

Name of person interviewed: Vicky Campbell

Occupation: Union rep, former fish cutter and worked in urchin industry

Age: unknown

Port: New Bedford, MA and Spruce Head Island, ME

Interviewer: Millie Rahn

Logger/Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood

Place of Interview:

Oral history station in Harbor Development Commission, New Bedford, MA

Date of interview: September 25, 2005

Interview Contents

00:00 Introduction to interviewer and then Vicky Campbell; her history in Rockland, ME then moving to New Bedford; brief history of her jobs related to the fishery.

03:08 Vicky's work as a Union Rep now and in the past; how the Union in the 1970's supported workers; how conditions were better then verses now; how things changed with a big strike in the 70's.

06:00 More discussion of how hard the strike hit people; wages cut, waterfront was devastated; story about kidnapping "scabs" and leaving them in the back of a U-Haul for several hours; describes what it's like being a woman in the Union.

09:30 Vicky's history with local Union, how she started out, how it led to current position; describes a typical day at work; represents nursing homes, mostly women.

12:40 Left the fisheries scene, not in touch with what's happening; work in processing etc. couldn't support her family as a single parent; described typical day in processing industry, how it was really "nice"; more women than men in the industry.

15:58 Monk "stamping", passing one fish for another; Vicky buys only fresh fish; from personal experience, wouldn't eat processed food.

18:53 More discussion of disgust with processed/ fast food; people Vicky works with in Nursing homes, etc. were once in fishing industry as processors, support, manufacturing, etc.

21:58 People once in fishing, manufacturing, etc. have adapted to do other city jobs or outside the city; people adapt, do what you have to do to survive; some young girls and immigrants working in processing.

24:59 Her children not going to fish; no promise of a better life, what fishing used to be all about, what America used to be about.

28:00 Cycle of next generation being fishermen was broken years ago; her families neutral status on her entering fishery; used to go on grandfathers lobster boat as a young girl

30:27 End of interview

Major Themes

- Fish processing
- Union
- Strike
- Devastated waterfront
- Maine lobster family
- Factories closed
- Women processors
- Commitment to Union cause
- Worker rights
- Disgust with quality of processed product
- Buys fresh fish
- Nursing homes
- Generation shifting professions
- Adapting to survive
- Immigrants
- Younger generation not fishing
- Loss of the promise for a better life

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Interview

00:00 MR: Ok, just say something...testing or something.

VC: Testing, testing...

MR: Good. Today is Sunday September 25, 2005. My name is Millie Rahn. I am a folklorist with the Working Waterfront Festival and I'm here in the HDC building with Vicky Campbell and she is a former fish cutter and is doing lots of other things...

VC: Not a cutter.

MR: Oh, not a cutter, Ok, sorry.

VC: Ok (laughs).

MR: Tell me who you are and what you do.

VC: Now or then?

MR: Both.

VC: Vicky Campbell. Now I'm a Union Rep.

MR: I'm only as good as my information.

VC: No, that's fine. Then, I worked in fish houses. I was a packer, processor, skinner, made fish cakes, ran a flash freezer, brine tanks... was not a cutter.

MR: We will make a note of that. When was “then”?

VC: Then was mid to late-70’s, I don’t know exact dates, somewhere around ’78 through probably ’81.

MR: And where were you working then?

VC: I worked at Pilgrim Seafood.

MR: And that’s here?

VC: In New Bedford.

MR: And then you said you went up to Maine for awhile.

VC: Yes, I went up to Maine in the ‘90’s. I worked at Atwood Brothers Lobster Company.

MR: And that was in Rockland?

VC: That’s in Spruce Head. Spruce Head Island, its right outside of Rockland. And I worked in a lobster plant. I mostly worked on urchins. I did the testing, I would unload boats, weigh totes, did the testing, set the price, and sent them out to Gloucester to be processed.

MR: Where did you grow up? How did you get into this work?

VC: I grew up in Rockland, Maine. Fishing is a way of life. My grandfather was a lobsterman, I mean, you know.

MR: Was your father or mother...?

VC: No, my father was in the Navy, my mother was...I don’t know... (laughs) my mother did many things.

MR: So how did you get then from Rockland to New Bedford.

VC: I had a friend that lived in Wareham and I came down for a weekend to visit her, and got a job and an apartment. I went home, packed up. Me and my... I think 8 or 9-month old daughter at the time moved here. And within a few months of moving here I was working in the fish houses. You go to what you know.

MR: Right!

VC: Worked in waterfront bars, I worked in the fish houses.

