

Name of person Interviewed: Edward "Eddie" Fortes [EF]

Facts about this person:

Age (?)

Sex Male

Occupation Former Fish Cutter

Home port, New Bedford

Hail Port, New Bedford

Residence (Town where lives) New Bedford, MA

Ethnic background (if known) American

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR]

Transcriber: Tove E. Bendiksen

Place interview took place: New Bedford Harbormaster House

Date and time of interview: September 25, 2004

Fortes Interview Working Waterfront Festival September 25,2004

Transcribed by Tove E. Bendiksen

Tape 3: Eddie Fortes, Jr.; fish cutter

160 Grinnell St., New Bedford 02740

interviewer: Millie Rahn

interview time: track 1, 16:20 minutes; track 2, 00:54 seconds

recorded at HDC oral history station, September 25, 2004

summary: during fish-cutting contest at festival, Eddie identified himself from the

audience, reminding Carlos Rafael that he (Eddie) was the one who taught Carlos to cut fish. Interview came from that; otherwise wouldn't have known about Eddie.

Talks about process of cutting fish, coming from fishing family, value of unions, ethnic changes in industry.

Track 1

[00:00]

Fortes [pron "Forts"]. Been living on Grinnell St. for 45 years. Worked on waterfront for 35 years. Father was sword fisherman. As a child, Eddie would make swords from swordfish tusks that father brought him. About age 20, after service, learned to cut fish. Was "the fastest fish cutter in the city" at one time. Once cut "86 boxes of market cod"... "the most anyone had cut in the city." Also fast yellow-cutter. Taught 16-year-old friend Carlos [Rafael] to cut fish. He'd just come from the "old country"—Portugal—and spoke little English.

[02:48]

Takes 6 months to learn to cut fish. "To be a good cutter, you got to get cut at least 10 times to become a cutter...I mean big cuts. That was the word around the waterfront. You got to get cut 10 times."

[03:54]

Worked as shop steward and vice president and then president of Seafood Workers Union.

[04:16]

Father brought fish to Aiello Brothers. Eddie used to fillet swordfish for Japanese; knew how to do it without leaving "leaving meat behind on the bone."

[04:46]

"When I taught Carlos to cut fish, he told me this. He said, 'Eddie, I'm not going to cut fish all my life.. Someday I'm going to own my own fish house.'That's the way things go."

[05:07]

Eddie born in New Bedford, hung round waterfront as a child; brought home lobsters and swordfish. Father and brothers owned 3 fishing boats.

[06:00]

Left waterfront to work for city's building department; retired now 11 years.

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[06:55]

Changes on waterfront: no more unions. Lots of minimum-wage jobs. “Most of the people can’t even speak English and they’re working down the waterfront. Nine out of 10 fish houses has Cambodians or people coming across the border” [working there] ”because there’s no union.” Talks about strike about 20 years ago and industry at standstill for a year or so.

[08:12]

Has 2 daughters; one a teacher in N.B.; one a veterinarian in New Jersey.

[09:36]

Four uncles owned fishing boat together, in addition to father who worked on boat. They made a record swordfish catch in “1920-something.” Eddie lent whaling museum book with story of the catch and also catch of 23-pounds of lobster meat, and harpoons. One display for two years.

[10:52]

Had to buy own knives, own gloves, aprons, boots. “They would give us nothing. We had to supply our own. That’s how we learned to cut fish.” Describes process, with leftovers going to pet food. Describes cutting machine for haddock and cod, “but the machine could never beat human hands.” Machines “paid off, though, because they didn’t have to pay union wages or medical insurance” [to people]. Today still gut them by hand at a few places, but not many.

[12:15]

Shift: 7am to 4pm. “Just cut fish all day long.” “When I used to cut, I used to rock all day long, on my feet. You had to be on your feet all day long. Get into a rhythm.” Had stainless steel bench outside door on the waterfront and people watched him cut for many years. “Fish is so expensive [today] that no one is going to give them the fish to [demonstrate]...I used to be the only one cutting fish out there.” No one knows how it’s done any more. “I don’t think it’ll [cutting] every die out. They get a better fillet and percentage with a hand cutter. With machines, they lose a percentage.”

[14:06]

Cut tuna for Japanese; then shipped to Japan. Japanese liked belly best and paid big money for it.

Tells story of Japanese man who brought stone with diamonds in it; Eddie used it to sharpen his knife. Man said if Eddie could cut stone in half, he could have half—and he had it done and has had stone for 30 years. Says in those days, he was “only guy who used to fillet swordfish.” Always stayed in New Bedford.

[15:48]

“Bygones be gone.”

Track 2

[00:11]

Used to be fisherman for 2 years on *Laurie Dawn VII*, scalloping.

[00:27]

Wants to correct statement: not sure wages he quoted [above] are what they get today. “That’s hearsay. That’s what people tell me.”

