



NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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GEORGE MENDONSA

THE FISHING INDUSTRY IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND, 1930-1987

INTRODUCTION

The Fishing Industry in Newport, Rhode Island, 1930-1987, an oral history project, was implemented under the auspices of the Newport Historical Society and the University of Rhode Island Sea Grant Program.

Through question and answer format, the tape-recorded transcribed interviews document the fishing industry from the point of view of its complex traditions and changes. They provide a body of unedited primary source material focusing on priority issues of local concern and those beyond the geographic area under study.

Interviews were conducted by Jennifer Murray of the Newport Historical Society and were transcribed at the Center for Oral History, University of Connecticut. Narrators include representatives of the floating fish trap industry, the inshore and offshore lobster industries, the inshore and offshore dragger industries, the swordfish industry, the wholesale and marketing sector, and fisheries conservation and management.

Oral history enables us to learn about our heritage from those who usually don't write about it. It supplies what's often only hinted at in written historical documents. Readers and researchers using these oral history memoirs should bear in mind that they are transcripts of the spoken word and that the narrator, interviewer, and transcriber sought to preserve the spontaneity and informality inherent in such historical sources. The Newport Historical Society and the University of Rhode Island are not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoirs nor for the views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

Copies of tapes and transcripts are available for research at the Newport Historical Society. Copies of transcripts are also accessible at the library of the University of Rhode Island, Narragansett Bay. As stated in the release form which accompanies each transcript, the memoirs are to be used for scholarly and educational purposes only.

GEORGE MENDONSA

George Mendonsa was born in Newport, R.I. in 1923. His father came to Newport from Madeira, Portugal in 1910 and supported his family by working as a trap fisherman. He passed on his knowledge and pride in his work to his son, George, who has worked in the floating fish trap industry in Rhode Island waters for his entire life.

George Mendonsa's manuscript is an important document of the floating fish trap industry in Newport, R.I. from the 1940's to the present. It provides a detailed description of the work of fishing in this unique industry, technological changes the industry has undergone, the way of life experienced by those involved in it, and the important and far-reaching problems it faces.

Interview with George Mendonsa for the Newport Historical Society's Oral History of the Fishing Industry in Newport, R. I., conducted by Jennifer Murray on January 30, 1987.

MURRAY: Is it all right with you if I tape this interview?

MENDONSA: Yes.

JM: The best place to start is with, where were you born?

GM: I was born in Newport on Dearborn Street, 1923.

JM: I wasn't going to ask you that, [chuckle] but since you volunteered . . .

GM: Well, I guess [for] this interview I got to make myself old or otherwise it doesn't have much value.

JM: No, not necessarily. How about your parents? What are their names?

GM: My father, his name was Arsenio, and my mother was Maria Mendonsa. They came from Madeira.

JM: Both of them?

GM: They were married over there. As a matter of fact, my oldest brother and oldest sister were born there. Then there were four of us born afterwards when they came to this country. My father came in 1910 and he started fishing at Price's Neck -- trap fishing. My mother stayed over there with my oldest sister. Then my brother was born shortly afterwards. So my father wasn't there when my brother was born.

In those years, it was kind of tough making a living and when he came across here, he used to send my mother money with the intent of going back there. My mother was buying up a lot of property there. Every year my father would say, "I'll work one more year here, then I'll come back." This went on for ten years. Finally my mother says, "The hell with you, Jack, you're not coming back -- I'm coming over." So they come over somewhere around 1920 and my oldest brother was ten years old before my father had ever seen him. So anyway, he was fishing at Price's Neck -- trap fishing -- and my mother went down there as the cook. She made \$20 a month. That was her pay.

JM: Why did they come to Newport?

GM: My mother had a brother that was fishing here.

JM: What was his name?

GM: Joe. That's all I know. As a matter of fact, he's the only commercial [fisherman], only trap fisherman that I ever heard of that drowned.

JM: Really?

GM: Yes, in the trap fishing business here in Newport. That was way before my time. He was fishing at night for conger eels, which had nothing to do with the trap fishing, and he

didn't come back to the fish house that night. My father went looking for him and the way my father tells it, he saw the body on the bottom and he reached down with a boat hook and stuck the boat hook in his neck and pulled him up. But anyway, while my mother was the cook there, the trap fishing was seasonal from April to November. My brother Manuel was the first one born in this country -- he was born down there in the fish house. Dr. Easton, a millionaire from New York, had a summer home at Price's Neck. They went and got Dr. Easton, and he came out in a rowboat with Helen MacLeish. Did you ever hear of Helen MacLeish? She was a social worker.

JM: Yes.

GM: Well, Helen MacLeish was the nurse that come out to the island to deliver my older brother. Then I had another younger brother that was born after me, that was born on that island also. So I believe that there's been nobody that was born on land any further south than my two brothers in Newport -- else they'd have to be [laughs] born on a boat. I would've been born there myself but I was a winter baby. In the wintertime, there was no fishing -- we moved into town.

