

# FAITH IN FISHING



## JOHNNIE WHEATON

*“I dream more about lobstering now than anything else at times.”*

*John Wheaton was born on March 20, 1918 to Georgia Alberta (White) and Edward Burton Wheaton in their home in Swan’s Island village. Johnnie has worked in various areas of the island fishing industry, from fish processing to long line trawling and lobster fishing. In 2005, before retiring at the age of 87, he was the oldest working lobsterman on the island.*

It is the early 1930s and a wharf worker shouts, “Hake comin’ in!” as the fishermen unload their catch on Barter’s fish wharf. Johnnie Wheaton and a dozen other wharf workers clean, gut, shack, soak, split and kench a hundred-thousand pounds of groundfish. At one end of the building tanks of cod, hake, haddock, cusk and pollock soak, waiting for Johnnie to remove the backbones, a task referred to as splitting. At the other end, Johnnie’s father, Burt, cleans, guts and cuts the head from the fish, which is known as shacking. Two more workers kench the fish, rubbing them thick with salt while packing them into round containers bound for Gloucester, Massachusetts. Johnnie’s skills with a knife earn him 40 cents an hour, a bit more than the regular workers make at Barter’s wharf.

Looking back on those years he explains, “Because I could split I could get an extra five cents an hour.” Some weeks he took home \$20 of pay, which, for a 16-year-old in the 1930s on Swan’s Island, was good money.

Johnnie had planned on getting a high school education. He began his freshman year in September of 1932, attending Pemetic High School in Southwest Harbor, while boarding with his aunt and uncle who lived a few miles away in Bernard. He says, “I went up till Christmas time and then, of course, we had a vacation and I went home. In the meantime, it was one of these kind of winters that you probably never did see. The

harbor froze over and stayed that way.” In fact, the whole bay was frozen from Bass Harbor to Swan’s Island. After a few extra weeks of vacation at home, with the ice finally breaking up enough to get through, Johnnie returned to school. But it didn’t last for long. “Algebra was the one thing I could not get through my head.” A snide comment from a teacher about his forgetfulness in algebra set him off. “That was enough for me. I went home and I didn’t go back again.”

After his short stint in high school, Johnnie found employment by going fishing with his uncle, Nelson White, and working at Barter’s Wharf in the summer. Following a long day at the plant, Johnnie would make the short trek home through what is known as ‘the Valley’, a low spot between two ridges near the tip of Hockamock Head. His family’s house looked out over Gurry Cove, named for the greasy remains that floated down from the three fish plants further up the harbor. He doesn’t remember the wharf having a bad odor, but he does recall that whenever a white boat anchored there, by morning it didn’t look white anymore; the gurry would coat the boat black. He chuckles at the memory, “Oh man, that thing [boat] would stink something scandalous.”

Johnnie’s father, Burt, began working at Barter’s Wharf soon after he moved to Swan’s Island from Nova Scotia, where he had lost his leg in a trawling accident. Burt knitted heads and pockets for the lobster fishermen, as well as making sails and rigging up trawls, valuable jobs for



*Barter’s Wharf in Burnt Coat Harbor - 1940s*

him as they allowed him to sit as he worked. Johnnie remembers predicting the weather simply by watching his father’s wooden leg jumping and pounding on the floor as the air pressure changed. He declares his father as the best of men. “Well, one fella told me one time, he says, ‘I can tell you one thing—if you’re just half as good a man as your father, you’re one heck of a good man.’ So that’s how good my father was.”

In March of 2011, Johnnie sits at his sunny kitchen table in Waltham, Maine, sipping the last of his instant coffee. He speaks with a thick Maine accent and fast running words. Johnnie is 93 years old. He says, “I’ve made it up this far and I never thought I would in my life. But I have nothing to complain about whatsoever.” His doctors remind him to use his walker, though he moves around from the recliner in the living room to the kitchen table with confidence. Once the weather warms up again he’ll start his daily walking habit of six or seven round-trips up and down the long driveway.

