw the boat with his own eyes, he bought it on the spot. The first Skilligalee only lasted a few years, but even today you can find Sonny in the Harbor on his second Skilligalee.

Sonny took part in many different fisheries throughout the years, but Skilligalee Seafood's current bread and butter is Black Sea Bass and lobster - and they do it all with pots. Lobster and sea bass pots are very similar to the crab pots commonly found throughout the Coastal Bays. They are cage-like devices with openings that lead to a chamber that is inescapable once entered. They have hatches that open during harvesting, weights to anchor them to the ocean floor, and small openings that act as an escape route for smaller, immature fish. Pots, just like any other fishing method, require a great amount of preparation to get ready for the fishing season. For Sonny, preparation begins in January for a late March start. Prep is tedious, as every pot must be cleaned and assessed for usability. While taking care of his existing pots, he also must be sure to construct new ones to replace ones that were broken or lost in the previous season.

A look into his backyard reveals his extensive pot collection. Neatly stacked and organized, 1300 pots await their submergence into the waters off Ocean City. Final touches include replacing clasps and patching up holes. "You want to make sure everything is in good condition when you are ready to start fishing because you don't want to be fixing anything out on the water." Sonny will check his pots consistently every seven to ten days throughout the season. He usually leaves them out until late December, but this year he hopes to bring them all in by Thanksgiving. "You put them out, blink your eyes, and then it's time to bring them back home."

Sonny has pots for both offshore and inshore sites. Though lobsters are typically more offshore, Sonny finds that there is often overlap in what he gets at each site. Along with seabass and lobster, Sonny also often brings up octopus, Jonah crab, and tilefish. After many years of firsthand experience, Sonny has found that his inshore pots, which target Black Sea Bass, do not need to be baited in order to be successful. His unbaited traps catch the same amount of sea bass as the baited traps, which Sonny guesses is the result of the fish's curiosity about the structure. Sea bass thrive in structured, reef-like environments and often take refuge near structures on the ocean floor. Presumably, this behavior causes them to enter unbaited pots.

"This is nothing," said Sonny of the abundance of pots in his backyard. "I used to fish 1800 pots." Now, due to stricter fishing regulations, Sonny is only allowed 1300 pots. Laying behind all the pots is a discarded empty net reel - another reminder of the changes Ocean City's commercial fishing industry has undergone in past decades.



A pile of seabass and lobster pots on the *Skilligalee*.

This reel was once used to deploy Sonny's gillnet, which he used to catch dogfish, bluefish, and croakers. Spiny dogfish, a small shark found off the East Coast, were commonly caught in Ocean City around the time Sonny came to the area, and Sonny remembers "50-some" boats that took part in the fishery at the time. In 1998, the population was classified as overfished, and management efforts soon went into effect to rebuild the stock. In 2010, the stock was declared rebuilt, but the lapse in the fishery and more close management caused lasting effects on it and the fishermen. Now, the dogfish industry in the area is mostly obsolete with only two or three fishers still doing it. Like many others, Sonny decided to retire the gillnet and stick to pots.



Sonny and his son working to sort fish they just brought in.

Regulations and management, along with other obstacles, are certainly changing the industry Ocean City has to offer. "[Thirty years ago] you couldn't fit another boat in [the harbor] with how packed it was when I first came to the area... It was a lot of fun. It was... different."

Since many fisheries in Maryland operate through the Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system, operating fishermen are given access to a limited number of fishing licenses, which makes it difficult for new fishermen to step in and build a business. Often, fishers will buy quotas that are already owned by other fishers, which is referred to as "leasing". Leasing is a common practice in an ITQ system, as it allows fishermen who may be newer to a fishery to get their foot in the door. It also gives fishermen with large amounts of quota more flexibility, as selling their quota brings in income without having to go out and catch the fish themselves. Sonny owns 44,000 pounds of seabass quota for this year and in past years has leased some of that to another fisherman. However, with inflation causing a spike in fuel and general operation costs, Sonny's seabass leaser had to tie up his boat, and Sonny now has to make sure he catches all of that quota without any of his leaser's help. Sonny unfortunately understands his leaser's point of view, as he has also personally felt the effects of rising prices on his operation.



Black Sea Bass (top) and American Lobster (bottom) are Skilligalee's specialties.

Quota shortages are also on the rise in Maryland because of policy-making in response to climate change. It is believed by many that due to climate change, waters are warming and causing the stocks of lobster, seabass, and other marine life to shift northward into cooler waters. For this reason, quota for these stocks have been "transferred" from Maryland to more northern states, and these losses are not being made up for in other ways, as Maryland is not receiving additional quota from more southern states. Since climate change regulations have gone into place, Maryland has lost 12,000 pounds of seabass quota. Meanwhile, the total seabass quota for the whole east coast has increased, causing a drop in price per pound. For these reasons, Sonny stated that Maryland can officially declare it has been financially hurt by regulations in response to climate change. While Sonny knows the dangers of climate change, he personally has not seen a significant change in the number of lobsters or seabass in the area. Over the years, he has seen a pattern in the fluctuation of the populations and firmly believes that lobsters are on a seven-year cycle and in a few years will be booming once again. "The resource looks really good to me. If I could hold out for another three years, I know it's going to come back. I've been doing it for so long - I've seen it happen over and over again."