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Interview

[00:00] Track 1

MR: If you could tell me your name and where you live, how you came to work with fish in New Bedford and then we'll go from there.

EF: All right, my name is Eddie Fortes, and I'm a junior as my father was Eddie Fortes, they called him "Sugar". Now I reside at 160 Grinnell Street, I've been living in that house for 45 years and ah... I've been working on the waterfront, previously, for 35 years and prior to that...uh... My father used to be a fisherman, he used to be a swordfisherman, and he did a lot of swordfishing, and he used to bring me the tusks and I'd make swords out of them, I used to enjoy doing that. But prior to that, I learned to cut fish when I was young, maybe about 20 years old... 21, when I came back from the service and after that I worked in Aiello Brothers for 35 years, and while I was working there, you had asked me about Carlos [Carlos Raphael] because you were interviewing Carlos, he was a good friend of mine, he had just come from the old country he as 16 years old, and I brought him down to the waterfront and got him a job in Aiello Brothers and I taught him to cut fish, cause at that time I used to be the fastest fish cutter in the city. There was one time I cut 86 boxes of market cod, which is the most anybody ever cut in the city, and I used to be a fast yellow [yellowtail flounder] cutter too at that time, one of the fastest in the city. He lived next door to a friend of mine on Acushnet Avenue, that's where he lived when he just came from the old country.

MR: And the old country?

EF: He just came from Portugal. Could speak very, very little English...him, his mother, and his father and his sisters. So when he was working with us, I taught him how to cut fish-it took about 6 months, that's about how long it takes to learn, but to be a good cutter you gotta get cut about ten times. I used to be the fastest fish cutter, I was interviewed through the Washington Post, they came down to interview me at that time and everything-you know...how fast I could cut and everything. It was amazing, today I realize it and I look and think gee how could I ever did that? Years ago-for about 10 or 15 years, to function like today, I used to have a stainless steal stand with Frankie Silvia, right near the entrance and I used to cut fish. People used to come in the entrance and used to watch me and used to be amazed, "Wow! How does that guy cut fish without cutting his finger?" The idea is that you gotta get cut at least ten times to become a "cutter", and I mean big cuts, that was the word around the waterfront. I worked on the waterfront as a shop steward then too, then I became vice-president of the Seafood Workers Union, at that time we had 2,300 people in the Union, then I became President of the Union...I was president of the Union once, that was a long time ago.

[04:13]

My father used to fish and he always used to bring the fish to the Aiello Brothers, swordfish, I was about the only person on the waterfront who knew how to fillet swordfish. I also used to fillet swordfish for the Japanese. I was the only person

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they let do it, because I knew how to do it without leaving a lot meat behind on the bone. It was a skill to do that, and I had been doing it for years. When I taught Carlos how to cut fish he told me this, he said “Eddie, I am not gonna cut fish all my life. Someday I’m gonna to own my own fish house” and sure enough that son-of-a-gun he owns his own fish house, he owns ten fishing boats, he’s a millionaire today. Yeah, but that’s the way things goes.

MR: Were you born in New Bedford?

EF: Yes, I was born in New Bedford

MR: How did you learn to cut fish?

EF: I learned because, ah ...when I came to the waterfront as little a kid, my father used to -like I told you- him and his brothers owned three fishing boats, I used to be down there every day and I’d bring home all the goodies-the lobsters...I ate good then, lobsters and swordfish all the time...today I can’t get it-nothin’ [laugh]. But, I used to watch them do it and then I learned how to do it, I learned very quick, it was easy for me to learn because it was in my genes I guess...and then I learned how to cut fish, then first thing you know I was the fastest in the city.

MR: Like I was going to say, it’s not just the skill of cutting, but you were the fastest.

EF: Yes, I was the fastest. I’m nothing today. Today, I just about can do it because I haven’t cut fish in 20 years. After I left the waterfront I went to work for the city the Building Department, I worked for the Building Department until I retired, you know...I’ve been retired now for 11 years, I’m way up there in age you know, I’m past working time now. I still work now and then for Maria Tamasto’s election, you know, I get a few bucks there...I enjoy myself. I go to Foxwoods a lot, that’s where I get the extra money from, you know...and so, I’m very satisfied.

[06:37]

MR: In your experience being both on the waterfront and observing it, what kind of changes have you seen?

EF: Today there are many changes, many, many, many changes. I understand they have a lot of people working in the waterfront industries, that-of course they ain’t got no more unions, the unions are long gone and today they are not working for not too much money, I think 5 or 6 bucks an hour or the minimum wage, whatever that is, that’s all there doing. It’s a shame that most of the people can’t even speak English and they are working on the waterfront. 9 out of 10 fish houses you go to is Cambodians or people that’s come across the border and they are working for hardly anything, course they ain’t got no more union, you know... and that’s the reason why. Cause, when we had our union, we were pretty strong but the union was gone. They went on strike one time, about 20 years ago and the guy that was the president at the time, that was after me, he didn’t want to sign the contract and the union went broke. The waterfront industry was at a stand still for about a year and a half to two years and they came back without a union and have been without a union ever since...it’s too bad, but they seem to be doing okay.