There is no mistaking; Johnnie has an unbeatably good-natured outlook on life. One could wager that Johnnie turned out much more than simply “half as good a man” as his father by the warmth he emits with his twinkling smile. Johnnie’s son, Edward, describes his father as a “man of good principles and good values. If [Johnnie] said something and meant it, he meant it.”

Johnnie lists the ingredients in his recipe for a good life: “a good wife, good kids, good friends, good family and the good Lord.” He gives tribute to God for allowing him to safely survive his long fishing career. “I’ve had my ropes catch around my feet, and the boot go into the air. I’ve had my feet over the side. I’ve been up under the stern of the boat, with the glass toggle smashing down on my head.” Looking back at such perilous moments, Johnnie says he knew he had someone watching out for him. “I give the credit to the good Lord. Many, many times if it hadn’t been for Him, I would not be sitting in this chair today.”

Johnnie remembers a day in the 1930s when he crouched by the engine of a 26-foot boat, his trawling partner clutching the steering wheel nearby. Waves tipped the boat, nearly rolling it over. The ocean poured in over the sides. The storm had already washed the compass away and swallowed Johnnie’s “three brand spanking new tubs of trawl.” Johnnie

thought to himself that for once in his life he'd been right about something.

Johnnie tells how it started, "I went with a fella trawling." On the boat, Johnnie's job was to manage the trawls, 400 feet of line with hooks every three feet that were baited up with herring to catch groundfish. When they hauled the trawl lines in Johnnie would shack the fish just like he did at the wharf in the summertime.

The man he went trawling with that day, an older man, asked him as they were going out that morning, "What do you think Johnnie?" The weather wasn't too bad at the time, but something didn't sit right for Johnnie.

He answered back, "Well, if you're really asking my opinion, we're gonna be sorry before this day is over." Soon enough his prediction came true. "We got our storm and it come up and it was rough and blowing."

Lost at sea without a compass, they scoured the horizon through the driving rain for a sign to point them home. His trawling partner said he spotted Heron Island. But Johnnie didn't believe him. "We're never gonna see Heron Island again," he despaired. But as he got up, there it was. "When we come back by that head, I tell you right now, I was some happy. That was some day. That was a day once in my life I was right. I was never again." He finishes the story laughing at his fears from long ago.

In 1941 Johnnie traded his fishing adventures for four and a half years in the Pacific serving with the Medical Corps during World War II. "They called us Ward Boys." Johnnie and the Ward Boys took care of basics like making beds, cleaning bedpans and floors, and getting meals from the mess hall for the patients. Sometimes he gave shaves to prep patients before operations and administered shots and medications.

His longest station during the war was two years in New Guinea. "Yeach" is how Johnnie expresses his feelings regarding his least favorite outpost, the "Nadzab" in Markham Valley. "There was nothing there. Course it was hot. The mosquitos. All it [had] was an Air Force base. There was nothing, no other town around it." He did get to know some of the natives, whom the troops called "Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels" for their frizzy hair and helpfulness escorting injured soldiers through the jungle

to the hospitals. "One fella was just about my age and about my size and about my build, and we got to be pretty good friends. They called him Anzak Gubatan." Johnnie and Anzak would sit and talk often. When Johnnie left he gave his friend a "real nice knife," and in return Anzak gave him a New Guinea shilling, which he still has. After four and a half years in the service, Johnnie was ready to come back to Swan's Island.

He returned to the island in late August of 1945 with only his uniform to wear. It was good to be home, or as Johnnie puts it, "finest kind." His family was glad to see him return. However, at the wharf, one worker greeted his return with a gruff, "It's time to get out of that uniform and go to work." Since everything, including clothing, was rationed during the war, Johnnie had to scrounge up some civilian clothes and get to work. And that's what he did. Johnnie immersed himself in the fishing industry of Swan's Island as a wharf worker and fisherman. But it wasn't long before he found himself caught in someone else's net.



