Laurence Newman: A Southwest Harbor, Maine, fisherman "Snowstorms, whatever, we went out and set the trawls"

Synopsis: Laurence Newman had deep roots in a family of fishermen, shipbuilders, and adventurers in Southwest Harbor, Maine. His recollections were recorded by The Southwest Harbor Public Library in 1993. For this family history, I transcribed the recordings, spliced and occasionally synopsized them for narrative flow, and added explanatory information from other sources.



Laurence, about 5 years old, ca. 1910, on the shore road in Manset. Newman family photo

"I was born in Manset in 1905. We lived on the Manset road, right on the side of the road. My grandfather had a grocery store on the other side. My grandmother had a dry goods department where she was busy all the time. My grandmother had to do post office work, too. They lived overhead in an apartment. That store was there from the late 1880s on up until about 1950."

Laurence's grandfather, Saunders Ward Newman, was called Ward. Ward and his father, Henry, along with Henry's three brothers, built ships on Mount Desert Island and in Ellsworth. (One of Henry's ships, the Kate Newman, was named after his wife, Catherine Ward Newman. The Kate Newman went down in a collision off the Jersey coast. The sole survivor was knocked, or jumped, onto the other vessel with the impact. Henry was later killed when he was thrown from his horse-and-sleigh one winter. This info is from Ralph Stanley, the subject of ten of the library's tapes.)

Ward was married to Marion "Molly" Hadlock Newman. Their store was a busy place. Says Laurence, "There were a lot of fishing vessels in the harbor, and my grandfather carried a lot of fishing supplies and oil boots and things like that. He had a big barrel behind his counter that was full of corned beef. I remember he had a hook hanging over the side of tub, and he'd hook out a piece of meat for a customer. He had a big round of cheese on the counter, and he'd cut a wedge of cheese for them, and he'd grind the coffee for them."

Ward had a racehorse that served double-duty to deliver groceries. He used to hire a trainer, and raced a sulkie at the state fair. Later, he had another racehorse called Baby Laurence, named for his grandson.

"My grandfather liked hunting and fishing and bird-shooting," says Laurence. "He liked to go to fairs to race the horses. While he was doing all that, my grandmother was left in that big store to take care of it. She was alone all the time. But it didn't bother my grandfather much. He still did those things he wanted to do."

Ward also built model boats.

"S.W. Newman is putting the finishing touches to a beautiful model of a two-masted craft, with every tiny block and chain and rope complete to the last detail," an old newspaper item reads. "The name, The Eagle, is painted in beautifully executed letters and the figurehead is a gilded eagle with outstretched wings. The little anchors are in place and the sails all set."



The Gold Note, a model of a three-masted schooner crafted by Saunders Ward Newman, around 1915, now in the home of Ward's great-grandson Jarvis.

Molly had storied forebears. "Captain Hadlock, on Cranberry Island, was her greatgrandfather," says Laurence. "Captain Hadlock was married to this Prussian lady. He was a showman, and he used to go up to Labrador and collect Eskimo trinkets and seals. He brought back a pair of Eskimos one time. He took them and his collection to Europe to put on a show, in England and then over to the continent. He was quite successful. He started giving shows to royalty. He had to get permission to put on these shows. In Germany, one day, he went to get permission to put on his show. The official wasn't home, but his daughter opened the door. When Captain Hadlock saw the daughter, he knew he was going to marry her. I guess she felt the same."

This is the true story told in the 1934 book God's Pocket, by Rachel Field. Captain Samuel Hadlock, Jr., was a Newman ancestor whose grandfather, also named Samuel Hadlock, arrived on the Cranberry Isles in the 18th century. The first Samuel came to an ignominious end when he was hung for murder. Captain Samuel, born in 1792, was evidently something of a visionary (and neglectful father. His first wife died, and he left behind their three children when he sailed off to tour his show).



Laurence and his granddaughter Kathe, in the mid-1970s, come in from handlining for pollock and cod around Mount Desert Rock. Newman family photo

The official's daughter was Dorothea Albertina Wilhelmina Celeste. They married in 1825, and had a daughter, Jane Matilda, in 1826, in Paris, while they were on tour with Hadlock's show of curiosities, which was popular with royalty.

