

Fishtales
Sunday, September 30, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Also in attendance - James Dwyer, Jr
Interviewee – Jim Tomasia

MS About the industry and it's to let people on the other side of the street hear a little bit more about

JT Right.

MS What it's like.

JT Ok yeah.

MS SO they will put, occasionally they'll take groups of stories if there are humorous stories they'll group 'em and do a radio broadcast

JT Yeah

MS You know places like, so they broadcast them and they put them on the web. On this site here they actually have thousands of recorded fisherman's stories. So its a slice of life sort of thing

JD About your lumpin career

JT Yeah. Oh how I got into it. Yeah

MS So what I'll do is I'll start off and I'll ask you a couple of questions and then you can, is there a particular story or

Yeah I mean I just, yeah. Alright

MS So what is your name?

JT Jim Tomasia

MS Are you from New Bedford?

JT Yes I am. I was actually born in the Azores though. Yeah. I came here when I was six years old.

MS Were your parents in fishing?

JT No they weren't. My father was actually a, he was a maintenance man for the mill, right down here the south end it's been awhile there, do you remember Jim?

JD Berkshire Hathaway?

JT Berkshire Hathaway, yeah. He retired from there. He was a textile, he was a maintenance man there. Yup.

MS And how did you get into the industry?

JT Well, actually I quit school. That was one of the things and I, my first occupation was, I actually tried fish cutting. And then I didn't do too well because I was there for a while and I was cuttin' more fingers than fish. [laughs] So I didn't last too long there anyway. But it was a good experience. And I already got an idea what it was about. But what happens is, I did a few things, I did carpentry, and I got some knowledge in that. I worked for my brother in law. I did time. And then what happened was, like I said, I quit school early, actually 9th grade and it wasn't for me. I knew that and, school wasn't for me, so my dad always made it clear that if you don't stay in school, you got to work and that's when I started lookin' for work. But anyway, a friend of mine was comin' down here, his name was Danny Silvia, and he's a colorful character, but anyway, he brought me down here and it was pretty interesting, but the first day that I got here he, some reason they had had a scuffle and he actually had a fight in front of me before the first day I came here. But it was a thing that, from time to time, the people down here, they alot of times when they voiced their opinion, they get pretty excited and sometimes it comes to blows and you know that's how it is. But anyway, I was wonderin' if I should, if I was gonna like this seein' that these problems come before me. But anyway, after getting to the job, I had a few jobs swinging baskets and stuff like that and it seemed like a good fit for me because I liked the freedom of it. You came down here and things were very busy then. We worked pretty much every day. You worked hard, but it was satisfying and the people over all are good. I mean it just, I think people look at the waterfront and a lot of people look down on a lot of these people, but they're just other people tryin' to make a livin' like the next person. But anyway, it seemed like a good fit for me and I stood with it. And I've been into it probably 35 years. And it's been a good go. I got no complaints about it. I brought up, I got three boys, they're men now and my wife, and it's been a good run for me. I have no regrets. If I had to do it again, I would. So that's pretty much how I got into it.

MS Has it changed a lot since the first job?

JT Oh drastically yeah. Years ago, people have no idea, you had boats, you probably had maybe on an average 500 or a thousand pounds of fish per day takin' out on a regular basis. And you probably don't even see that in a week now. I mean that was just, it was a constant movement because you had people on the dock, you had more men per boat just the movement was incredible. It's been a great, big difference. You know you could see the decline as years came down. The biggest decline started comin' down was in the 90s

early '90s. They started feelin' the pinch and things started goin' further and further down as you know the catch is.

MS Can you, most people have no idea what a lumper is or what they do. Can you explain what your job is?

JT Yeah, well it covers a variety of jobs. A lumper is, well a lot of people relate lumping to stevedoring which is the big ships. But a fish lumper is different. What we do is more hands on. We have a variety of jobs. We actually work the hold with pitch forks and we fork fish in to the baskets. It's how we fill 'em. and then the one of the jobs is working down the hold, you usually have a few men there fillin' the baskets, the other job is swingin' the baskets and the other one's dumpin' and they also have the winch job which also lumpers do. So it covers a variety of three or four different techniques to the job.

MS And a typical vessel in the big days of fishing, what kind of poundage would a typical vessel come in carrying?