JM: You were lucky.

GM: Yes. [chuckle]. My father fished down there all of his life. I was around those boats and so was my brothers when we were kids and we swam that whole length of that Ocean Drive. We had a great life down there. We didn't know it then. We lived right there with the millionaires. Then as we grew up, the war come along. Two of us, Manuel and I, wound up in the Navy. Then when the war ended, Tallman and Mack was for sale. As a matter of fact, it was for sale even before I even got out of the Navy. But my brother Manuel was here, my other two brothers were here, and my father, and when Tallman and Mack was up for sale, they started talking with Tallman and J.T. O'Connell. Tallman had 50% of the company, J. T. had 25% and there was a widow in New York -- I can't remember her name -- she had the other 25%. J. T. O'Connell didn't want to sell all of his -- he wanted to stay in there. I guess J. T. never sold anything in his life. And even if we'd leave him with one share of a stock, he wanted it. But we didn't want it that way -- we wanted to be clear of the previous owners. For years all the trap companies had a problem financially. Year in and year out, between J.

T. and Cliff Tallman, they had to sign a lot of notes and borrow a lot of money to keep the company afloat. Of course, during the war years, they did make money. One of the reasons that they did make money was that the offshore fishing was restricted. One of the problems during the war was that the German U-Boats that were operating off this coast used to go alongside the American fishermen and take their diesel fuel and their provisions. So trap fishing, which is considered an inshore fishery, had more or less the whole fishing to themselves and that's how they made money. So when the war ended, Cliff Tallman -- I guess they got together and felt that there was going to be hard times again -- and that's why they sold the company.

JM: Before we talk about that period and the war and all the things that happened after the war, how many brothers and sisters?

GM: There were six of us. Two girls and four boys.

JM: What about religion? Was there a particular church that you went to?

GM: Oh yes. My father was a very strict Catholic. And, of course, Jesus Savior was the church. As a matter of fact, he dragged us up there about three times a week.

JM: How did you get there?

GM: I think around 1930, he had his first car. At that point, I'd be about seven years old. In the old country, he was an altar boy over there. I can remember my father going to Jesus Savior and sitting there, and the altar boys didn't show up for some reason or other, and Father Gomes, he'd come out and start saying the Mass alone. Well doesn't my father walk right, march right up through the middle there and play altar boy. Of course, he drowned out Father Gomes with his Latin. I felt like crawling under the pew. [laughs] He was a very strict Catholic. As a matter of fact, I never met my grandmother or grandfather or aunts or uncles in my whole life, but in the old country, we had a lot of cousins that were nuns. There were a couple of them that were sent to Africa -- you know, the Portugese colonies. I can remember every time we had a good fishing season -- my father knew when we were doing good -- he'd always put the touch to us to send money over there to the nuns. I can remember one time, one of the nuns had written to him and said that the transportation was tough, so the old man come to my three brothers and myself and he says, "You guys can send over

some bicycles -- they want bicycles." So we had to ship over some bicycles. After they got the bicycles, they thought motor scooters would be better [laughs]. The old man always put the touch to us and we couldn't lie to him because he knew what was going on, so we had to ship over motor scooters [laughs]. He'd always try to get us to communicate with them, but we couldn't write in Portugese. They'd write to us and the old man would write to them. He was trying to get us close to our relatives over there -- we knew none of them. But the last one we got over there, one of the nuns, wrote to the old man and said that they were going to fly her back to Portugal for surgery, that she wasn't healthy. So the old man says to my brothers and I, "You're going to send them money for the plane fare and for the surgery." The last we heard, she never did go [to] the surgery [laughs]. I think they were conniving the old man at this point. But the old man, he was a very religious man.

JM: Did your parents speak Portugese at home?

GM: Oh yes. My father was pretty sharp. He had about four years of school over there and he picked up reading and writing and English on his own. But my mother, like most women in

those years . . . They didn't have any education at all over there in those foreign countries. So when she came, she mixed right in with the fishing crew that were all Portugese. The neighborhoods that we lived in in the wintertime was all Portugese women. Like Holland Street and that area, they were all in there. My mother, even until the day she died, couldn't speak a word of English. I could speak Portugese with the best of them.

JM: How about school? Did you go to school in that neighborhood?

GM: Yes, I went to Carey school, then from Carey, I went to John Clark and then up to Rogers. In my junior year, I had a little problem with the football coach, so I quit school, quit the whole works. I come home that day, and we're sitting at the supper table and I says to the old man, "I quit school." He says, "Put your boots and foul weather gear in the car. I'll call you in the morning." [laughs]

JM: You knew you had that to go to.

GM: Oh, I knew that's where I was going to wind up.

JM: How old were you on your first fishing trip with your father, and when did you start work?

GM: I was seven, eight, nine years old. My whole summer vacation was spent there working. I

mean working. I know it's hard to say seven, eight years old, but John F. Mack owned that fish company down at Price's Neck and I used to do a lot of fishing around the rocks there. I used to catch fish and sell fish.