*Johnnie (left) with brothers Burton and Nelson in their World War II uniforms - 1946*

On a Sunday afternoon in 1946, at the Ocean View Hotel and Restaurant in Swan's Island village, Johnnie was finishing up his pie and ice cream when his friend Mertic Morrison asked him, "You wanna go for a ride?" It was a beautiful day, so Johnnie answered, "Yup, sure enough," and they drove off towards Atlantic village. The car zipped passed the home of Lester and Helen Stanley and their 20-year-old daughter, Lenora. Johnnie had seen Lenora walking around the island with her cute turned-up nose and curly hair. Of course on such a small island he knew of her, but had only met her father once or twice before, never met her

mother and had never had the opportunity to meet Lenora. Half joking, Johnnie suggested to Mertic, "Let's go in and see Lenora." Johnnie never imagined Mertic would actually do it, "but he stopped right in the middle of the hill and backed up to the house." Johnnie grins, "And that's how I met her."

Lenora remembers his unexpected visit that Sunday too. She recalls, "He asked me out to the dance the next weekend at the Odd Fellows Hall." But she told him, "I don't know how to dance."

He said, "I'll show you how."



*Johnnie and Lenora: In her photo album  
Lenora wrote next to this photo-  
"Johnnie came into my life in August." - 1946*

Then, as Johnnie tells it, "I was hooked. She threw her net out and she caught me." In less than seven months they were married and moved into the fisherman's cottage on Firehouse Lane in which they would raise their two children, Edward and Helen.

By the 1950s Johnnie had stopped trawling. He remembers the last time he went; it was out to Mount Desert Rock with his brother Burton. "Brought home one

little codfish about that long." He puts his hands close together to show how little the fish was. "And that's all we got out of that." The fish were gone; the trawling days of Swan's Island were over. After that the fishing was primarily lobster. At 29 years old Johnnie started lobstering alone, in his own boat with 150 wooden traps he built himself.

In the early 1980s Johnnie decided he wanted something that wouldn't go down by the nose like his first boat, the *L.A.B.*, named for his wife, sister and brother, Lenora, Annie and Bobby. He designed his new boat by cutting out the shape he wanted from a piece of wood. When she was built she was 10 ½ feet wide and 30 feet long, and shaped a bit like a

scow with a bow on her. He named his new boat *Johnnie's Mistake*. The name was not due to any fault in his design; it worked perfectly. "I had some really, really, really hard days out on her and never ever once saw that boat put her nose under." He explains, "I called her *Johnnie's Mistake* for the simple reason afterwards I should have had a fiberglass boat." He says fiberglass boats have replaced wooden boats. "There's no sale for 'em. You can't even give 'em away." But *Johnnie's Mistake* served him well.

While Johnnie usually chose to work by himself, sometimes he took friends or family out just for the fun of it. There were three Catholic priests that used to summer on the island, Mark, Joe and Mark's brother, whose name Johnnie doesn't remember, but he does remember that they were all "very good company." On occasion Johnnie used to take them out hauling traps with him. They'd bring him smoked mackerel and he'd show them a few things about the lobster business. They nearly got him into trouble one day when they neglected to toss back the seeders, egg-carrying female lobsters, which are illegal to keep. Johnnie was unaware of the mistake until they'd brought the haul in. "I had seven of those things. But they didn't notice. It's a good thing. If the warden had been around I'd been in trouble." Johnnie had to watch his friends carefully when he brought them along, but he liked the priests and their company.

Another time Johnnie took the priests out lobstering in Toothacher Cove and seemed to be hauling in empty traps all day. Predicting his catch on the next string of traps, one of the priests told him, "You're gonna get 29 or 30 lobsters." Johnnie laughed at the idea and recalls them teasing him, saying, "Oh, you're a Methodist; you haven't got any faith." He hauled in the traps in question and brought up about 30 lobsters, just as they'd promised. Johnnie laughs, "That's unbelievable isn't it?"

In the early 1970s some of the island lobstermen started talking about forming a co-operative. "We just decided we wanted to maybe get something for ourselves, you know, a little bit of the profit too." At the time, Johnnie and 22 other lobstermen had been selling their catch to the lobster dealer, Bill Sprague. Bill's wharf was the old Barter's Wharf, where Johnnie used to process fish. In 1973 Bill sold his wharf to his 23 fishermen. By coming together as a co-op, the members were able to build a lobster pound, which enabled them to hold fresh lobsters for a few months until prices improved. "That's where the money is in that co-op,"



Johnnie gaffing a buoy – c. 1966

advises Johnnie. Working cooperatively as a group wasn't always easy for lobstermen used to their independence. Over the years some members left and others joined. Johnnie figures he was the last of the living original members to still belong to the co-op.