03:08 MR: And you’re now in New Bedford?

VC: Yeah, I’ve been in New Bedford, except for a couple of years moving to Maine in the ‘90’s, I’ve been in New Bedford since ’78.

MR: Um, what do you do as the Union Representative?

VC: File grievances, go in and talk to workers, build strength and unity within the work place. There already organized workers. I just started doing that. I was a Union organizer for over six years. Where I would go to un-organized workshops and show them the importance of having a Union workshop.

MR: And how was that received?

VC: I mean people really understand it for the most part. There’s that fear factor. There’s always that fear factor, management has such a hold on workers they don’t really understand that, that they can fight it, they have rights. It’s a big fear factor. And that’s with any field, that’s with any field [reiterates].

MR: I know from interviewing a number of people over time for this project that a lot of the old timers talked about, particularly the ‘60’s when the Union here was very strong and how it benefited them and now it’s not as strong.

VC: Non-existent.

MR: And that’s what they talk... the rights, the pensions, the conditions, things like that.

VC: I don't know about the '60's, I wasn't here. I was maybe a little too young for that. I do know in the '70's, I was in a Union shop and I was teamsters member. I had rights, I had a decent work place, for the most part, I had benefits, I had short-term disability benefits. I had medical benefits. I had the right to call out sick and get paid for it, I had vacation time, I had Holiday time. You know. You got paid for overtime. You had rights. The strike pretty much eliminated most of that. It was for the most part unresolved. It devastated the waterfront.

MR: And when was the strike?

VC: I honestly can't tell you the year. A lot has happened. It was...

MR: Five years ago?...

VC: Oh no, no, no. It was... early '80's... late '70's, late '80's, somewhere in that time frame. The one that I'm talking about anyway.

MR: Because I was going to ask what happened between this hay-day that the old-timers talk about and now... so it was the strike.

06:00 VC: The strike. People don't want to talk about the strike too much. It was a really hard and difficult time, it was... people lost everything. I mean people lost. It was one of those unresolved strikes for the most part. Working conditions changed drastically. People used to make \$17/hr for instance, maybe... \$15/hr cutting. And a year later, they were lucky if they made \$10/hr. It devastated the waterfront. It devastated the people that worked on the waterfront. Fish houses were shut down. A lot of the...like the people I worked for, were from New York, and they shut Pilgrims down. They opened up a fish house across the street, under another name, it was a non-union shop.

MR: What started the strike, do you know?

VC: You know I really don't know. I was caught up in it. I know that when it happened, it was not a safe place to be, on the waterfront. So it was myself and others, took a scab truck, it was like a U-Haul or Ryder truck, they had scabs in, and we kidnapped the truck, we took it someplace and put holes in the side of it, and put a plastic tab on the back of it like a padlock type thing. And left them there, in the Freetown area. Called authorities 4-5 hours later, it was just a plastic tab, they cut off and let them out. I would almost bet those scabs did not go back. But that was the kind of things that were happening down there. It was not a safe place to be, people were really angry, very angry.

MR: So as a consequence, did a lot of people leave the industry?

VC: I did. I would assume that people did. I left, I went to work for Chamberlain Manufacturing who later went on strike and shut down and went to Biloxy, Mississippi, so.... (laughs).

MR: So strikes, you have a track record with them... (laughs).

VC: I don't know what it is. I believe in the movement. I was raised in a blue-collar home. My father was very involved... my stepfather was very involved in the Union, so I knew the importance of having somebody have your back.

MR: What's it like being a woman... in the Union.

VC: I love being a woman! You mean a woman in the Union?

MR: Yeah.

VC: It's great. It's great. I don't think that, maybe initially people may look at you like a woman but I think that once that I get talking, I'm not looked at as a woman, I'm looked at as a women, I'm looked at as a... well it depends on whose looking at me. It's from Union members, I'm a brother and a sister in the Union. A sister to folks in the Union.

And if it's management, I'm looked at as a bitch. (laughs). I try to be fair to both sides, but I don't allow anyone to walk over the rights of someone. That's really important I think.

09:30 MR: And which Union are you representing?

VC: SEIU – local 20/20.

MR: And could you say what that stands for please.

VC: Service Employees International Union.

MR: Local 20/20?

VC: Local 20/20.

MR: What kind of background would you say you need to be a Union rep?