JM: What did you catch?

GM: Black fish, conger eels, and that kind of stuff. I used to sell to the fish peddlers that came down to Johnny Mack's to buy fish. But whenever the old man needed help to do some extra work or something, I can remember being about ten years old, and he'd say, "I need you tomorrow morning." I was a big kid, and I was born and raised right there on the water. We were like water rats. I can remember when those fishing boats were anchored in that cove there -- Price's Neck. During the hurricane season -- September and October -- it was real nasty in there. There was lots of nights we'd be in town and the old man would wake me up and say, "Let's go, we got to go down and get those boats out of there." Of course, the crew would be sleeping on the island. I couldn't have been no more than twelve, thirteen years old. Him and I would go down at night, get in the rowboat and row out to the fishing boats that were all anchored there in the little harbor.

I'd go aboard the power boat, get the engine running, and the old man would be running around the moorings, getting all the little fishing boats to tie behind me. Then we'd come running away up in Price's Neck away up in the lee of the land, way up in the cove and anchor the boats up in there. I was no more than twelve, thirteen years old.

JM: Talk about an education . . . Where did your father learn from?

GM: In the old country he wasn't a fisherman.

JM: He wasn't?

GM: No, but he was fishing about two years and after about two years, he was the captain for the fishery.

JM: Smart man.

GM: Yes, he took right to it. And anybody that's raised around fishing like my brothers and I were, there's no place else they're going to go. No place. You get addicted. You're hooked on fishing.

My oldest sister came from the old country when she was about twelve and went down to the island there. My oldest brother was ten and she was around twelve and my mother was cooking on the island. They had to walk from Price's Neck to Carey school everyday to go to school.

JM: That's a long walk. How many miles is that?

GM: It's got to be close to three miles each way.
So they made that walk. . .

JM: What kind of food did your mother cook there?

GM: Chourico [laughs]. They ate a lot of fish --
Portugese do anyway, and regular Portugese
soups, kale, that kind of stuff.

JM: That's wonderful. Good food.

GM: Oh yes.

JM: Now who were the crew that were living there?
Do you remember any of those?

GM: Yes, there is a picture here. I can name these
guys. Of course, they're all Portugese.
(Shows the picture.) This fellow here, named
Frank, came from Pawtucket. He got away from
fishing and he wound up in jail because he was
making moonshine [laughs] off in Pawtucket.
This fellow here -- his name was John. This
fellow here, his father came from Madeira
Island where my father came from.

JM: Did they know each other?

GM: Oh yes. He was from New Bedford. And this
tall fellow, of course, was my brother. This
guy on the right was Manuel Santos. He was
from Fall River. The fellow in the middle was
my father's cousin. His name was Baretto. He
has a couple of sons in the area here. This

place here used to belong to -- Davis was the name of the people who lived in this estate. They were related to Cook Borden from Fall River. Goose Neck is the name of that land.

JM: Weren't there some people who came down from Nova Scotia? Was that before that --

GM: No, it was about that same time. Like Tallman and Mack and the Sakonnet River Fish Company and the Coggeshall Brothers, there was quite a few fellows that came from Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. They were aliens when they come into this country to go fishing. They'd fish eight months. The fish companies had to put up a bond with the federal government so that if these fellows didn't return at the end of the fishing season, the government would forfeit the bond. I guess up there, too, there was a lot of hard times and those guys were glad to come here to work. I worked with quite of few of them myself.

JM: Did they speak French or English?

GM: They spoke English, but I guess most of them could speak French.

JM: Would they be mostly family men who would leave their families and come live here?

GM: Yes, I guess some of them were. Towards the end, eventually a few of them did stay here in

this country. They probably finally got some kind of a legal entry into the country. But a way back say in the 1920's, darn near a 100% of them would return back to Newfoundland. One of the fellows' names was Martin Baker and he was the captain of one of the boats for Tallman and Mack. I remember Martin well. And there was twin brothers, the Landry brothers, that used to come down.

JM: Wasn't there some trouble with Martin Baker? Trouble with the government because he was here?

GM: I'd say somewhere around '35, they were not allowed to come through anymore. I think the federal government put a stop to it.

JM: Why was that?

GM: Probably it was hard times here, and they felt that -- put the American people to work rather than the foreigners. That's the only thing I can see. When they came from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, they were commercial fisherman. They would be better than getting someone off the street here.

JM: What did the house look like inside on the island? What is the name of the island?

GM: We used to call it "Portugee" Island. The house was about the size of this room. It had

a partition and there was two bedrooms. Then the middle section was the kitchen. That was everything -- the kitchen, the living room (if you want to call it that), and then down the other end of it, there was a partition across and that was the crew's room. It was nothing but wood. It was nothing fancy. There was no electricity. There was kerosene lamps. Just about before my time, they used to get the water up there in barrels -- they had these big wooden wine barrels. The Price's Neck Coast Guard Station was right there. My brother and the crew used to go over and fill the barrels with water and roll them down the shore into the water, then they towed them with a skiff across to the island, and they rolled the barrels up the rocks. That's how they got water there at first. It had to be somewhere around 1935 that they put a pipe under the water out there to the island.

