

Fishtales, Saturday, September 28, 2013  
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr  
Interviewee – Isa Najjar

MS Ok so now he's ready. So I'm gonna ask you first what's your name?

IN Isa Najjar

MS And where are you from?

IN I am from Nantucket Island, Massachusetts

MS And were you born there?

IN I was born in Nantucket, 1956

MS And what were your parents? Were your parents in fishing at all or?

IN My great grandfather was the first in the family to come to America from the Cape Verde Islands and he was a whaleman

MS No kidding.

IN He travelled around the world twice, he didn't make a single dime, he didn't get paid a single dime, but he did get American citizenship because the captains at that time had the power to give citizenship to crew members. So his name was Joao Rodrigues, John Rodericks.

MS Do you know what year that was?

IN That would have been 1892 or 3, around that year.

MS Really?

IN At the very end of the whaling industry

MS Wow

IN It may have been a year or two sooner, but approximately around that time. And so that was the beginning of our transplant, being transplanted to America. So the fishing the story that you want me to tell is not that one. The fishing story is circa 1977 and it happened on Sconset Beach in Nantucket which is the very most eastern part of the island, from there we say you can swim to Spain, if you're a good swimmer because

there's no land between there and Spain, basically, I mean Europe, Africa, the whole of the Atlantic. So this adventure took place with a friend of mine whose name was David King who's now since passed away, but David King was an excellent fisherman and he loved fishing, he was a commercial, he did fish commercially.

And he had a, his family had a summer cottage on Sconset Beach. In fact the name of the area is called Codfish Park, Sconsett is a stretch of road right on the beach area of, the lower area of Sconset Beach and it's called Codfish Park. And that was a place where all the codfish, the people who did cod fishing had their shanties. And they used to get their catch and they used to cure the codfish with salt of course and process everything right there. So anyhow, his home, his family's summer cottage was right there on Codfish Park. And so we used to spend a lot of time there. And so one day, summer day, we were enjoying ourselves with some extracurricular activity. And we were sittin' out there and the fish were jumping. The bluefish were literally jumping out of the water. And so he said listen, we gotta go catch some fish. And so he had a catamaran, small catamaran. And he said, "Listen, I'm gonna get the pole and you know and whatever we need which was a mail bag, a canvas mail bag and an ice pick, right. And whatever he thought that we needed. He gathered everything up real quick. And we got the catamaran and we put it in the water. And so he said I'll control the catamaran and you fish. So he gave me the pole and the pole was a, it was a broken, it was a stubby fishing pole that had broken off. It was about maybe less than three feet long. And so we had the lure and, you know that's all we had. 'Cause we went out there so quick, so quickly because that was like the moment. We gotta hit these fish now because we don't know how long this moment is gonna last. And when the bluefish are in a frenzy like that, they will literally bite anything you throw in the water. If you throw a shoe, they will bite the shoe. So we were on the catamaran and we started trolling along the shore, back and forth and we were catching fish. And as soon as I could get the lure in the water, a fish was on the line. And I was pulling the fish into the, you see, into the boat, and taking the fish off the line and putting it into the bag and you know of course you know they're moving because they don't wanna be caught and so Dave was, you know, expert at immobilizing them with the ice pick. So we were loading them and we got to the sixth fish in about fifteen minutes. And you know on the sixth fish, the rod broke.

MS [laughs]

IN And so I'm with this fish on the line and a broken rod and it's, basically, I just have the reel in my hand. And I don't, you know, have any way to control this fish. And I'm trying and I'm grabbin' the line. I'm trying to pull this fish in and then finally just before I get the fish into the boat, on the boat because it's just a flat canvas surface with catamaran, just before I get this fish onto the top of the canvas, he takes the lure, and then that's the end of the adventure now, because no pole, no lure, nothing. But we did have five fish, and so now it's time to eat. So we started cleaning the fish. The sun was setting and so we were on the east side of the island so of course we can't see the sunset, but it did set and as the sun was going down and it started getting dark, we were preparing this meal. And we had the most delicious bluefish dinner that day. And we just, you know we just enjoyed the rest of the night laughing about the fish story that was just told. But it was a real fun time.

Needless to say it was '77, thirty something odd years, forty years almost back and it was a lot of fun and that was like a typical kind of Nantucket thing to do. So there you have it.

MS That's great. Can we back up. So after your grandfather got here, what did he do once he stopped whaling or...

IN Yeah, that would have been my great grandfather, my mother's grandfather who I did know. I was about maybe ten years old when he passed away, he would have been almost 90, 88, 89 around that age. And so he did different, I don't, I mean he was quite old by the time I came along, you know I was conscious of who he was a little bit young in life, but I know he, they did have a, they had a work on Nantucket called the mosquito control which was spraying annually to try to control the population of mosquitoes. And I know that was like, he was in charge of that operation for many years. But that was like a seasonal thing. And they did work on the cranberry bog, Nantucket at one time had the world's largest cranberry bog, single bog. And that was something that Cape Verdean laborers did as a livelihood.