To make up for the losses in quota, Sonny and some other fishermen in the region have been advocating for the opening of a shrimp fishery in Maryland. Currently, shrimp fisheries exist in North Carolina and Virginia only. In years past, fishers from these states would continue trawling for shrimp up the East Coast right into Maryland when such a practice was legal. If they are successful in opening up a shrimp fishery in Maryland, Sonny is optimistic that it will be a lucrative and popular sector of Ocean City's commercial fishing industry.

Shrimp, whether farm-raised or wild-caught, is the topmost eaten seafood in the United States and one of the top seafood imports of the United States. Green Tailed Shrimp are found right off the beach of Ocean City and throughout the Coastal Bays in the late summer and would be a fresh and local option for shrimp. Sonny thinks "they are really good - even the little ones!" Since the shrimp fishery in North Carolina and Virginia work well, Sonny would like the chance to at least try the fishery for one year. From all the quota Maryland has already lost, he wants to try to make sure there will be some payback for him and the other fishermen.

Of course, in addition to securing enough quota, it is also vital for fishermen to make sure they have enough area to fish in. Securing fishing grounds has become increasingly more of a priority for fishermen as more offshore wind farms and ocean conservation areas have been proposed. Beyond being concerned about the loss of fishing grounds to wind turbines, Sonny is skeptical about the environmental impacts that will come from the offshore wind farm that will be built along Maryland's coast. The wind farm has leased an area of 80,000 acres starting 15 miles offshore of Ocean City, and Sonny wonders if the benefits outweigh the costs. "You can't just do it and ruin what you got now. You have to think things over." Sonny compared these projects to the dam projects that litter the rivers of America. The first dam was built in the 1800s to improve navigation. Since then, it is estimated that 600,000 miles of U.S. rivers have been impounded by dams, which affects fish passage and alters hydrology. As dams degrade through the years and science continues to develop around their impacts, there is a push to remove them and restore rivers to what they once were. Sonny is concerned that this, too, will be the case with wind turbines in our oceans.

Challenges posed to Ocean City fishermen make it hard for younger people to step into the industry, which is an important component of ensuring local commercial fishing can stick around.

While Sonny has three sons, it is a challenging time to try your hand at small-scale commercial fishing. "You can't blame them," says Sonny. "I got into it because I wanted it. I wanted it really bad." He hopes to somehow continue keeping a Skilligalee boat in the harbor and contributing to the history being made there because it is such a local icon. "It has been there such a long time; I would hate to see it go to the wayside and would *really* hate to be the last one there." Despite all the challenges current fishermen are facing, he is hopeful for the future as technology and social media continue to advance. Skilligalee Seafood has been using social media to promote their fresh seafood and the importance of buying local while keeping customers up-to-date with their latest catches.



Sonny's son throws him a rope as they tie up the *Skilligalee*.

While the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a challenge for many businesses, Sonny found a new business opportunity within it. During the pandemic, supply chains started to break down and Sonny was not able to distribute his seafood to its normal destinations. He was finding himself having excess amounts of product with nowhere to go with it. Since the supply chain breakdowns also caused grocery store shelves to stay empty, Sonny began selling fresh seafood right off his boat in the harbor. The community responded well, as people were avoiding grocery stores and other crowded places during the pandemic. Some of the other fishermen in the harbor took advantage of this opportunity as well. As a result, during the first winter of the pandemic, fishermen in the harbor sold a large majority of Maryland's seaside quota right out of the harbor. Normally, this seafood is shipped away to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other northern markets, but with the world shutting down, Ocean City's seafood was forced to remain local. Now that businesses and supply chains are opening back up, Sonny hopes to continue growing his dockside sales.

Sonny's deep passion for fishing shows through his words and his hard work to keep the industry alive. He believes a big misconception that the public has about the commercial fishing industry is that "we [commercial fishermen] are out there killing all the fish." The United States has some of the most regulated fisheries in the world, and fishermen have to be very careful that they follow all regulations precisely. When purchasing local seafood, you can be sure that the purchase is directly contributing to a healthy fishery and a hard-working fisher.

If you want to support Sonny, you can find his boat, which is white with large letters spelling out SKILLIGALEE in the commercial harbor in West Ocean City. He also has a seafood stand on Route 50 across from Stephen Decatur High School. Loyal Skilligalee Seafood customers can stay in the loop by subscribing to their e-mail chain and social media pages, which are constantly updated with the latest products. In the future, Sonny hopes that he can open a more permanent storefront and maybe even go to some local farmer's markets!

Sonny hopes that his stories and the Voices of the Coastal Bays project encourage people to not only buy his seafood but also support his fellow fishermen and local seafood as a whole. If you venture down to Sonny's dock, you can see the person who caught your next meal, and he "always has a good story to tell".

This interview is part of the *Voices of the Coastal Bays* interview series. Voices of the Coastal Bays is a project by the Maryland Coastal Bays Program that aims to promote local commercial fishing companies, highlight the local fishing history, and educate on the seafood found in our waters. For questions regarding this project, please reach out to Liz Wist at lwist@mdcoastalbays.org. You can find more on this project at mdcoastalbays.org or on our social media pages.

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