

Fishtales  
Sunday, September 30, 2012  
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr  
Interviewee – Rodney Avila

MS I'm just gonna start with a few other things just so we can

RA No problem

MS Ok so, what is your name?

RA Rodney Avila

MS And are you from here originally?

RA Yeah, I grew up in New Bedford, started fishing with my dad and my granddad when I was nine years old, summers

MS Really? What type of fishing?

RA Every kind, every kind there is outta here. The only thing I haven't done was surf clams. I've never surf clammed. But I've ocean quahogged, I've quahogged, I've scalloped a little bit, dragged for fish, caught tuna fish, swordfish, swordfished for a lot of years

MS Are you still fishing now?

RA Unfortunately no, I'm 70 years old [laughs]. No, retired. I own two fishin' boats out of New Bedford. I recently sold one, so I still have one. I'm actually the fifth generation of fishermen in my family.

MS Really?

RA Or fourth. My son's the fifth, I'm sorry.

MS And did you have a particular story you wanted to share?

RA Oh I've got a few of 'em, that's why Laura sent me. But I'll give you one that I think is the funniest. Is that what you want? Ok.

MS [laughs]

RA We were flukin' on my boat the TRIDENT. We were down by the corner buoy which is just south of Nantucket and it was a foggy day and my watch to be below would be

between midnight and four o'clock in the mornin'. I would get up at four o'clock in the mornin'. And I had a mate on my boat that was a prankster. Everything was a joke to him. Everything was a joke so...And we used to swordfish. So we used to have a walkie talkie, a hand held VHF. So I come on watch, it was about four o'clock, it was a little after four o'clock in the morning when I got on watch. It was thick fog. You couldn't see five feet on either side of the boat. And next thing you know I hear, "Trident, Trident come in Trident" So I answered my VHF radio and there's this guy on the other end that's irate. "Oh just because you're a big boat and you're a big guy, you think you can push me all over the ocean" and he's goin' on. And I says, I don't even know what's goin' on here. So I look in the radar, I don't see any target so I figured well, maybe he's in the clutter, he's inside, I can't see him, so I start openin' the doors and lookin' for boats, no boats around. And then he comes back again, "Come in, Trident" Well, at that time I used to be a pretty big fellow, you know, and he says, "You know, I'm sick of you pushin' me all over this ocean, when I get ashore I'm gonna, me and you are gonna take this out on the dock" And I'm tryin' to be nice to the guy. I'm goin' "Well, wait a minute, I just got on watch, I don't know anything that's goin' on." So he's "yeah you know". So then finally I've had it. I've had it tryin' to be nice to this guy and apologize to this guy, so I says "You know what? I'll just stop my boat now, you come right aboard, we'll square this right now, you don't have to wait till I get to the dock, we'll take care of this right now." And I don't hear no more. So I decides to go back in the bunk room and wake up the mate. Well, when I enters the bunk room, they're both rollin' on the floor laughing, both my mate and one of the other deckhands. And they got the walkie talkie in their hand. So I says, "Oh, they got me" Well, unbeknown to me, all the other boats in the area was just hearin' one side of the conversation, and there was this other friend of mine on another boat and he says, "I wonder who that other guy is that's antagonizing Rodney. He's gotta be out of his head 'cause Rodney'll just tear him apart." But that's the way it went. That was, I think that was the funniest story.

Another story, we, like I said, I used to swordfish, same guy, well, when we , I don't know we used to harpoon swordfish, so we used to have men aloft and I had a 26 foot stand in front of the boat. I used to got out there to harpoon 'em. And I used to always beg this guy just before you get there, 'cause I had a lot of bar wash slow the boat down so it don't wash the boat. So one day, we're goin' on a swordfish and all of a sudden the boat don't slow down, it's turnin' away from the swordfish, and I goes, his name was Joe Rendeiro, I says, "Joe, what's the problem?" "Well, I can't slow the boat down." I says, "So what's the difference, you never slow it down any other time so why you turnin' away from the fish now?"

But I can go to another story, I don't know how much time you got, but just tell me to go. I can go to another story if you'd like, I was a very young skipper, this was in 1968, I was runnin' a 54 foot boat outta here that wasn't mine at the time. I was just captain of it, called the GERTRUDE D. And we was out on a no name storm, on April 28th, 1968 and you probably heard guys talk about this. There was the DEEP WATERS when they got lost. I don't know if you ever heard of that. Well, I was out and there was a captain George Edwards, he was runnin' the boat, and he called, we were both fishin' together, and we were down south of the Nantucket Lightship. We were about 50 fathom of water

we were catchin' lobsters, 45-50 fathom of water. Well, this storm come up and all the old veteran fishermen are tellin' me, my uncle had this other boat and he said "Well, you better come home. The barometer's real low. It's the lowest I've seen for a long time, so we're gonna get a big storm." So I says, "Well, I've been listenin' to the weather report and the weather forecast was 15-25 which is..." And he says, "No, that's not correct" I says, "Well...you know the trouble," and I remember tellin' him this, "The trouble with you old guys, you get scared easy and you wanna rush home for any little excuse." So, they all took off. George and I stood. Well, it blew 90 some miles an hour and we had like 30 foot seas. He got flooded. We had to, our pilot house got flooded. We lost all the electronics. We had an engine room half full of water. We had a sea broke, break over the stern. So we had to just jog for three days before it got calm enough for us to come home. The DEEP WATERS got lost. They found her, a merchant ship found her comin' across the Atlantic Ocean. All the crew survived. She was down off of Virginia. So, she went from Nantucket, she drifted all the way down to Virginia in three or four days, well, no actually, I was back in three days, so I think they found them like a week later, seven or eight days later. So, that's that story. And that's it. I mean I could keep goin' on here.