JM: Who did that?

GM: My oldest brother. He was probably the one, the big engineer on that project. The pipe was convenient, but every few months with the heavy seas, that would break in half and snap and they would have to go out there and start repairing it. That was a big convenience when

they got the water pipe across.

JM: Yes, I'll bet. How did you get food out there?

GM: The food was from Santo's Market up on West Broadway or one of them streets. He was another Portugese, so the Portugese had to deal with the Portugese. I can remember Santos used to deliver the food to Price's Neck with a small van-truck. If the crew was out fishing, my mother used to go across in the skiff and get the provisions.

JM: By herself?

GM: After a while, I was about 4 years old and my other brother was about six. At that point, my mother used to put us both in the skiff and push us off the island. Imagine that, four years old and six, one on each oar and row across and get the stuff. I know I wouldn't do that with my kids [laughs]. Maybe my mother was trying to lose us. [Laughs]

JM: She was so overwhelmed with everything [laughs].

GM: My mother, I can remember, was a big woman. And she would go over and get the provisions, and of course, she made all the bread and stuff. The flour came in hundred pound bags -- you know them big things -- and the sugar. I can remember her picking up those big bags of

flour and carrying them right down the beach while I used to hold the skiff for her. Strong woman.

JM: I'll say, in more ways than that probably.

GM: As a matter of fact, the '38 hurricane, my godmother --

JM: Were you out there then?

GM: No, my father was still fishing there, and my mother was cooking there that summer. My godmother had just come back from Madeira. Her husband, my godfather, was fishing with my father. She had gone back to the old country. She was back there a few years, and then they came back across in '38 with three or four kids that were American born. When they came back, my mother quit cooking for the crew and my godmother took the job. That day of the '38 hurricane, the fisherman -- my father and the crew -- took all the small fishing boats, and they took them away up inside the cove.

JM: Had the hurricane started?

GM: Yes, it started. But they were not aware that it was a hurricane. There never was any publicity previous to this about hurricanes. It was just like fall storms. So anyway, they moved all the boats away up in where they'd be safe. By the time they got the boats up in

there secured and they walked out to Price's Neck, it was almost full-force hurricane. And, of course, the cook, my godmother, was still on the island. My father and Louis Gaspar, (he's still around town today) got in the skiff and they rowed to the island, which was only a short distance. It was probably from here to the other side of Thames Street. I guess it took them about an hour to get that far. When they got to the island, the sea broke and threw them and the skiff and all on top of the island, sunk it and everything else. So my father says, "We're going to stay here. We can't get off this island, we're going to stay here." So Louis Gaspar says, "Like hell we are, we're getting off." So they got the cook, and they put her in a skiff. My father and Louis were coming back with the wind, so it was only a matter of a few seconds that the wind threw them up on the beach up on the other side.

JM: She must have been pretty scared.

GM: Oh yes. So the next day, the island was completely wiped off. My father had four pigs on the island, and the next day the four pigs were over on the shore. Three of them were still alive. They were laying under a bush.

Of course, they were all beat up and scarred and bleeding here and there, but they made it off the island, the three pigs. [Laughs.]

JM: They're pretty smart animals, I guess. You must have been glad to see them. Did the house get blown over?

GM: Oh yes, everything got busted up. Right there at Price's Neck was where the Coast Guard Station used to be. They moved it to Castle Hill after that. The Coast Guard station got wiped out. As a matter of fact, the Coast Guard boat broke loose. They had it up on a railway, hauled up out of the water near the boathouse. The hurricane blew away the boathouse, and the boat drifted away up into . . . you know where Green Bridge is? Well the Coast Guard boat travelled across the Ocean Drive, over the road and wound up way in back in Green Bridge where they're building those new houses. That was a tough storm.

JM: Pretty wild storm. Where were you?

GM: I was in Rogers High School.

JM: School had started, so you were back in Newport.

GM: The next day there was no school and I was down there with my father and we're looking at the damage -- out there was a mess. Where Freddy

Alofsin lives, just to the west of him a little bit, we found the body of one of the governesses from one of the rich estates. The estate was Dr. Easton's on Price's Neck. There was a governess in there with a baby. The Army from Fort Adams got the word that this woman was in trouble there with this baby and some soldier went out there. He went out to the road somehow and I guess he put a rope around a telephone pole. I can still see the pole there. With the rope, he got himself back into the house and he was coming out of the house with the baby and the governess. The sea was breaking, and he was having problems. Well, he lost the woman, but he saved the baby. The next day, we did find the governess' body over where Freddy Alofsin lives, right near Mike Bove's house. Just to the west of Mike, is where we found the governess' body. That was a tough one.

