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Boat Launch

Pete McFarland

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Storyteller: Pete McFarland
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Towns along the Maine coast have a long history of building boats, large and small; wooden, metal, or fiberglass; from lobstering close to shore to delivering people and goods across the high seas. Whether at Bath Iron Works, any of the smaller boatyards in a town like Brooklin, or any of the long list of builders and shipyards from Eliot to Eastport, Mainers have been building boats since before Mainers were even Mainers. And this does not even begin to consider the inland boat building traditions! There is plenty of discussion in other parts of the Maine Song and Story Sampler about smaller types of watercraft, but what about larger vessels? In the story heard here, Pete McFarland talks about what it was like to launch one of these ships. He worked for many years as a builder, doing drafting, caulking, and just about everything else one can do in the process. This included crawling under the ship to insert wedges that lifted the ship and then knocking out or cutting the supports that held it in place. These combined steps allowed the ship to slide free into the water. And they were obviously dangerous, too!

Boat launches were not just a part of the business; they also were a social event. As Pete noted here, five hundred to a thousand people would gather for each of the three or four launches per year. He did not specify if this was just the shipyard he worked for or if he was speaking for all of the boat builders in town, but it is still safe to conclude that the boat launches were a popular event. These were not only an excuse to have a party (as if that were not reason enough); they were a celebration of the lifeblood of the town. In other words, if ships were being built and launched, people were working and the town could thrive.

In the story, Pete mentioned Earle Haley, who was one of his co-workers at Gamage's Shipyard in South Bristol, owned by Harvey Gamage. Check the "Sources and More Information" section below to read more about the shipyard and its owner. One more note on South Bristol may also be of interest here. South Bristol includes the village of Christmas Cove on Rutherford Island, named for a stop made John Smith supposedly made in that spot on Christmas in 1614. In the transcript below, comments and questions not spoken by Pete McFarland are marked in brackets. "E" notes questions from the interviewer, Ellen Vincent, and "A" marks additional comments from Pete's wife, Adele Rice McFarland.

Transcript:
When it come time to launch, these, course, had cradles with timber, heavy timber. And between the piece that went on the ways and the one above that was all wedged up by hand, top mauls. I think there was four of us in a bunch. I helped launch most of them. I think I launched on one. We would go along and drive the wedges, about six hits each man, then the next man take over and drive again. That's the way it went up through 'til she lifted off the blockings. And then we crawled up through on our hands and knees and took the blockings out from under her. That was not a good feeling, 'specially when you get up to a hundred, hundred and ten foot. Once they're up, then there was, well, the way was here, and the block ahead with oak cleats to the two bolted. Then you took a skill saw, either a skill saw or a crosscut saw, and those were sawed. They was graduated so you'd go down an inch or two inches or

three. And when you'd go down so far and they would crack and let go - she would launch, slide right in. [A: You didn't know that's how they did it? Crawled right up under like?] Yeah, all the launching crew had to crawl up 'longside the keel and take the blockings out. And I don't know how many there was like that, quite a number of 'em.

[E: Did you have to get your nerve up the first time you did that?] Well, I don't know 'cause I had done it in Damariscotta before. [E: Were launchings always a big event?] Yes. [E: Lots of people would come?] I would have to guess at this, I would say 'tween five hundred to a thousand to a launching a good many times. And he built 'bout three, maybe four boats a year. He wouldn't call 'em *boats*; he'd call 'em *vessels*. And I know when we'd launch one, he always looked ahead whether he had an order or not. This is where Earle Haley and I come in. All the frames, or a big part of the frames, Earle and I sawed and put together, And then after a -- went out the doors, the door wouldn't even be closed [and] there'd be another keel in the place of that one, and before the day was over there'd be anywheres from four to a dozen frames set up on that keel. He had quite a system.

Sources and More Information: The South Bristol Historical Society, www.southbristolhistoricalsociety.org. To read more about Harvey Gamage and his shipyard visit www.gamageshipyard.com or read about the ship named after him.