Hadlock made a fortune. The Inuit died. He lost a fortune. By 1827, the little family was back on the Cranberry Isles, where Dorothea Albertina Wilhelmina Celeste was referred to as The Prussian Lady. Captain Samuel called his wife Hanna Caroline, or just Caroline. He built a large house on a hill, with the help of his sister Abigail's husband, Samuel Spurling. Captain Samuel and Caroline had a second child, a son named Epps. A year later, Captain Samuel was off again, leaving his second family behind to sail for Greenland on a sealing expedition. He and his crew never returned.

The Prussian Lady left Great Cranberry, remarried in 1839, and had two more children. She died in 1889 and is buried in Southwest Harbor.

In the meantime, there was Captain Samuel's sister, Abigail. About four years after she lost her brother at sea, she lost her husband, Samuel Spurling, to the same fate. In 1839, Abigail married a man named William Preble, the son of a Mount Desert Rock lighthouse keeper, who arrived on Great Cranberry Island as a schoolteacher, became a church elder, selectman, justice of the peace, notary public, gentleman farmer, tax appraiser, postmaster, storekeeper, shipbuilder, ship owner, and shipwreck appraiser. (Preble information is from the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society.)

Preble moved into the Hadlock house, which is today called Preble House. Abigail died in 1874. A year later, Preble married Captain Samuel's daughter, Jane Matilda, who by then was a widow herself. Jane's first husband, George Epps Sanford, was a cod fisherman who died in 1873 and left her with three children. One of them was Samuel "Sammy" Clark Sanford (1852-1933), who inherited the European exhibition journals recorded by his grandfather, Captain Samuel. Sammy was at odds with his stepfather and lived the rest of his life in a one-room cabin on the Preble property.

Rachel Field had visited Great Cranberry Island a number of times, and had noticed Sammy, by then "a gaunt, spare" old man. One day, he hailed her and began to tell her about his grandfather's journeys. She returned many times to learn more. Two days before his death, Sammy entrusted her with his grandfather's journals.

Sammy, says Laurence, also had a gold snuffbox, jewelry that had been given to his grandfather by King Frederick Augustus of Saxony, and a signet ring; "Sammy was getting old and he wanted to make sure that was taken care of. So he gave the snuffbox, the jewelry and the signet ring to my father, Lyle Newman. Lyle gave them to me. I turned over the snuffbox and jewelry to the Hadlock Museum on Cranberry Island. The snuffbox, they gave me a receipt for \$2,000, for exemption for income tax. I think the jewels are in a safe because they're too valuable to be left out in a case.

"The signet ring, I wore that. It was a nice ring. I was out fishing one day, and I heard on my radio that a load of herring had been shut off up on Marshall Island [off Swan's Island], so I went right from lobstering up there and got 50 bushels, and filled up the cockpit of the boat, to bring home for lobster bait. On the way home, I cleaned three or four of the larger herring. When I got through, I washed my hands in a bucket of water. It's slippery when you're cleaning herring. I slapped my hands, and out springs that ring overboard. So some codfish had it in his belly."



Newman, in 1962, comes in from Mount Desert Rock. Newman Marine photo

Laurence's father, Lyle, was born in 1876. (Ward and Molly's other child was Marion, who earned a reputation as a great investor; she had no children.)

As a young man, Lyle had a little barbershop on the side of his parents' store.

"Then one summer," says Laurence, "he bought some lobsters. He had a lobster car built, and he kept those lobsters for the summer. When he sold them in the fall, he made more money doing that than he did barbering. So he gave up barbering and learned the lobster business. From then on, the rest of his life, he was in the lobster business. He had one of the first powerboats in the harbor."

On his mother Ethel's side, Laurence's grandparents, Joseph and Adelaide King, lived in King's House at the end of King's Lane, in Manset.

"It's reported there're some ghosts in there," Laurence says. "I never knew it. I used to spend nights in there, in those cold bedrooms. There'd be featherbeds. You'd wake up and the windowpanes would be covered with frost."

Before she married Lyle, Ethel worked at a herring factory at the head of the harbor. "Did she hate it! They'd string herring on a stick and hang it up and smoke them. She hated that job, but she had to work."

Laurence was an only child. He went to the local school, but transferred in high school to Chauncey Hall, an old Boston prep school with a first-rate curriculum in science and math. He also liked to fish. One spring, he returned home and found that his grandfather had built him a 24-foot square-stern fish boat with a six-cylinder universal engine.