JM: Oh yes, it was a terrible storm. How about the Fall River line, did you sell fish to them?

GM: They did, but that was a little bit before my time. All I can remember about that is that I remember the Fall River line coming in here. But I really can't remember them putting fish on it. The fish companies in those years,

they'd have to get all their fish all packed and then when the Fall River line come in, they'd all run up there with their trucks and put the fish on. I guess that was the only thing available. Even after the war, when we would ship fish to New York, we had to load it on trucks here. The train would come in from Boston to Providence and the trucks would put all the fish on the train. Then it would run down into New York, and there would be trucks in New York taking it off the train, taking it into the Fulton Market. You had to pay railway freight for the fish, you had to pay trucking on this end, trucking on the other end where the fish was handled, like three, four times before it got to its destination. So then trucking starts getting bigger, and then they'd come right down to our place and put the fish on the truck, and then make one straight run to the destination. Trucking is what really killed the railroads. Everyone today is trying to save the railroads, but that railroad was a problem. Anything you shipped by rail had to be handled too many times. And of course, the fish boxes were delicate.

JM: What were they made of?

GM: They were made of wood. Still the same type

box today, but if you handle them too many times, they break, and then you have fish hanging around the floor.

JM: So something that starts off in good shape --

GM: Yes, by the time it gets to the original destination, if it's handled too many times, it's busted up.

JM: Before the war, before you left, you were in the Navy, weren't you?

GM: Yes.

JM: About how many trap companies were there in this area?

GM: In Newport, there was the Coggeshall Brothers. They went bankrupt in the early '30's.

JM: They did? How come?

GM: There was no price for fish.

JM: Because of the Depression?

GM: Yes. Well, even before then, and even after, for years after the Depression, I still say there wasn't much of a price.

JM: Why not?

GM: I don't know. [Laughs] Then there was the Sakonnet River Trap Company, there was Coggeshall Brothers, there was Tallman and Mack, there was John F. Mack -- that would be about four -- the big trap companies. Then down on Sakonnet Point, there was a couple of

them. There was Holder Wilcox and Point Trap Company. Then during my high school years, there was a few of these small traps up in the Bay which was maybe a two-man operation. But they died out quick too. They didn't survive very long. One of the problems that hurt all these fish companies in those years -- the netting was made out of cotton and the rope was all manilla.

[End of side one, tape one]

GM: A cotton net would fish about twenty-five weeks, in the water, and you'd have to put about one-third into it of new material. This was a big job. These nets were enormous. They were big nets. So you put one-third back into a net after twenty-five weeks and then it would probably have a life-time of a total of about forty-five weeks, and then you had to throw it away. At that time, with the cotton nets, Tallman and Mack used to spend somewhere around \$35,000 a year on new nets, which was a bundle of money in those years.

JM: Who made the nets?

GM: We did -- my father and my brothers. Making a fish net, you'd order yards of material. The material was all woven on a loom. You'd give the twine people the specifications, the size

mesh, the thickness of the twine, the number meshes in the length and depth and they would send you whatever you ordered. Then you'd cut this up and taper it and make a net out of it. It would take three, four men three to four weeks -- good men -- to make a net complete.

JM: Your father taught you how to do this?

GM: Yes.

JM: And how did he learn?

GM: He picked it up like I did, I guess. Every year we'd order about \$35,000 worth of nets. Then after the war, when the synthetics come along -- now, I haven't ordered a fish net in about twenty years out of nylon. I never kept a record of it, but I would say that we got nylon nets today that have fished probably two, three hundred weeks of fishing and they're just as strong as the first day we used them. So now you're comparing nylon, say two to three hundred weeks of actual fishing time, against a cotton net that would only survive let's say forty-five weeks after you put about a third back into it. Well, in those years, if we spent say \$35,000 on new material every year, if I went to order that same material today, I'd be ordering over \$150,000 a year. Actually, what we're spending now every year is

about \$5,000 a year. That shows you what the synthetics have done to the industry. This is what hurt lot of those fish companies. The cotton was the only thing available. Every year these companies had enormous twine bills for what they grossed in those years, and that's what really hurt them.

JM: And if it's a bad year --

GM: Yes, and then, of course, fish -- you get three, four cents a pound, and by the time you paid for a box -- a box in those years was eighty, ninety cents, and then you pay trucking. So you send in box of fish to New York, it would cost you about two cents a pound. Then if the fish is selling for four, five cents, and you had to pay your men and the rest of your operation out of two cents, it was tough. It's unbelievable, what prices you get for fish today.

JM: Did the fish trap wars hurt them?