But I know he did fish and for as long as he was able to he did fish for scallops because the main cash crop of fish in Nantucket, Nantucket Bay Scallops which are some of the finest in the world, even until today, but they're not as plentiful as they used to be, they're more scarce. But the Nantucket Bay scallops were really a prize that restaurants in France would order quantities of it and they would be flown directly from Nantucket Airport to Paris to be served in the best restaurants. We knew that. It's a practice that probably still happens till today. But I know he fished for scallops and he would be proud to boast that he would almost always get his legal limit. And he would do all of that by hand. Because he had a row boat that he used to row out to the area where he would fish for the scallops and then, of course, that process of dredging for the scallops and then you have to, of course, cull them afterwards. And that whole process was very tedious and he would do all of that work himself. And then, of course, he would row his boat back to shore, unload everything and then he would take those scallops to the shanty and that would be the whole evenings event for men to sit around and tell stories and what have you and open their scallops and then 'course get them to market afterwards. And that was something that was like an annual ritual for us.

In the winters, in Nantucket, I made my first dollar, I made my first dollar opening scallops as a boy. I remember being like eight years old, seven years old and one of my uncles had a shanty and that's where everybody brought their scallops to open in the evening after they made their catch. And he paid ten cents a pound, ten cents a pound. So to get a dollar, I had to open ten pounds. So it taught me how to open scallops at that age and then I labored I don't know how long it took me, but I know I was exhausted before I made that first dollar. And, in fact, I didn't even open ten pounds, I had like eight pounds and something. 'Cause they would weigh them up. And my Uncle Pete said, that's ok, you earned this dollar. And he paid me a dollar for opening that eight and a half pounds of scallops. And I felt like so rich you know. I said, a whole dollar, what am I gonna do with this? But that was life, there at that time. So you asked about my great grandfather, that's

what he did, he fished for scallops, for most of his life. And made a healthy living from that and I'm sure he had other things that he did as well.

MS How about your grandparents and parents?

IN Grandparents, my grandfather, my mother's father and my mother's mother, they were, my grandmother was a domestic. She did domestic housekeeping and my grandfather did caretaking and gardening for one family for thirty-five years. And that family was a family that owned the New York Post. And they were well treated by this family, they were well loved and respected and my grandfather had a lot of loyalty to them. And they gave him a lot of autonomy as well. Because basically he could use the property when he needed to for his personal use because it was basically a summer home, a mini mansion which is still there. And so, and along with that he also did some mason tending, did work as a mason tender. But it was a very happy family. It was a together, it was a family that was together. And we really had a lot of great times because the people were really good people.

MS Did you have a Verdean, Cape Verdean community there?

IN Yes. Nantucket had a, in fact had quite a good sized Cape Verdean community and we had quite a few relatives there. We still do have relatives there. We still do on our own. My mother and my Aunt now own the family home which was my grandparent's home which is on Orange Street in Nantucket. And there was quite a sizeable Cape Verdean community there at the time when I was growing up. And most of those people did come as immigrants from the Cape Verde islands and that same period that my great grandfather came, late 1800s is when they started to come and there was, that was a time when there was a concentration, a larger concentration. It began to, it began to dissipate a little by the time I was a young boy, but it was still a community. There was still a community there with at least about forty to fifty families. And all the families knew each other. And they were all, some of us related as well. But it's still, I mean it's, there's documentation about all of that too. There's books that have been written. There's one book. I can't remember the authors of it, but the title of the book is called "The Other Islanders" and it does chronicle the life of the Cape Verdean community on Nantucket. And there was a couple of other books also been written about that aspect of life on Nantucket. But they were definitely an integral part of the whaling industry in that period and so for that reason, they do have a place in history.

MS Yeah. Huh. And how about your father? What did he do?

IN My father was in a different line. My father was from New Bedford of course, but he was born in New Bedford, but his family eventually migrated to Falmouth. And my grandmother bought a house in Walkway and they had a home there and eventually my father went to school in Falmouth and graduated from Falmouth High School which at the time was called Lawrence High School, graduated from Lawrence High School in Falmouth, 1948, and after finishing his high school, went directly into the military, into, went into the Marine Corps and became a Sergeant in the Marine Corps, went to the war

in Korea, fought in the Korean War and then toured on a what they used to call R & R, rest and recuperation, right. So they would, and of course the troop carrier at that time wasn't by air, it was by ship and they went around from the Asian Pacific I guess, well that side of where Korea is, northern Pacific I believe and then from there around the tip of Africa, Cape Horn, Cape of Good Hope, right? Cape Horn is South America, Cape Hope, Cape of Good Hope. And then into, around North Africa and into the Mediterranean and spent considerable time in Morocco, Tunisia, Greece, France and Italy, it was a Mediterranean type tour and so spent some time there and after finishing his military duty, his military career, then he started work as a civilian working as a steeple jack, painting water towers and bridges and so forth in New York, New York City. There was a time in his young life when from before the family had moved to Falmouth that they had lived in New York. So he always had a attachment to New York City. So, eventually, when my parents first married, they lived in New York for some time. And then, eventually, they came back to Mass. But during that time he started his career as a steeple jack and then he continued that until his death so that was his livelihood. And basically that's it. And you got the whole, the whole history.