Laurence on his boat, the Crow-K. Newman family photo

"That was a dandy. That was perfect! So I spent the next six years, vacations, three months each summer, going fishing and lobstering, having the time of my life, healthy work, and doing pretty well financially. I'd go back to school, oftentimes, with a thousand dollars made, compared with the other boys, three hundred or four hundred dollars doing caddy work or hotel work or something. Some of the professors asked me why I wanted to go to college, when I could make all that money. I sometimes wondered myself. I'd go out in that boat and come back loaded. That was fun. That was real fun.

"In those days, the shorefront was covered with fish wharves and coal wharves. One was Parker, loaded with salt fish. Vessels would go seining and they'd come in loaded with pollock, herring, shad, or mackerel. All those species, they'd catch off Mount Desert Rock. When they'd come in with a load of pollock, they'd hoist them on the wharf and we kids would get a job dressing the fish. They'd be full of shrimp. If you left them in the pollock for three or four hours, they'd spoil the pollock. They were hot. Our hands, when we dressed those fish, would be all sore, just raw. We'd get 30 cents an hour. When the herring came in, they'd come into Stanley fish wharf, where they had a big cold storage. We would go down there and wheel those herring up to the cold storage, hoist them up and freeze them for bait for the trawl fishermen in the winter. Mackerel and shad the same way. Now you don't see a fish of any kind at all out there."

Interviewer: "The fishing isn't as good now [1993]?"

Laurence: "There's no fishing at all. The bottom's been dragged clean. There's not a pollock out there. You don't even get a bite. You can go out a hundred miles, drag for scallops, codfish, but they don't get the big haul. That's why they're \$5 a pound. It's because the fish were cleaned out with gillnets. The gillnets cleaned those fish out while I was fishing. They set a gillnet a half mile long. And whatever fish that comes into it gets caught. And the draggers drag the bottom all the time. I don't think anything can grow on the bottom that would be a natural food for fish."

Laurence next went off to study electrical engineering at MIT. While in Boston, he met Eleanor Jarvis, also an only child, who lived in the nearby suburb of Needham.

"She was going to have a date with a Dartmouth boy one time, and her mother wouldn't let her go," says Laurence. "So she took her to a dancing school in Boston. I used to play the saxophone, and two or three of us would go to play for the dances. We did it just for the fun of it. That's where I met her."

Eleanor: "He was a freshman at MIT, and I was in high school."

Laurence: "That was back in 1925."

Interviewer to Eleanor: "You'd probably never heard of Southwest Harbor."

Eleanor: "No, and probably didn't ever hear much about Maine. He asked me if I'd like to go to an MIT dance and I thought, 'Oh, boy, that would be great!"

Laurence: "I didn't want to get interested in any girl. I was very particular about that. Some of the fellows got carried away. And I was determined not to be interested in anybody until I got through school. And I followed that pretty well."

Eleanor attended Wellesley College, then graduated from the University of Missouri, where she was active in the drama society. Laurence graduated just before the stock market crashed. He worked through the Great Depression for the Southern New England Telephone Company in New Haven, Connecticut. His first job was foreman of a crew that replaced and installed telephone poles. He received a number of promotions, but chafed in the commercial department and missed Southwest Harbor and fishing. Eleanor and their children were able to visit Southwest Harbor in the summer. But Laurence "suffered down in New Haven in that heat."

In his late 30s, Laurence was diagnosed with diabetes and was warned the disease would eventually kill him. He decided to live "what 'little' life he had left the way he wanted," as his obituary says.

Because of the diabetes, he says, "I couldn't eat anything without working. I had to manually exercise. Finally, we talked about it, for quite a while. Eleanor had everything in New Haven – Yale, drama, plays all the time, and she loved the activity. She finally said, 'Well, if you want to go, go.'"

Laurence had worked 17 years for the telephone company. In 1946, he was ready to move on. "Innumerable people came to me, when they found out I was going to leave, and they said, 'I wish I had your courage.' They were working at something they didn't particularly enjoy, but they didn't know how to do anything else, so they were stuck. I used to see these people going on a bus every morning, hanging onto a strap, and I couldn't imagine myself doing that the rest of my life. I wanted to be my own boss. I said, 'If someone else can make a living lobster fishing, I can, too. And I'll work harder.' So I made her give up everything and come up here. She didn't know anybody. I was busy as could be, going fishing, one o'clock every morning. I was no social help at all."