JT I would say on the average you would have a range from maybe 38,000 to a hundred thousand. And that was common. It was a constant go. You worked hard but it was rewarding. It was a physical job but it's I guess I was made for it. And all the people down there, they all seemed to like it. Good people, just everybody makin' a livin'.

MS How long would it take to unload a hundred thousand?

JT Well in those days, it were different. They had what they called double tackles. So you would actually have two baskets comin' out of the fish hold at the same time. And if the fish hold wasn't big enough they would alternate the baskets. And then you would have two shoots instead of one. So probably a hundred thousand in those days it would take you I'd say anyways, six hours, six to seven hours. Where if today if you were to take out like a hundred thousand, it'd probably take you like nine hours, nine, ten hours because in those days, they were set up for it. It was commonplace.

MS And did the crew ever help with that? Or when a vessel came in it was ...

JT Well in those days, they pretty much just hired a whole crew, all the lumpers. I think at one time we had over a hundred, a hundred lumpers, fish lumpers. And so it was pretty busy. They worked hard, the fishermen work hard. So when they came in, they pretty much just worked on gear and they let, they hired the fish lumpers. It was pretty common. There was always plenty of work for the guys.

MS And were the group of lumpers for the boat hired by the boat or by a fish house or...

JT Well in most cases they had what they call "a boss lumper" you had a person designated by the skippers that they would give 'em the responsibility of hiring automatically when they came in so the skipper says "I need so many men." And the boss lumper, give it to the boss lumper and the boss lumper would hire for the boat as a whole.

MS And that was taken out of the boat settlement?

JT Yes, yes. Yeah. Overall, I believe it came off the top settlement of the boat, the overall expenses.

MS And what were some of the hazards in lumping?

JT Well if you weren't payin' attention sometimes you'd get hit in the head with a basket, it would split your head. Some guys would get stitches. If you weren't careful, if the basket hooked your hand or somethin' like that, sometimes you'd have the thing would fall in the hold. And I'm pretty sure, I never heard of anything happen, not lumpers anyway, I've heard of fishermen fallin' in the hold like that. But I don't remember recallin' any lumpers actually fallin' in the hold.

[inaudible chatter]

JT There was a lumper that years ago they had the wrap around, what they call, it was, it's a big winch and they call it wrap around because they put the rope and you'd put a few turns on it and as you pulled it up, that's how the basket came up. And a few guys lost their fingers on that, yeah I've heard that. And fishermen, a few of them lost legs and limbs and stuff. That was just the times. Nowadays, everything's hydraulics. The safety's a big difference from those times of course because technology improved and whatever. But there was a lot of dangers, yeah. And then the ideas, every now and then the rope would chafe and it would wear out so every now and then the basket would fall. A couple lumpers got hit with the baskets and as a matter of fact, one guy broke a collar bone and it put him out of commission. From time to time you had a few. Overall, I thought that maybe considering, overall it didn't happen as often as I thought, considerin' all the people that worked at the job and stuff. But it was dangers, yeah. It's awkward, but I had an incident where I could have become a vegetable. I remember walkin' across, I was in the hold and I was walkin' across and then as I turned around I was walkin' the other way and I had a big block, probably about 40 pounds, the basket had hooked it and it came, and it came unhooked and it came down the hold. And it just missed me. If that hit me it would have been it. But you know those are incidents, a lot of close calls, put it this way. But then there's a lot of guys that got seriously hurt.

MS Now do you have family at all?

JT Yes, yes I have, my boys are grown up. I have three boys. They're men now.

MS Any of them go into fishing at all or into the fishing industry?

JT I've had my sons come down lumpin' but they didn't stay. They experienced...one of my sons he tried even fishing, on a day boat. He didn't go very far, but he himself liked the experience, but he went on to do somethin' else. Not only that, but the work isn't as it was before. And the thing is, it takes a certain kind of person. Because if you're down

here, you have to be committed to the job for the fact is that the boats come in at night now. They come in in the afternoon. So to do this part time, it's kind of tough. You either have to be committed or not bother at all. And every now and then I guess there's some guys that have other jobs and come down, but overall it just so sporadic that it's not, for a man tryin' to make a living and bring up their family, its really wise. The only reason I'm down here is I'm like at the end of my career so to speak and I don't have the demands on my life as a young man would at this point. So and I still like the job and I still like the freedom so yeah I'm still doin' it and thank God I'm still fairly healthy to do it, to do the job. So that's why I'm still here.

MS Well that's great. Thanks.

JT Ok.