GM: Yes, what happened out here, these fish trap locations, there's a few of them that are a little better than others. Today it's all controlled. Every area that I put a fish trap in, I have a license from the state of Rhode Island that only I am allowed in that location. The other companies have licenses for where

they put their nets. I can't go bothering them. But in those years, I guess these trapping companies, especially the big ones, like the Coggeshalls and the George Lewis', that's where the trouble was. I don't think the state issued licenses in those years. So if one company (say way back) went out there and he had a good year, the competition would be aware of what he was doing. So the following year, I guess some of these guys would try to beat them to that location -- get a net in there first. Well, in a way that's not right, because every net is made for a location. You can't just take a net and put it say over near Ledge Road or put it down Narragansett. Every net is made for the depth of the water that it is going to be used in. So you take a company that explores a little bit, and finds a good spot and makes his net for that spot, well that's the only place that you can really use it. And then, the following year, if someone tried to beat him in there, it wasn't fair. After all, the guy did develop the area, and rigged for it. When they started fighting with one another, the word was that the Coggeshall's put a big sickle on the bottom of their boat, and they just run right through

everybody, cutting the nets all to pieces. That hurt. They could not afford that kind of problem.

JM: It sounds like it was all worth fighting over though.

GM: In those years, I guess, the only law enforcement was state police. From what I hear, the state police were out there one day, and they went aboard the Coggeshall's boat, and tried to make an arrest. I guess Lester Coggeshall threw the state trooper down the hold of the boat. I guess he damn near killed him. [Laughs.] I guess they meant business.

JM: Did you know them?

GM: Oh yes, I knew the Coggeshalls. I knew George Lewis, Cliff Tallman. Yes, I knew them all.

JM: This might be a good time to talk about the seasonal basis of the fish trap industry -- what you catch and caught, and what time of year.

GM: Another point in talking about the catches, during the war years when the American fisherman had a problem fishing offshore because of the U-Boats, there was very little fishing done out there for maybe four years or five years. And I say that the volume of fish increased. It was unbelievable the amount of

fish that there was on this coast. The first ten years or so after the war, in the fall of the year, we couldn't handle the fish.

JM: So much.

GM: It was unbelievable, the amount of fish. Even the fall of the year, like codfish and mackerel, we even worked Christmas Day one year there was so much fish.

JM: And was that codfish that you were --

GM: Yes, codfish, mackerel and herring, was unbelievable.

JM: And that was because they weren't getting it offshore.

GM: I'd say that there was very little fishing done in the spawning areas, and also where the fish migrate in the winter months. The fish was left alone.

JM: Where are the spawning areas?

GM: In the spring of the year -- in late March, early April -- the fish spend the winters on the Gulf Stream where there's the warm waters. In the spring months, the fish'll come up what they call the Continental Shelf and out of the Gulf Stream and they'll swing in around the coast of the Carolinas or Virginia. Then those fish'll come up the coast -- the waters warm up quicker along the coast -- and the first

migration of fish will be right along the shore. One of the first species to come up will be the scup. They usually start showing up here around the 25th of April.

JM: So you're all set for them?

GM: Yes, we'll have our nets in the water. We'll start putting the nets in the water somewhere around the 20th of April every year.

JM: Are there frames in already?

GM: No, no we put the frames in about the 15th of April. You know a lot about traps -- frames, and nets . . .

JM: No, I don't [laughs].

GM: You've been talking to somebody. We usually get a net fishing. The frame is already there. It's always the last few days in April when the scup come. It's suprising to really understand that they're pretty close to the calendar.

JM: Are they?

GM: Yes. If conditions are normal, they're pretty close. Of course, if you get, say a cold spell or something, if it's a cold April, then the fish may be a little later. But the biggest run of fish will be in early May. The next species that will come along will be mackerel, sea bass and fluke. They usually come around the 5th or 10th of May. The fluke maybe the

15th of May. It seems as though they come right behind one another, but they seem to have their own time. Then when it gets about the end of May, trap fishing slows right down to hardly nothing. This is about the time when the fish have all migrated -- these species -- and they're usually spawning. Now scups, sea bass will migrate up here, but it seems as though none of them go beyond the Cape [Cape Cod]. They seem to stay just in this area here. As a matter of fact, I guess there's fishermen out of Boston, I doubt if they've ever seen a scup up there. We catch them here by the millions. I guess the Cape seems to be a stopping point for most migration. Of course, the mackerel will go on up the coast and striped bass will go on up the coast, and squid usually comes along there too, like late April, early May. Then afterwards, when they get through spawning, a lot of these species will stay in these inland waters here -- the bays and outside here searching for food. It's a rich area for food for the fish. Then about the middle of June, we'll start catching a few scup again. We usually set a net down Narragansett Pier. Down there you'll catch a few scup for a few weeks and a few butterfish.

Then about the middle of June, the bonitas migrate north and about the same time the bluefish come up. Then we leave Narragansett Pier, come back here off of Newport. In the course of a year, we'll probably fish in about fifteen or twenty different locations. We don't keep a net in the same spot the whole year like a lot of people think. There's certain locations that are better for scup. There's certain locations, like down the Pier, that's better for butterfish. And then over here is better for bluefish, and bonitas and sea trout. In the course of a year, through experience, we know where we're going to go. This whole coming season almost right to the week, we know where we want to have our nets.