Eleanor: "He'd go out fishing at two in the morning and get back and go to bed at seven at night. *I* wasn't ready for bed. That's what we did."

Laurence: "Then she got a job taking somebody's place at the Bangor paper."

Eleanor became the Southwest Harbor correspondent for the Bangor Daily News in 1946, and stayed with it until 1954, when the couple began spending winters in Florida.

Eleanor: "The first article I wrote was about [authors] Eleanor Mayo and Ruth Moore building their own house in Tremont. I had come up here with the children for summers before that. When I came, I felt everybody thought I was a city girl, and they weren't too friendly. Then when I began to write about people and they realized I liked people and I enjoyed doing it, they became much more friendly."

Now returned to his hometown, Laurence began lobstering and fishing. His father Lyle had retired, but Laurence persuaded him to partner up and form L.D. Newman & Son, a lobsterbuying and fishing business. (Lyle was on the water until his late 80s; he died at age 98, in 1974. Laurence, who expected to die young because of the diabetes, passed away in 2002 at age 96. Eleanor died in 2006, four days shy of her 97th birthday.)

Laurence and Eleanor moved their family into an early 19th century home overlooking a coastal passage called the Western Way. Her parents also caught the Maine bug and built a home on Main Street.

It was difficult getting back in the game as a lobsterman. The fishery is territorial and some resented his return. That first spring, someone cut some of his traps. He retaliated in kind, but only once. Then he stumbled on a point of negotiation: A local dealer wanted to return a truck his son had bought from Laurence.

"I said if you want me to do that I will but also I want you to use a little persuasion on some of your fishermen to quit bothering my traps," Laurence wrote in a long letter to his granddaughter a year before he died. "I think that was the end of my problems.

Laurence had a 32-foot boat built at Southwest Boat, but it didn't work out.

"When the boat settled in the water, I knew I could not use it," he wrote. "It was bow-heavy. The engine would have to be moved out of the cabin and take up some of the work area. A disappointment. A couple of days later the changes were made and we used it that way a couple of years. Then I had a 30 built by the Rich Brothers over in Richtown. A much better boat for fishing." He named the boat Crow K, perhaps a play on the word "croquet," which the family remembers playing on Laurence and Eleanor's lawn in Seawall.

Laurence's letter tells of some of his adventures: "A few days later it was almost dark when I got in from setting traps. I was walking down from the wharf when a young man came from behind to walk along with me. He said he wanted a job helping me. He was a Jehovah's Witness and had just gotten out of prison. I was not prepared to hire a helper. But he would take anything. He needed a job.

"I told him I did not really need help but if he wanted to try it I would pay him \$5 per day and a little extra if we got over 100 pounds/day. He lived in Richtown and would be ready when I was. The next day he was in my yard to go by daylight via a bicycle. By the end of day 1 he could do everything. He was a very good helper and we did not talk religion.

"One night when he was with me we had landed at the head of the wharf. It was covered with a big roof and was a storage place for salmon casks full of salt fish. It was dark walking up between these 'butts' when up stood two men with flashlights aimed at the two of us and they in their uniforms and I think guns on their belts. He had half a dozen lobsters rolled up in an oil jacket under his arm. Of course they thought we had shorts.

"I asked if they wanted to see the lobsters. It wasn't a good place to show them so they said no. We continued down the road til we got to the folks house where I was still living. They drove up behind us and said 'Let's see them.' We threw the whole bundle on the lawn and there were six legal size lobsters. They were obviously disappointed. A short time after that they were eating lunch in Jackson's restaurant in Southwest Harbor. Leola Jackson waited on tables there. She overheard one warden say to the other 'I am going to catch Laurence Newman if it's the last thing I do.'... so we were on our guard. A few years [later] one of the wardens ... apologized to me the way they treated Pa and me."

In 1945, he says, he could catch any amount of pollock. It sold for two cents a pound. Codfish went for a cent and a half a pound for the small ones, two cents for medium-size, and maybe two and a half cents for the big ones. He'd get four cents a pound for haddock. He could fill up the boat with 5,000 pounds of pollock; one time, he caught 125 pollock in an hour.