MS Go on, we'll listen.

RA I'm tryin' to think of some other stories that are funny.

MS How about did you ever tow up anything usual?

RA Well, I caught a plane, yeah but that was like about six hours after it had crashed south of Nantucket and we actually found a couple of people in it. You know they didn't survive so...that was it. We did pick up a torpedo. I was deckhand on a boat called the PORTUGAL. This was, I was probably maybe, 21 years old, 20-21 years old. We were south of Block Island and we did pick up a torpedo. It happened to be a live torpedo, but none of us knew it was live. We was...and it was one of those kind that it's the rotation of the propeller that sets it off. So we had it hangin' off of the GILSON at the time. We couldn't, it was 22 foot long and the boat didn't have a lift high enough to get it aboard. So we called the Coast Guard and when they found out we, they asked us what color it was, if there was any markings and as soon as we did that, as soon as we told 'em the color of the markings, they trans, actually the Coast Guard transferred us to the Naval Department in Groton, Connecticut or New London, Connecticut. And they, they were the ones who asked us about the color if there was any markings. As soon as they, we described the color and the markings of it, we heard this, like uh oh. They said, "Just stand in port, don't touch anything, we'll be there as soon as we can. We're sending some boats out to you." Next thing you know, we see this Coast Guard, about a 40 footer, racing at us. And we didn't think much of it. Next thing you know, they were "Get off the boat immediately, right now." So I decided well, I got all my wallet and everything in the bunk, I says, I'm going to go down and get it before I get off the boat 'cause I didn't know where I was going. "No, just get off the boat right now." "What are you talkin' about. My wallet is there. My keys to my car is there. You're not tellin' me..." "Yeah we're tellin' you. Get off the boat" So once I was off the boat, they cleared it away and they told us, "You guys had a live torpedo on that boat." I was "Oh, okay." And we

waited and they sent a crew out from the naval base and they disarmed it. So...that was like I wanna say in 1960 or '61, somethin' like that.

MS And what were those torpedoes from? I mean they weren't from World War II right?

RA Yeah.

MS They were?

RA It was from World War II. Yeah. Yeah. It was a live torpedo from World War II. So that was over 20 years old, 27 years old. '44 to we picked that up, '61, so 20 years old. That's it. I'm tryin' to think if there was anything else I picked up that was...

MS What was the worst trip you ever had?

RA Worst trip I ever, well I gotta tell you this one, this starts this, I was a young skipper and I made a pretty good name for myself, a lot of people wanted to hire me, and I got hired to run a fishin' boat called the OCEAN SPRAY which was brand new, never made a trip before. And so I was part of the construction of the boat, where you wanted the electronics put and everything, so every weekend the owner would take me up to Maine and we would lay out the boat the way I wanted it, so when it was time for the Blessin' of the Fleet, New Bedford Ship Supply donated all the sandwiches, the little finger sandwiches we had a launchin' for the boat up there. It was docked at a boat, at a dock. And it had a jog, like a little L shape. And it was the first boat I'd ever been on with hydraulic steerin' this was the modern, everything else I had over there was chain steering. So I backs the boat up to get away, we were gonna go up the river, but we got tables out on deck and we got all kinds of people there, invitees who joined us for the little cruise, we were going up the river with trial runs. So I goes, backs away and I turns the wheel to starboard to go away and the boat goes to port right back to the dock and hits the dock. And I goes " Oh" Well then I start thinkin' well the tide's runnin' out, maybe I couldn't, I need a little more power to compensate for the tide. So I do the whole thing again and I give it more power, now I really slams the dock, knocked all the tables over, knocked all the food over and everybody's like, "this guy's gonna run your boat? He can't get away from the dock!" So that was it, but now leadin' to the worst trip, I, we were gonna go out on Friday the 13th. Nobody ever leaves on Friday the 13th. Well, I was never superstitious. I says, "Eh", so I decides to go out Friday the 13th. My whole crew is, well they're all, "Well..." We goes out. Everything happened, the first day we blew up the power take off. So we had to get a new clutch plate shipped out to Nantucket, went in there, worked all night puttin' a new clutch plate in. Then we go back out again, something else let go on the boat, so it was one thing right after another, so, but I was determined, I wasn't gonna come home until I got a trip, we ran out of groceries, and we ran out of everything to eat on the boat, we started eatin' fish and we got caught in a hurricane. It wasn't a very big hurricane, but we got caught in a hurricane. So when I come home the whole, I had no trip, I had a broken, and the whole crew quit on me. So that was the worst trip I've ever had in my life. I had a few that were bad, but that one was the worst one. So, alright?

MS That was great.

RA Ok

MS Thanks for sharing that.

RA Alright.