

Fishtales, Sunday, September 30, 2012  
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr  
Interviewee – Bill Gell

MS What is your name?

BG Well my name is Bill Gell. And I've been a commercial fisherman and fished out of New Bedford for 35 years. And I started my career with Rodney Avila on the Trident. I used to be his pilot. I was a swordfish spotter. Started with him in 1978. And it was, the story that I guess he already told you, I was half of the program on that with Joe Rendeiro who was Rodney's mate at the time. And we were fluking, it was after swordfish season. It was in the late summer, early fall. And we were six-handed runnin' the watch, 8 and 4. And it was a, oh heck, I guess it was 2 or 3 in the mornin', Rodney got up and a little groggy. It was foggier than hell. And we used to keep a walkie talkie in the dory when it was swordfishing, you know just for safety. So that was, I shared the state room with Rodney and I got this walkie talkie and Rodney says, I mean Joe Rendeiro says, "Hey give me that" so we're suitin' up to haul back, gettin our oil gear on and there's a bulk head between the state room and the wheelhouse, so Joe was pretty good at this stuff anyway. He turned it on, it was on channel 7, foggier than the devil, boats were all catchin' fluke, we're all back and forth between the lightship and the corner buoy and he says "Trident, Trident, you on there" thowin' his voice so Rodney's you know, he opened his eyes and he says "Yeah" reaches for the mic, "Yeah Trident's in" Rodney was quite large back then. He was a big boy, you know. He said "Oh you big bastard, I'm gonna tow you backwards you've been hookin' up with me, I've been avoiding you all night." 'Cause Joe was the mate, he was on watch, just gettin' off watch. So Rodney says "Gee. I don't know where are you?" Nobody had radar. He says "Who are you?" "Never mind who I am you big so and so, I'll I'm gonna hook up with you and I'm gonna tow you backwards." Well you know Rodney, he can get a little short tempered, he's lookin' all around, he's dancin' from side to side out of the wheelhouse, you couldn't see from here to there, you know. And so we're goin' back and forth and we got all we could do to keep from crackin' up. We're as close as from you to me and we got a bulk head between us. And he's talkin' on the radio like this, you know. And he's lookin' around and Rodney's gettin' steamy. So finally this goes on for a few minutes and so we're gettin' ready to haul back and Rodney says "Hey Joe," he says, "What you do on your watch? You got some guy's all pissed at us here. What's goin' on?" And of course we're all...and he's got the walkie talkie you know and he's, we'd been had at that point you know. Well that, the repercussions of that were funny over the whole rest of the season because nobody could hear us talkin' on the walkie talkie, but they could hear Rodney's response, cause some of his got pretty steamy over the radio and everybody's sayin' who the hell would give Rodney a hard time about this? So that's how it went down. Of course we all got a laugh out of it. Gee that was 35-40 years ago, for Pete's sakes you know. And it's still a funny story. But yeah I was part of it. I was part and parcel of that. You know me and Joe Rendeiro. But that's about it. There are others, jeeze, it's just kind of spur of the moment you know. But we had a lot of good time. I enjoyed fishing with Rodney. Caught a lot of fish. Made a lot of money over

the years. You know we caught a lot of swordfish. That's what got me in the business. I had a boat that my dad had in Westport. We used to day fish and you know so I'm just glad to be a part of it. I'm at the tail end of my career here now too.

MS You were flying the pilot?

BG I got 4000 hours flyin' over the North Atlantic on a small single engine Sitara. yeah. You had 110 gallons of usable fuel, you had a 13 hour day. We'd leave, out of New Bedford we'd leave at sun up and fly all the way down the northeast petons (?) before the Hague Line, 240 miles from here. It was a pretty good commute.