JM: That's really something.

GM: It's all experience.

JM: The nets are set in a certain direction for each kind of fish, aren't they?

GM: Most of the nets out here usually start from a point up here to nor'west and they usually run about southeast. Most nets are set more or less at right angles to the coast. You take a place like Land's End where we set nets. You pick a point of land and put a trap out there, and the fish are coming up along the coast and

they're following the coast line. Actually, the coast line will help you catch fish. It'll head the fish to a point of land. A point of land helps you -- kind of leads the fish to you.

JM: How far offshore are the traps?

GM: We've got licenses that go out there over a couple of miles from land. Certain times of the year, like in late April, the inshore net will be the best one. After about five, six or ten days, the number two (we go by numbers) will outfish the number one. Finally, when you start getting into the middle of May, late May, the outside net will be doing the best. The migration works along the shore. Through the migration period, the outside nets will increase and the inshore nets will slack off. So the first net we set every year is always the inshore one.

JM: Is the mesh size different? And that can get into a very controversial subject [chuckle] that you can spend some time on.

GM: You know years ago, we used to use a 3 1/2 inch mesh. It worked good. Then all of a sudden, mackerel disappeared for about 10 years. Finally when the mackerel come back, we was caught out there with a lot of this 3 1/2 inch

mesh. The mackerel are a wild fish -- they don't like to be held in captive. They gilled themselves -- they tried to go through, and everywhere they were hanging there in the mesh by the thousands. Now I'm telling you it's an awful mess. Then when the mackerel continued to increase and kept coming back every spring, we had to go into a smaller size mesh where they wouldn't gill because you could spend five or six hours out there hauling one of those nets with a load of gilled mackerel. The weight is enormous and hauling the twine, it would cut right through almost to your bone. In those years, we had all these nets with 3 1/2 inch mesh and we had to change, come back to something like 2 3/4 inch where the mackerel wouldn't gill. So we've got traps there that haven't been out of the building in years because I wouldn't risk putting them in the water. But these same nets, in November, would be good because then the herring runs. When the herring run, the new nets that we got for 2 3/4 -- we'd get clobbered if we ever had them in the water. So the big mesh is better in the fall of the year. That's why mesh size regulations can never work because a fisherman, through experience, knows how he can get burnt

and what to use at the right season.

JM: When you're setting the nets for scup, what time of day do you start?

GM: We leave the wharf in the spring of the year at 5:30. And it takes us about an hour to get to the nets.

JM: How many boats are involved in this?

GM: We have the one boat that carries the fish, plus the working boats -- what the crew gets in to handle the nets. For years, we used to take out our two big boats and put fish on them, but we've got a boat now that can carry all the fish we can handle in a day, so once the nets are set, we just go with one boat. One boat is enough to keep us busy for quite a few hours.

JM: How many people are on the crew?

GM: Usually somewhere, in the spring of the year where May is our busy month, we usually figure pretty close to twenty-three, twenty-four men, something like that.

JM: On one trip?

GM: Yes.

JM: What are their jobs?

GM: We go out there and we figure out what net we're going to haul. Usually in the spring of the year, we have four nets out there. We'll haul a net and put whatever fish was in that

net aboard, and if it's not that much fish, we'll go tackle another net. But for years there, we could go to one net and put say over a hundred thousand pound of fish on the boat and come in. And, you know, that's a lot of fish to handle. As a matter of fact, the most fish that we ever handled in one day in that company was a hundred and sixty-three thousand pounds.

JM: When was that?

GM: Oh, I'd say about maybe eight, nine years ago.

JM: And what were they?

GM: Scup, mostly scup. That one year, I can remember that just during the month of May alone we unloaded three million pounds of scup, which is averaging out a hundred thousand a day. That's like five trailer loads.

JM: It gives you an idea of these huge schools.

GM: Oh yes. But the last couple of years, like last year, I think the most scup we brought in one day was probably about fifty thousand.

JM: Really?

GM: There's more nets out here today and Uncle Sam was slow in setting regulations with the foreigners. They did a hell of a job out here on the fish -- they took a lot of fish out of here.

JM: You wonder if it'll ever come back.

GM: Now it's like before World War II. Like [I said], the four, five years where there was hardly no fishing on the fish out here, there was a big build up. The catch now is like going back fifty years. I'd say it's pretty much the same.

JM: Was it fairly abundant before the war, before the offshore trawl fishery started?

GM: In a way it's hard to really figure out. Before the war, I can remember working with my father and we caught our share of fish. I don't know whether to say there was more fish than there is today because the nets that my father was using, they're nowhere near as efficient as the nets we've got today. I know that if we ever had the nets today -- then -- we'd never be able to take care of the fish. I think if in those years, if they had the gear we got today, they would've been more efficient. Today the operation's altogether different. We got a lot of big winches, and there's a lot of the strain taken off the men, where in those years, it was all done by hand, every bit of it.