MS How about you though? What did you do?

IN Well I don't have so much time for all of that, but in a nutshell, maybe I can kind of...we were just going to Nantucket of course in my young life and by the time it was time for junior high and high school, my family moved back to New Bedford. So I went to school here went to High School here and graduated from high school here. New Bedford Vocational High School. Eventually went to college in Pennsylvania, Slippery Rock University. And after that had a religious experience and made some spiritual treks out of the country to different parts of the world, India and Pakistan and eventually Jordan and Saudi Arabia and so forth, and all in the pursuit of trying to acquire more knowledge and understanding about the teachings of Islam. And so after that experience I returned back home to America and continued to travel every year basically, different places in search of more enlightenment, of course, and my livelihood here was working in construction. I worked as a construction supervisor, worked in the union, carpenter's union, with the carpenter's union. And then after thirty-five years of that, I had a career change and started working in the prison system as a chaplain. And so basically that's what I'm doing now, retired basically from the construction, as I said after thirty-five years, and now I have a new career working in the, with the Department of Corrections, working as a full-time prison chaplain and that in a nutshell is basically it.

MS Great. Wow.

IN So the fish story has evolved into kind of a comprehensive anthropological essay.

MS From whaling to prisons, that's interesting! [laughs]

IN Yeah, I mean, if you wanna take it from the start to where it is now, yeah, exactly. But all of it of course centered right here. You know right in this, right in this immediate locality, you know. Where I work now is in Bridgewater, so basically I've been in this

kind of, this triangle between New Bedford, Nantucket, New Bedford, Providence, Boston. This has basically been my world. And I feel comfortable and I feel at home here. We have roots here. New Bedford and Nantucket we do have roots here. And so it's a great place to be from. A very underappreciated place. I don't think people realize you know how much natural beauty actually is here. I mean you go to Fort Tabor and you walk around that area and you look at Buzzard's Bay and you look, you see towards Dartmouth and Fairhaven and you see, the panoramic scene there. Today was a spectacular day there. I looked at the sky when I went for a walk earlier today and you know the clouds everything was so crystal clear, you could see everywhere, you know. And I even started singing that song, you know, on a clear day you can see forever. You can literally see for ever. You know what I mean. When your mind is clear you can see forever, because you can see internally as well as externally. And so that was a, you know, a moment you see when, you know we can never re-capture those moments. You can re-live them in your mind, in your memory, you know. But when you see those...in fact I have a camera and I didn't have my camera with me at the time, but the way that the sunlight was sparkling on the water because it was so calm, I mean it just looks like diamonds on the water. And you know the, just the configuration of the clouds and you're looking at the horizon and you see, this artistry of the maker, it really kind of is awe inspiring. A spectacular day, you know? You don't feel the air. It's not a heavy day, it's not like when it's humid, it's not like when it's cold, it's not like when it's hot. September is so beautiful here. And I told my wife, I said, "if September was a woman, I would marry her and I would change my name to August just to be closer to her." And she said, "I'm born in September and you're born in August!" A match made in heaven. So this is a place that we live in that sometimes we don't maybe appreciate how special it can be. And, I mean, historically we know it has its place in history, sometimes people have called it "strike out city" because it has been a world leader in three different categories, different times. It has been the leading whaling port in the nation, hence it has its' name, the Whaling City. And it was also the leading textile manufacturing city, rivaling of course, with Fall River, but it did have the most number of mills in operation at one time, over thirty mills, textile mills. So it was a world leader in that category at one time. And it was also a world leader in the fishing, as a fishing port, the leading fishing port in America for several years running as well, and still has a presence in that area. But it is a place that has definitely contributed. I think New Bedford has contributed as much to the prosperity of this state and this region as any other city. And has plenty of reason to be proud of those accomplishments and I think that we need to do more to try to help change the perceptions and to change the stigma that has begun to creep in about this area not being a positive place to live or to be from. So I know you're doing your part in all that and we hope that you will share all of your work with the greater world and so that people will have a sense of what New Bedford is and what it means to live here and to be from here. So with that my friends...I would like to bid you adieu.

MS Alright well thank you!