

Fishtales
Sunday, September 30, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Paul Swain

MS I'm just gonna ask you your name and a few questions and then we'll have you tell your story.

PS Sure.

MS Ok. So, and what is your name?

PS Paul Swain. I'm originally a New Bedfordite from day one, born and brought up here and I come from a fishin' family. My father was a fisherman. My uncle was a fisherman and my two brothers were fishermen and my nephews are still fishin'. So there's about three generations there I guess.

MS When did you first go fishing?

PS I went first when I got out of the service in 1956. I was lookin' for a site at that time. My father was the head of the fisherman's union which was quite powerful at the time. And he says, "I got a site for you, report over to Hathaway Braley Wharf in Fairhaven and look for the [?] St. Mary" So I went over there and I got aboard and I introduced myself to the skipper and he says, "What's your name" I says, "Swain" He says, "Yeah? Is your father the fisherman's union delegate?" And I says, "Yeah" "Well he don't think much of you to put you on this little slab." That was my indoctrination to fishin' That was my first trip. And then I tried it again, a little later in the summer. Worked ashore. Then I tried it the following summer and I started to like it. But my father having worked for the union knew the government people and they said they were lookin' for a young fellow to be a sampler for them in the Port of New Bedford. So I applied for the job, seein' I had service time. They considered me and I got the job apparently after six months. So I put in 40 years on the New Bedford waterfront. So I've seen a lot of good times, but there's a lot of bad times. Now the scallopers have got it good. I went fishin' when it was 27 cents for scallops. That's quite a while ago considered they're ten dollars now. Other than that I had a few trips. One of them I remember very well. I was on the boat called the Bradt [?] and we had this French logger from Canada, couldn't speak too good English, you know? And he was runnin' the winch and I was hookin' up the drag. The drag come aboard and he almost landed it on my head and I of course said a few swear words at him and he come back like a typical Frenchman, "What's the matter, I gave you too much [?]" Crazy people, that was just one 'em. There was lots of 'em. Another time we went out, I got a job because of my father, the crew wanted to go out on a Saturday afternoon so they'll take anybody on a Saturday afternoon. So I got out there and the skipper's name was Crabby Moe Cullin, old Newfoundlander. And he says "Swain, you go north-

northeast" So I says to him, "What numbers is that on the compass?" He says to me, "You know, I hope you got your bag packed on the way home." [Laughs] So that's a couple of good stories there you know. Another one was my brother and brother-in-law were in the Newfoundland. And she was sinkin' on George's Bank. So they were. They had to get some attentions so they saw the fire on the boat so, they're burnin' up the mattresses and they finally got someone's attention. And a big steel boat come over called the Hildagasten. She picked 'em up, brought 'em home safely and everything. So my, they went to look for a site, you know another site. My brother-in-law was asked to go on the Hildegasten. So he's all in the Hildegasten and they're on the way home. And on the way home, she tore the bottom out of the corner off Buzzards Bay. So they go down the bilge room and they say "Hey [?] time to get up, we're sinkin'!" He says "Oh you guys are a bunch of hot shits" [laughs]. This is serious. So luckily when they got in the dory, she didn't have any oars, she just floated up on the banks of Horseneck Beach. They had to break into a house to get clothes 'cause it was February. So they survived but I thought that was a funny story. You know sinking.

MS Did he continue to fish after that?

PS Oh yes. He went, put in 30-40 years fishin'. That didn't scare him. Once you get that sea blood I guess, 'cause my father often said to me, 'course he was come from Newfoundland and he was born. His title when he come to the United States was cod fisherman. That's what it said on his papers. And he said to me one day when I come home, he said, "I can't get a site today." I was happy as hell. And he says, "Comedy fall when you wish you could go to sea." 'Cause my father suffered horrible when he couldn't fish anymore. And he loved the sea. It's gotta be in your blood I guess.

MS Well that's great.

PS After that I worked 40 years for the government out of the Port of New Bedford and then I got to be State Supervisor of all the Ports of New Bedford, I mean Massachusetts. So it was a

MS This was sampling did you say?

PS It was a combination of a bunch of things. We did biological sampling which we took the, you'd just go down and you'd take the age growth of a yellow tail, scrape the scales off it, you'd have to get 25 of each sex. They'd do that was on the yellow tail. Then the codfish you did scales and the [?] was a head. You did those and took all the lengths. Guys used to bring in me boxes of shells and you could tell the age growth from them and just have like a board and it would be every five millimeters that they, so that would give them an idea of the average sizes they were catchin'. And then we did a lot of the statistical work before computers come in. You'd go to the dealer. You'd pick up the landings which would be the individual boat, landings stuff and everything he caught and got paid for, so the pounds of value'd be there. You'd take those all back to the office on a little old addin' machine, add those up individually, total them up for the month and

produce the landings, pounds of value or what for the Port. So it was quite interesting work. I always liked it. So I...

MS Great. Thank you.

PS Is that good enough?

MS Paul can I also get your picture too?

PS Oh sure. I know you're good at that 'cause you took one before.

Second recording (comes in the middle of a story)

PS And the enforcement guys said, "Alright, we caught you red handed." They had a bag of meats. So he's talkin' to the guy and he's writin' it all down. All of the sudden we hear BEEP. Car goes by. It's this Breezy in this big Lincoln. He's got T. Evertson [?] in the car, he's gone! [laughs] Oh man, these guys were crazy. You'd get there at night. You always unloaded at night. You'd get down there and everybody's talkin' "What a nice guy, he gave me a couple of lobsters" That's 'cause we used to measure lobsters too you know. He's down there and the guy says, "How about a lobster?" it's Doggie. He says, "Well take one from over there." And I was wondering, why was it always over there? Well the basket come up, took it off the top of the basket, Doggie didn't pay for it. He got it from the boat, he gave it to the guy. [laughs]. Nobody realized that, "take one over there". What a nice guy Doggie is. "Give me a lobster!" [laughs] It's just one of the crazy ones you hear about. It was always a laugh though. Like the auction you'd never, you never experienced the auction here did you? That was really something I thought. You'd go in that little room there. You couldn't move. And they'd have, finally they put up a bar and they put up a panel. But there was anything from the banker to a lawyer to a lumper to a government worker and all the fish buyers and everything. All in one building. And everybody said, what's he doin' here? Well guy from the bank, Spider Gomes was the signatory. He used to be there to help 'em finance boats. So if a guy wants to buy a boat and stuff like that. Then the lawyer, he might be part owner of a boat, so he was there. And all the, Jimmy must have told you about all the nicknames that we have.

MS Yeah somebody here went through a list of them yesterday.

PS Yeah well that's what, him and I made that up.

MS Oh, is that you?

PS Yeah I revise it every couple years. We started way back. Where is it? I always put it in the upper left hand corner, revised when somebody else will tell me. And every one of these, you know, is true to their character. Big Eared Mike. There were, One Eyed Lars, Hard to Port Leo [laughs]

MS Those are great.

PS Yeah.

MS Did you give a copy of this to Laura?

PS No I don't think we ever did. I don't know if Jimmy did or not, but.

MS Oh yeah. If you ever get another copy, then I'm sure she'd love to have one.

PS Well you can give it to her.

MS Alright.

PS That's an extra one.

MS This is an extra?

PS Yeah.

MS Great. Well thanks.

PS And your welcome.