MS [inaudible]

BG Oh yes we had a couple early on I had trouble with one engine. I burned oil. I just made it into the Vineyard. Had two quarts of oil left from 8 that I started with in the morning. So we had to overhaul that engine. That was the first airplane that I had. But yeah I had one time when I was flyin' for Rodney it was in 1980, '80, '81. High Time Motor, I was gonna get the season out of it. I had 1900 hours or 2000 hours engines and I hung a valve. And I'm runnin' on three cylinders, early in the morning I was heavy with fuel and I was just spiraling my way into the drink. 'Cause I didn't have enough rpms to keep her flyin' I said "Rodney, get ready to pick me up. I'm headin' in." So I managed to, there's not a lot of levers on those things, I leaned it out as much as I could, pulled carb heat for whatever that did, but I managed to get another hundred rpms so I could just maintain my flight and I said I'm gonna try to get to Nantucket. We were down by the lightship which was 75 miles south of Nantucket. And so Joe Avila who is Rodney's cousin, I used to fly with Joe, Jimmy, Frankie Avila, John Beavus was another guy, Jimmy King. There was really not that many of us over the years, but those are the steady guys that flew out of New Bedford. Joe calls me on the radio and says "Where are you?" and I gave him my bearings real quick. I said "I'm makin' it for Nantucket here. I think I can make it." Cause you get right into a ground effect when you get right on the deck. You know you actually can fly at what would be a lower rpm than you normally could fly, kind of compress the air under the plane. And he said "I'll follow, I'll catch up with you." 'Cause I was goin' slow and slow, 85, you know [laughs] but I got on the air I called him I said, "Look I've got a, an engine emergency. I'm under my own power, but I'd like a straight in runway 5, it's the direction we're comin' in. There's a big sand dune right there off the end, it's right on the water." So he gave me a clearance to land and Joe followed me all the way up. Just popped over the dune and landed. And when I taxied in I changed my shorts! And I'm proud to say that. [laughs] Yup, it was quite a day, so. You know the funny part of it was, there really wasn't much or any maintenance at the airport, there was, I think it was Will's Air Service. They used to go from Hyannis to the Islands. And ran an FBO, Fixed Base Operation, there. He didn't really have any mechanics so we did a leak down and sure enough there was one cylinder that had no compression so we pulled the cylinders off which I done, I've kind of been a mechanic all my life, so we pulled everything down, and I called, this was mid-afternoon at this point. I called George Perrott who was one of the swordfish, oh the tuna seiner spotters, with a bigger airplane. So he says, "Yeah, I'll come and get you." He had to come and get some fuel

anyway. So he fueled up. We threw my cylinders and my pistons back in the back of his plane and I went tuna spotting for the rest of the afternoon with him. Came back to New Bedford, had my mechanic overhaul everything, you know hone it out, new valve, valve guides, rings, everything ready to go. And two days later I was with Joe Avila on 91ZULU (?) 2991 ZULU was his N number on his piper, Super Cub, and we took some fuel out so the two of us and my engine parts could take off. He flew me to Nantucket, I put it back together and flew it home! And that's kind of how we did things. I timed it out the rest of that year and bought a brand new engine and flew from there until 1988 was the last year I flew. It was pretty much over. In '84 we lost the Hague Line, we lost all our good ground, you know to Canada, and they're catching swordfish now, but we can't go over the line. So you get one trip I had a boat named the GAIL and we used to tie up right here. It was an old Eastern Rig, 65 footer. And I sold her in '88. We'd get one trip a year, you know, in July and usually the water would warm up so you wouldn't seem 'em fin it (?), but I sold that boat in '88 and I bought the SOPHIA, it's another 65 steel boat, 65 footer and we rigged up for gillnetting swordfish. And we did that until 2000 when they legislated us out of business. They put that out of business too so...Yeah we've kind of been around. Sold that boat, in 2002 built a lobster boat and went back home to Westport and fished out of there since then so...that's me. Yeah we've been around. Did a little bit of everything. Oh there were some close calls I mean it was a good bunch of guys. There was, in fact there was, Wayne Davis is here. He's one of the last surviving guys. I don't know whether you met him. He has some beautiful photography that he's taken of swordfish and tuna, whales. And I don't know whether he pulled out. I went over to see him this morning and he's not there. Maybe the rain fouled him out. But yeah there aren't many of us left. Anyway that's about it. That's my story.

MS Well that's great!

BG And I'm stickin' to it [laughs]