"If you made a hundred dollars a day, that was a lot of money then."

But pollock didn't always sell immediately.

"When they wouldn't buy it, I caught them anyway and salted them. I'd put them in big butts, a thousand pounds in a butt. I'd salt 40,000 pounds a summer, and keep them on my scow that I had built for lobstering. In the fall, I'd take a dory over alongside the scow, fill it full of water, put in 2,000 pounds of pollock, and let them soak all day. When I came back from lobstering that

afternoon, I'd tow the dory over and leave it on the beach. When the tide went down, I'd back down the truck and haul the pollock to the house, and put it on the flakes to dry."

While her husband went out to fish or lobster, Eleanor was responsible for turning up to 800 pounds of drying pollock on the flakes in the yard, twice a day.

Laurence: "It was hard work. They were heavy fish. She almost killed herself once. She swore off doing it."

Eleanor: "They were just real wet. It was the beginning of their drying period. I had just gotten them all turned and it started to rain hard, and I had to turn every last one of them. My back was aching like anything and I went into the house and threw myself on the bed and cried. I said, 'I'll never do that again,' and I never did."

Laurence: "After that, my father did it. After I dried them, my father would skin and bone them down in the cellar, which was hours and hours and hours of work, then put them in cellophane packages – salt pollock or salt cod – then he'd put them in his car, take a trunkful and go to Rockland or Eastport, and go to all these little stores. They'd take a dozen packs of these salt pollock, and he'd sell them for 25 cents a package. Now they're \$5. You couldn't make anything. You did all that work. Well, the work didn't cost you anything and you had nothing else to do anyway, so that's how we did it."

That was from 1946 to about 1964 or '65.

Laurence: "We'd sell a lot of it in 50-pound bundles to old-timers who knew what it was." Interviewer: "My grandfather used to call it strip fish. It was one of his favorite Sunday night snacks."

Laurence: "Right, it was one of my father's favorite dishes."

Interviewer: "He'd strip the fish and have crackers and milk."

Laurence: "Right, same thing."

Interviewer: "And he had a special jar where he would strip it off so it was always ready to eat. He called it strip fish, I guess, because he stripped it off."

Laurence: "When my father was selling these fish, 12 pieces, he put those in a big, gallon mayonnaise jar. He'd fill those up with those little bits and sell those at 10 cents a pound."



Laurence and his son, Jarvis, return to land with a load of fish in the 1970s. Newman family photo

Laurence and Lyle used to go halibut fishing every day in April.

"Snowstorms, whatever, we went out and set the trawls. Left them. Next morning, went out, hauled them, baited them, and left them again, all night. One day – I used to have Stuart help me lobstering – he was home on vacation and he wanted to go with us. He went this particular day and I had a movie camera onboard. We got hauling this trawl and I knew we had a big one. I hauled up and I saw him coming and there was this 146-pound halibut laying there, and right below was another one, a twin. Got the gaff in, got them on board and Stuart got the movie of it."

From August through November, Laurence fished 200 lobster traps inshore, around Duck Island and elsewhere, and another 50 traps off Mount Desert Rock. Lobster sold for about 30 cents per pound. Most times, he went out to the Rock, 20 miles offshore, by himself. He'd haul his traps and set a halibut trawl. One morning, he bought some alewives and baited up his trawl and set it.

"When I hauled it, there was a codfish on there with the skin stripped the length of it. About a 15-pound codfish. He'd been swallowed by a halibut, he had halibut teeth marks on his skin. So I baited the trawl again and set it back near as I could, stayed there all night. Next morning, I got a 275-pound halibut. And there I was alone. I had a halibut hook, like a meathook, with a handline. I got that in his head. I had to kill him first with a baseball bat. Then I stood on the rail, squat down, and I finally got his head far enough out of the water where I could straighten my back. I straightened my legs and I got him in the boat. He filled the whole platform. He was a big fish, about eight feet long. I had three more halibut that same day on another trawl, weighed a hundred pounds between them."

Laurence mainly used herring for lobster bait. To catch them, he engaged in a fishing practice, now rare, called torching.