Sometimes Johnnie found himself in a fix in a bout of bad weather or with tangled gear. Fortunately Swan's Island lobstermen have always looked out for one another on the water; help was only a radio call away. Sometimes help

came when Johnnie didn't ask for, or even need it. One hot summer day Johnnie rested his boat in a back cove and sat down to eat his lunch in the shade of the cabin doorway. To anyone looking at his boat from the water, it appeared to be abandoned and drifting. "Next thing I know there's a fella up along side of me. He didn't see me. He give me a lesson. 'Don't you ever do that again! Next time you're gonna do that, you're gonna get on the [radio] and say so.'"

By the time Johnnie had reached his mid 80s he found himself among the ranks of the oldest lobstermen on the island. He still clung to his independence on the water, but one summer another island lobsterman told him, "Sarah's gonna go with you." Johnnie didn't know this Sarah and he hadn't made any arrangements to have her work on his boat. So he answered back, "Oh, she is, huh? News to me." Others mentioned Sarah to him. He says this went on for a while. Then "By and by, she come down to the house and wanted to know if she could go with me. I said, 'Well, I don't really want to, but we'll try it; see how it works

out.' So she went with me."

For three summers Sarah Adam, a seasonal island resident, worked as Johnnie's sternman, helping him bait, empty and set his traps. Johnnie knew he could trust her to measure the lobsters for legal size and toss back the illegal seeders and v-notched lobsters. Sarah's help made it possible for Johnnie to keep lobstering. "If it hadn't been for her I probably would of quit before I did, because my legs were bothering me. The first time she went with me I couldn't hardly get a cup of coffee up to my mouth, my arm was so sore." She was more than just a sternman to Johnnie; she was a friend. "She was really a very, very nice helper, good helper. She really took care of me."

With 87 years under his belt, Johnnie was the oldest lobsterman on the island. In 2005 Johnnie said goodbye to fishing. "My knees decided that for me." Over the years he had been cutting back the number of traps he set bit by bit, until he was down to 90. "Sold the traps right in the water, didn't even have to take 'em out." He settled into retired life, a condition about which he laughs and says, "Well, you grow used to it after a while."

Johnnie made the most of his retirement, making model boats and taking daily walks from his house to the Valley where he grew up. However, age had caught up with Johnnie and Lenora. It became troublesome to go back and forth to doctors on the mainland. Johnnie says he knows that anyone on Swan's Island would have helped if they'd asked. He says, "It was getting to the point where we both needed help and Helen wanted to help us."

Their daughter Helen and her husband Steve own a home in Waltham, Maine. Helen was trying to help her parents, often by driving them to doctor appointments in Bangor. She asked her parents if they'd like to move next door to her house. Johnnie and Lenora thought it over and decided it was time to make the move. In July of 2010 they moved from the island to their new home, a modular with views of the woods and hills in the distance. Johnnie says, "We haven't been through the black fly season yet though. But outside of that, it's been nice and comfortable and pleasant." He nods at his wife, reading in the living room, "She's satisfied. That's the main thing." He chuckles, "She's the main thing."

In talking about his 93 years of life, it appears that Johnnie has taken it all in stride. “I guess I’m just happy to be Johnnie Wheaton,” he says. He has lived his life by a credo of love. “You have to love yourself or you can’t love other people, and I do. I love other people. I really do.”

His fishing days may be over but Johnnie still lives them at night. “I dream more about lobstering now than anything else at times.” The other night he dreamt he was hauling traps and his wheel snarled on the trap line. He cut the buoy and hauled in the trap. “That trap was right plumb full of lobsters! Yeah, then I woke up. I don’t know if I was alive or dead. But the trap was packed right full of lobsters.” His face breaks into a big smile as he recalls that dream trap teeming with lobsters and memories.