JM: Do you have pretty much the same crew from year to year?

GM: No. We've got roughly ten men. If you total it up, these ten men would have at least three hundred and fifty years experience. And every year you hire men, you know, local, young guys from the area here. But the ten guys that are the main guys in the company, I'd say that they'd total up to about three hundred and fifty.

JM: Your father was able to support a wife and six children on doing only that? Were there times when he had to take on other jobs?

GM: No, my father never owned the fish business. He was a captain all his life. And --

JM: Was that called Star Fish Company up there?

GM: Yes, Star Fish Company.

JM: OK.

GM: My God, you do know something [chuckle]. I didn't mention that name because that company's been gone a long time. John F. Mack owned Star Fish Company. He died just after the '38 hurricane. The hurricane and the losses shook him up.

JM: Really?

GM: Yes, he died just then. We had a bookkeeper then. Her name was Julia Curran. Did you ever hear of her?

JM: Yes, I did. I read an article about you and

she was in it.

GM: She was some kind of a lady. She had never married and she was a bookkeeper for Tallman and Mack for fifty-two years.

JM: And she's dead now?

GM: Oh yes. She was there every day. Days off, she was there. And in snow storms, I'd say, "Miss Curran, I'm getting out of here, let's get out of here." She'd say, "George you go, I'll get home." Well anyway, she sat in that office for years and years when she had no business even being there. No one ever dictated to her because she knew when I was born. She knew my father. She ran that office and no one said boo to her. So finally, I'd hire a couple of guys and I'd bring them into the office, and I'd say, "Miss Curran, I just hired this guy," and I said to her, "His social security number was such and such, he's got so many dependents, his name is this and that," and she's taking the information down and she's making errors. I said, "Miss Curran the Social Security number's not 050 or what I says 005 or whatever," and she says, "That's what I got down George." "No you don't, Miss Curran." And I'd say, "Jesus, she's making mistakes." This is after fifty-two years. Finally some of

the people that we dealt with, they'd call and say, "You people are not sending us bills -- we want to pay you -- we're not getting any bills." So I'd go in and ask Miss Curran, "You sending bills out to. . ." "Yes, George, I sent them out." So I'd get another call maybe a week or two later, and I'd go back in and I'd say, "Miss Curran, these people are not getting bills." Then I noticed that she was making mistakes. Finally I said, "Jesus, something's got to be done here. She's making mistakes with those books, we're going to have a problem." So I called the accountant up and I told him what was going on. I said, "Geez, I don't know what to tell you, but I'm getting kind of nervous before this season gets too far along." Finally, one day I had to go in and talk to Miss Curran. And I said, "Miss Curran, you've been making a few small mistakes." I says, "Geez, I hope you're not making any mistakes in the books and stuff." And I was waiting --

JM: That's a tough one.

GM: Yes. Someone that was there all her life and my life. I was waiting for her to say, "George get out of here, out of this office." And I would've walked out, even though I was her

boss. So she says, "Oh, I'm glad you said that because it's true. I am making mistakes." And she says, "You know, I know I'm making mistakes, and I try to correct it, and it gets worse and worse, and I can't correct it." And boy, I was glad to hear that. I wasn't glad to know that it was happening, but I was glad that she admitted it.

JM: Yes.

GM: So anyway, I called the accountant and I says, "You come down, get the books. Don't say nothing because she's confused for some reason or another."

JM: How old was she at this point?

GM: Today she'd be 86, so she had to be close to 80. So the accountant comes down. And of course, she jumped right up quick and got all the books, and she tried to explain a few things, and he's not saying anything, and I'm not saying anything. So he takes the books. Well anyway, she left the office. She went home, she got in bed and never got out of bed. She wound up in the hospital, and I made her pay out for about three weeks. Of course, she never did make it back. What they found out, she had a tumor on the brain and that killed her. But before she died, I gave her these

checks. And of course, she wouldn't take them. This is for the weeks she was in the hospital. So finally, she took the checks, and long after she died, I'm going through the payroll book . . . the checks were stuck in the back of the payroll book. [She] never cashed them.

JM: They don't make them like that anymore.

GM: No, she was something.

[End of side two, tape one.]

JM: It's January 4, 1987. This is my second interview with Mr. George Mendonsa. Before we get started on the fishing industry, there are a couple of questions that I didn't have time to ask you about your family. The first is, where did you meet your wife?

GM: I come home to Newport in July of 1945 and the war was still on. My younger sister had gotten married while I was away, and I met her husband for the first time. He was stationed here at the Torpedo Station in Newport. After a few days he mentioned to me that his mother and father were coming from New York to visit him here in Newport and wanted to know if I could get them lobsters and clams to have a clambake. I said yes, I could get all the stuff. After a few days, he mentioned to me that I ought to pick up a little more stuff -- that a cousin