"When we'd go torching herring, we'd take the dory and a small rowboat. You'd have a dip net and a gasoline-soaked bag. You'd throw that bag in the dipnet and throw a match in it. It'd flare up, and the herring would start chasing it. The herring would go into the net, and you'd have 20 bushel of herring. Sometimes the herring would jump right aboard the boat you were rowing. That's how we got our lobster bait. You'd be covered with herring scales when you got through."

"I couldn't sell fish on weekends, so I used to take out fishing parties. I took out ten people at five dollars apiece. They would come in trucks. They'd catch as much as they could take home, and they'd put it in their deep freezes. Ten could fish at once, four to each side and two over the stern.

"I'd bring people up from Connecticut and we'd go out and catch two or three thousand pounds.

"They're all pulling those 12- or 15-pound pollock, and each thinks their fish is the biggest. Talk about excitement! They were awfully excited. I used to take out mixed parties, too, women and men.

"These fishing parties would be at the Manset dock, I'd say, at six o'clock. They'd come to the house and wake me up. They'd make up the date for the next year, a year ahead. They wanted the fish.

"I didn't allow any liquor on the boat. I told them all, 'No liquor.' You want to bring liquor, we'd turn around and go home. This day – 10 people, you can't watch them all – there were four or five in the cabin. We got 15 miles offshore in the fog, and the engine stopped. I jumped in the cabin and looked, and this fellow was drunk. He had kicked the engine and broke off the distributor cap. He wanted to go fishing there, so he stopped the engine. I could have killed him. I just happened to have a spare distributor. I carried spared parts with me. So all right, we made it. Another time we were out there. I had a square-stern boat. I had a couple fellows sitting on the stern with a line, and one of them was having a sandwich. He held up his hand and he turned around and talked to someone and overboard he went. We circled around and picked him up again. But while he was overboard, he had dollar bills in his pockets, you could see those dollar bills floating down like leaves."

Laurence could have lost his life at sea half a dozen times. The closest call came the night he was coming in from Mount Desert Rock in thick fog with a load of pollock. He was cleaning fish at the stern, with the tiller in rudder position, when the fog lifted just enough to reveal Bunker's Ledge – dead ahead, maybe 50 yards distant. He lunged forward, grabbed the wheel and spun it. By a stroke of good fortune, a large roller carried his boat past the ledge.

Another time, he headed out at one in the morning.

""I used to go fishing whether it was foggy or not. I never let the fog hold me back. Foggy, you couldn't see a thing. I just watched the compass and my depth meter. I ran my time from Manset out to Duck Island, and I stopped the boat when I figured I was there. I could hear the wash of the waves on Little Duck Island, so I knew where I was – or I thought I did. From that point, I could go right out between Little and Big Duck Island, keep on the same course I was going, and go to Mount Desert Rock. But foolishly, I turned my depth meter off – I was so sure of where I was – and opened the boat up and let go.

"The next thing I knew, I hit a rock. Bango! Dead stop. I knew immediately where I was, because I'd gone there on picnics. It was the big island, and I was farther away from the little island than I thought. If I'd have kept my depth meter on, I would have known where I was. So I struck that ledge. I thought, of course, I was going to sink. I looked overboard and there was a few feet of water under the keel. I grabbed the flashlight and went up on the bow of the boat.

"The stem was all smashed up above the waterline. I backed the boat up and I watched the inside to see if there was any water coming in. I tried the pump and stayed about ten minutes and there wasn't any water coming in. It was the third of July and the wharf would be closed the next day, and it was the last day they'd buy fish. So I kept the trawls baited and I went out fishing. I came back and I had a good load of fish.

"I unloaded the fish, cleaned the boat up. I beached the boat, right there in Manset. The next morning, at daylight, I was up there with a piece of oak and I cut the stem out and put a new piece in, and caulked the boat, and I was all ready for business the next weekend.

"When I was coming out of the fog that night, going into the fish wharf, I was late and the whole crew was waiting for me before they closed up. They saw the stem of the boat broken and the splinters in the bow, and they couldn't imagine what happened. I thought it was quite foolish to go out under those conditions.

"I used to go in the fog and like it because, if it wasn't foggy, there'd be half a dozen other boats out there in the same area, setting trawls for the same fish, and frequently you'd get tangled up with one of them. If you got tangled up with another trawl, you're licked. One boat has to haul it all in a snarl, and it's an awful job. In the fog, I was usually alone. There wasn't very many people who were foolhardy enough to go out in the fog."