

Fishtales, Saturday, September 28, 2013
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Alan Wheeler

MS Ok so even though I know who you are I'm gonna ask who you are. Ok so, who are you and where are you from?

AW I'm Alan Wheeler, Sakonnet Point, Rhode Island

MS And you're in fishing?

AW Oh yeah. Yup, yup. 50 odd years so far.

MS And what type of fishing do you do?

AS I've done most of the fisheries, you know like lobster, a little quahogging, but predominantly now I, floating fish traps

MS Ok and you had a story you were gonna tell

AS Oh, years ago when I first started out, you know I didn't have any money and all that stuff so my boat didn't have, it didn't have radar. I mean there was radar at the time, but that was one of my last priorities. And you know we'd go, you know we had gill nets at the time and as a gillnetter you wanna get to the gear every day and we had, we were down on Cock's Ledge sou'west side of Cock's Ledge and it was thick, it was thick fog. So I've got, you know we're going at a reduced rate to find the gear and we were just comin' up on a flag and I had plenty of, you know a bow watch of course and all of a sudden the sound of 10,000 trailer truck horns permeated the air. And I looked at my deckhands and they were, you know I basically put the boat in reverse and just didn't move we were fine there. And naturally you know basically this big steamer, freighter, tanker, whatever it was, basically came into view and was going out of view at the same time. And it was, it was, it was good. And I looked around and I said, there was, one of my deckhands was Gary Fish, I said, "Where the hell's Gary?" I walked out on deck, I looked up and he's, he's uh, I had a raft that wasn't inflatable, it was a solid raft, he was sittin' in the raft with a knife gettin' ready to cut the thing loose [laughs] Anyways I called my friend from Chris Electronics and I said to him, I said, "No big thing, we had our radar day, you know. But when you get a chance you probably ought to come over and put a radar in this boat kind of make things a little safer.

MS So one other story. Would you tell the one about George Mendoza and your father?

AS [laughs] Well I bought Tollman and Mack with a couple of partners. It's a floating fish trap company from George Mendoza. And George Mendoza's a famous, for a lot of reasons. I think his most notable for the Life Magazine, Eisenstaedt's Life Magazine

photo of the sailor kissing the nurse at the end of World War II. But my dad was in the fish business and this was when George was out of Newport before we bought the trap company from him. And he asked my dad if they were just gonna go out to the traps and back in and it was in April, cold water. And George, they went out in the steamer, the name of the boat was the Chester B. Tom that they had at the time and I was probably eight or ten years old maybe. But anyways, the George, they were goin' out to the traps and the boat took a roll and the latch came off the door and my dad went overboard. And George, I heard this story a bunch of times, George got in a skiff and sculled my dad. The only thing that he was worried about that he was gonna break the oar by the time he got to him. He was a big man. And my father said that he said, the last work boat, the third work boat went over his head and he just missed the strap hanging overboard and he figured that that was it. And George basically picked him up and by the scruff of the neck and set him in the boat and George always likes to tell the story. Like I said I was born a the time. George always likes to tell the story, "Wheeler, if I had known your old man was gonna go home and spawn you, I'da never saved his life!"

MS [laughs] That's a good one

AS [laughs] and true.

MS Well great, well thank you very much.

AS A pleasure. I'm glad you remembered.