VC: I think that you don't have to even... you could walk into it. How I started doing it? I went from many vocations (laughs). Started working with mentally retarded adults. It was not a pleasant place to work, but I loved the work. So we organized the Union in our work place, which was SEIU Local 509. And I became very active in the Union. I became a Steward (t?). I was on the negotiating team, I was pretty much the Chief Steward. And then I started helping the organizing director, asked me to go to un-organized places when they were having meetings and talk to workers about what a difference it made in our shop, in our place. And so I did that, it just became almost what I breathed for. My kids thought it was amazing that somebody was actually paying me to finally run my mouth! (laughs) Because I'd been running my mouth for years and nobody recognized it I guess. So then they hired me to organize un-organized group (homes?). And I did that for six years with Local 509 and then went into organizing at Local 20/20 and ... August I guess, this past August I took this rep position.

MR: Great!

VC: So it's still doing the same kind of things but at a different level.

MR: So what a typical day be for you?

VC: A typical day? Hmm... I typical day... it could be one of many things. You go into the office, you check your messages, there's always messages from workers that there's something going on, or Stewards. Check the fax machines, there's usually a few grievances that have been faxed to me, that have been filed in the work place. Call up the stewards, find out what's going on. Make a grievance folder on them, so you don't lose the time frames. The time frames are so important. Because every contract time frame is different, or a lot of them are different. If you miss the time frame to file it to the next step, its gone forever. And setting up labor management committees. And trying to set up general member meetings to make it a stronger unit. I represent nursing homes right now, and home care, and so to try and make it a strong unit, they need to understand what solidarity is. And in the places that I represent, it's probably 85% women. Because its nursing homes.

12:40 MR: So you're doing nursing homes and ...

VC: Home care.

MR: Home care. So you're not working with the fishery union?

VC: No, I haven't been with the fishery Union for years.

MR: Ok.

VC: I never worked for the fishery Union. SEIU was way away from that.

MR: Ok, got it. Because I was thinking you were doing this, organizing Unions...

VC: No, I stopped back in the '80's when I left and went to another work place. Except for in the '90's when I went back to Maine and I worked in a lobster plant, lobster company.

MR: Do you hear what's going on in the fishery? What kind of grievances they would have?

VC: No, honestly, I don't. I kind of like lost track of it many years ago, many years ago. Just kind of moved on. I couldn't support my family. I had 2 children, single parent, I had to support, so you have to go where the money is. And it wasn't in the fishing industry.

MR: Well, I was going to say, because one of the questions we ask people are why did you leave?

VC: I couldn't support my family any longer. I'd lost my benefits, I'd lost my insurance, the wages were reduced drastically. There's no way... I couldn't support my daughter. And I had to survive... I was a single parent; I had to make sure that I made enough money and benefits to take care of my family. And I loved to work in the fish house. I did. It was nice, because you almost felt free. Yeah, you have to work and stuff, but you're not tied down to a desk... you know? It was nice, I enjoyed it.

MR: What was a typical day there like?

VC: Well, you go in the morning, you start the machines up, depended if it was warm weather or cold weather. You said hi to everybody, grabbed your gear, hit the tables, so depending on what you were doing, skinning... you'd get on the skinning machines. If you're packing, you'd get on the packing line. It depended on what you were doing, you worked, you yakked while you worked, you talked to people. It was nice, I mean, it was camaraderie. People got along well for the most part, there's always that bickering in the work place, but most of it was hilarious. It was like being on a comedy show.

MR: And was it a lot of women?

VC: Yeah, you know Kinny (?) asked me that and I said it was probably 50/50, but after reflecting back on it, the place that I worked anyway, if you excluded management, and looked at the workers, it was probably more like 65/35, women to men ratio. Because some of the men did the cutting and then you had a couple of men that did floor work, but other than that it was women. For the most part it was women that did all the skinning, it was women that did the packing, it was women that did the processing, it was mostly women that did the monk stamping, scallop packing... all of that stuff, it was women.

15:58 MR: Um, what's monk stamping?

VC: (laughs) That's when we'd run short on scallops so they'd take monkfish and stamp them out into the shape of a scallop and mix them in the boxes.

MR: The little secrets we consumers are learning. I hadn't heard that before.

VC: Most people aren't honest about it.

MR: Are not.

VC: Definitely not.

MR: I also do the food ways tent here at the Festival, and yesterday, Carlos Raphael who was a fish cutter, was demonstrating cutting and he was showing how some fish are pasted off as others. Of course he was wired up on the mic, so only people in the front row could get it, but they were just really amazed... if it's flipped on one side, cod will look like something else, all of this. He was showing the color difference, and the scale, and the....

VC: It's amazing. It's an eye-opener. I'm really careful about where I buy fish and how I buy fish, because I was raised... my whole life has been my grandfather, my family members, friends of the family, ... are fishermen. My whole life. And now, when I was a kid growing up. They used to even tell you about colors of scallops to watch for.

MR: Where do you buy your fish now?

VC: In a fresh seafood place. Or I'll get it from someone who works in the industry. Like if I go to Maine, I have a lot of friends in the shrimping and lobster and scalloping industry, their divers for like scallops, diver.

MR: Not at the grocery store?

VC: No, I never buy fish at the grocery store. I don't buy any frozen seafood, and I don't buy any processed seafood. I'm not a fish cake, fish stick, fish... it's fresh seafood or it's not at all. I worked... Pilgrims, we made fish cakes and I would never eat one if my whole life depended on it. I'd eat a person before I'd eat a fish cake (laughs).

VC: Do you want to tell us what's in those? Or is it better not to know!

VC: It's probably better not to know! It probably is. I mean, it really probably not to know, but its...cat food probably is better or equal to. It's everything.

MR: Like sausages.

VC: It's everything.

MR: Again, Carlos was showing the stuff that was cut off... "now this would be cat food, and this would be something else"... the heads and some of the skins...

18:53 VC: Depending on the plant, they probably grind a lot of that stuff up into the fish cakes. And you'll have fish that's put into a brine tank, or they'll put bleach in it because it might have set long, and you want to preserve the color, bring it back to a white color, and it's like rubbery and that will get ground up sometimes and do into the fish cakes if it can't pass. Yeah, it's not...

MR: This is good, because we don't have any information like this.

VC: Yeah it is.

MR: And we know everybody is cutting corners.

VC: It's not like... back when you did it, you'd go home and tell your kid, "don't ever eat a fish cake or fish cake in any school cafeteria again". Or at least I did. I'd look at the menu and I'd make sure I'd made a lunch for my daughter that day that would be much better than she'd ever think that school lunch was, just so she'd eat a home-packed lunch. And it's weird because you take them to McDonalds or some fast food place, where you know the food really is not good for them. But you didn't process it. You didn't process that type of food so it doesn't hit home as hard I think.

MR: Until you read "Fast Food Nation" and then... I haven't been to a McDonald since to eat.

VC: Until you've done what?

MR: I have not been to a McDonald since I've read "Fast Food Nation" to eat...

VC: I haven't read that.

MR: It's all about the fast food industry.

VC: I don't want to know about it. I'm on the road too much!

MR: Well, I am too, and McDonalds is great for doing field work, pit stops, especially going up to Maine, I know every McDonalds along the way.

VC: KFC in Maine at least is, they have buffets.

MR: So, since you're no longer in the industry, what do you think of... you're no longer in the industry, but the fishery is so identified with New Bedford, how do people like in nursing homes and all kind of... view New Bedford?

VC: I think that a lot of the people that are in the nursing homes and the MR Group homes came out of fish houses in the '70's and 80's. They went to worker programs, or the unemployment office, to the training departments..., they were trained into different fields. And ended up in the nursing homes and group homes, and ended up as the bus drivers for the city. That's where all of these people came from. For the people that were raised in New Bedford, lived in New Bedford their whole life. They had to go some place to work.

MR: That's true, I hadn't even thought about that...

VC: The clothing industry shut down. Chamberlain industry shut down. GoodYear shut down. All of this stuff happened in a very short period in New Bedford.

21:58 VC: When I say a short period, I mean maybe a ten-year period. But it was like all of these great ways that people had lived and made a good living, no longer existed.

MR: So now they're working in...

VC: They're working in nursing homes, they're working in MR Group homes. MR is mental retardation, mental health group homes. They're working as bus drivers, city workers.... Or they're working out of town.

MR: Well that's... I do a lot of work with recent immigrants, but getting the whole immigration story... from when the Pilgrims came and met the Indians here... to now, and especially in Massachusetts, everyone came to work, because we've always had a strong economy compared to lots of other places. So that is the story of Massachusetts. So how do places adapt, how do individuals adapt?

VC: Well, people do what you have to do. Where I worked at, and I think probably for most of the waterfront, there was a large Portuguese population. On the boats were the men, and in the fish houses were their wives and their children. And when all of that's gone fast, you're options... you just take the first you can find. You're options are not as great as when you're whole family is working and making good money and you can plan on sending your kids to college or whatever. All of a sudden people have no income. What they've worked for their whole lives, they have a chance of losing, and they have to find something quick. And that's exactly what they did. They went to work in grocery stores, and fast food restaurants, or wherever. But a lot of people in nursing homes probably not as much now as back in the late 80's and early 90's, came out of the fish houses, out of the seafood industry.

MR: Interesting. And now where are they mostly coming from?

VC: Welfare lines. Or just young girls that aren't sure what to do with their lives. I say girls because for the most part its (C and E's) (?) its women. And this is a good place to start or something.

MR: Are there a lot of immigrants, recent immigrants?

VC: There are in some homes more than others. There's a big Brazilian population in some of the homes. African and other, not New Bedford area, but different places there are. And I only represent one home in New Bedford, I think it's Portuguese, American, Cape Verdean populations, probably a mix.

24:59 MR: I'm based in Watertown and I just did a big project with a lot of Brazilians in Framingham and they...

VC: There's a lot of Brazilians on the Cape.

MR: Yes, Yes.

VC: Because I have several places on the Cape: Falmouth, Hyannis, Plymouth... and there's a big Brazilian population on the Cape.

MR: So having come from a family that's been so involved with the fishery for generations... well work... but even, you're kind of the end of the line... are your children going to go fishing?

VC: Oh no. Absolutely not. My children aren't going to go fishing, they're not going to work in a fish house. My daughter didn't like it when I did... when she got a little older, but, because I stunk. But the money always smelt very green. No, absolutely not. I mean, we'll go fishing sometimes, go drop a line off on the pier or something. And I wouldn't want them to. I wouldn't want them to [reiterates]. Not the way it is today. There's no promise of a better life. And I think that's what it was always... people were looking for, a promise of a better life, and you always want better for your children than what you had. Fishing industry at one time, whether you were longshoreman, a lumper, a cutter in a fish house... it was always a promise of a better life. Until that all ended and I think that pretty much ended with the strike. And then it was very difficult. And what their doing in the fish houses today is appalling. It is, it's appalling, they have temporary workers, and they have no benefits. I think it's disgusting.

MR: Is there anything else that you want to add?

VC: I can't think of anything off the top of my head.

MR: That's a wonderful perspective, I hadn't really thought about.. well, I mean, you've said it better, about the promise of a better life.

VC: That's what it's always about. That's why people came to America to begin with. And people that have been raised here... I think I'm going to sneeze... people that have been raised here, you know, whether you come from another country or whether you're raised here, your whole life, the only thing you work for is the promise of a better life. I mean that's what it's all about, is that the end... by the time you've reached the end, it's gotten better. And that kind of like, when you've put all of your eggs in the basket and that basket is crushed, the promise is broken, it's gone. There's nothing there anymore. Build a new basket elsewhere. Carry your eggs in your shirt, you know what I mean....

28:00 MR: Right. Alternatives. Yeah because a lot of the fishermen certainly.. people in the industry, not just fishermen, a lot of them came from somewhere else, and now their kids are growing up or grown, and none of them are doing whatever the parents were doing.

VC: That cycle was broke years ago, that cycle was broke... some of it was broke, at one point it was like the mothers didn't want the kids growing up, if the fathers were a fisherman, because it's a very dangerous job. And then others thought 'what a wonderful way of life. You can work so many months out of the year and be home with your family....' And provide a very good life. And then, I think, all of that didn't even matter anymore, rather the family wanted them to do it or didn't want them to do it, it wasn't as good of an option, even if they wanted them to.

MR: How did your family feel when you started working in the fish houses?

VC: I don't think that they felt anything really one way of another, I think that it was like, I'm working. I jumped jobs so much at one point it didn't matter anymore anyway. I just have always worked. I worked in fish houses in Maine before I moved here, and I worked with my grandfather on his boat when I was little. I don't think it was a thought. It was

just a given. Vicki's working. It wasn't... had nothing to do with the industry. They were more upset when I went to work making shells for bombs at Chamberlains. I'm like, "well mom, they don't let me touch the explosives, that's a good thing!" They weren't... I don't think it phases them one way or another, it was just a natural thing, you know.

MR: So you were lobstering as a child?

VC: Yeah, I used to go out lobstering with him. And then I used to steal some of his lobsters and put them in a net on the side and drag them, because he never paid me, so I figured that was my payment, I'd go sell them on the side. He knew, he had to have seen me, but he never said anything. I did that.

MR: Is there anything else you want to add? I'm going to say thank you very much and turn this off.

VC: Your welcome.

30:27 END OF INTERVIEW