MR: Do you have children or a next generation...anyone involved in the waterfront?

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[08:16]

EF: Yes, I have two girls. One is a school teacher in New Bedford High School system, she's been a school teacher for 23 years, she teaches track- she's a head track teacher in Dartmouth, plus she's not a teacher in Dartmouth, but she's a teacher at New Bedford High School plus she teaches gymnastics for the city of New Bedford...she's a busy girl. My oldest daughter is a veterinarian in New Jersey, all she does is go around to five different hospitals and operate...that's all she does is operate. She used to be a New England Patriots cheerleader; I went to New England Patriots games for ten years in a row without paying a dime. I had good friends there, Sam Bam Cunningham at those times and Stephan Starr in '81, he was my good friend...I used to get tickets from them all the time. They used to be down at my house all the time... for many years, ten years, me and my wife went to the games for free. I don't seem to go to games anymore, because I'm getting old and I can't stand the cold weather no more, so I watch it on T.V. That's the way time goes.

MR: Did anybody fish in your family before your father? Commercial fishing?

EF: Well, all my uncles, my four uncles they owned a fishing boat together. As a matter of fact, my father he had- he was on a fishing boat years ago, they made a record swordfish catch in 1920-something and it was in...as a matter of fact they were in a book- I gave the Whaling Museum the story and they had it posted there for two years and he had a lobster that he had caught while he was fishing that gave 23 pounds of meat, which was a record, the had that it the Whaling Museum...plus I gave them their harpoons and a lot of stuff like that...they had it on display for two years- then they gave it back to me after that. They were supposed to have it one year but then I asked them for it back after two years, because it was only supposed to be one year...so after two years I got it back, that was pretty good, you know...Um...that was about it for the history. I worked on the waterfront for 35 years cutting fish.

MR: When you worked, did you have your own knives?

[10:51]

EF: Oh yeah, we had to buy our own knives, our own gloves, and we had to buy our own aprons, and our own boots...we had to buy everything. They wouldn't give us nothing for nothing, we had to supply our own, you know and so that's how we learned to cut fish at the time. We cut fish and it goes on a conveyor, and the gurry drops on one side-they grind the gurry up for dog food and cat food- and the fillets go through the opposite side and through a skinning machine. Later on they developed a cutting machine for haddock and cod, but it could never beat human hands, because it would pick up so many bones and they'd need three or four people just to cut the bones out, that didn't pay off too good. But at that time it paid off because they didn't have to pay union wages and didn't have to pay hospitalization and medication and all that so they made a few bucks. Today they still gut 'em a few places, but not too many.

MR: What kind of shifts did you work?

EF: Oh, just a regular shift like 7-4 o'clock. Just cut fish all day long.

MR: It must have been hard on your hands, all that repetition?

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EF: Oh, yeah...but after you got used to it, it was like nothing. When I used to cut, I used to rock all day long.

[12:34]

MR: And so you were on your feet...

EF: Yeah, on your feet, that was the main thing, your feet, you'd be on your feet all day long.

MR: So you'd get into a rhythm.

EF: and get into a rhythm and cut fish, yeah...but I did that for many years, like I said, right outside the door as you came inside the waterfront, I had a stainless steel bench there and the people used to watch me cut fish. I don't see why they don't do that today. I guess nobody has volunteered, the fish are so expensive that nobody's volunteered to give them the fish to do it out there, you know, that's probably why...

MR: Well, that's a good point though, for another festival...to have somebody.

EF: Yeah, we did that for many years, I used to be out there-the only one cutting fish, and people used to come by and say "Wow! Look at that! It's amazing how he could do that!" You know what I mean? It was very interesting, see now nobody knows how it's done. I haven't done it for years and I don't see nobody doing it either.

MR: Yeah, it's one of those dying skills...

EF: Well, I don't think it will ever die out, because that's the way they do it. You get a better fillet, and more percentage, with a handcutter than they do with machines. See, machines just swish...they lose a lot of percentage and they know that. The only time they use it, I imagine, is when fish is cheap, you know or they buy it from Canada or Maine or something like that for a lower price.

MR: Now when you were cutting for the Japanese...

EF: Only tuna fish, only tuna fish...

MR: Oh, okay, tuna.

EF: Only tuna fish.

MR: And then ship it over...

EF: and then ship it to Japan. The best part that they liked was the belly. Oh yeah, they'd pay big money for that. As a matter of fact, there was a guy, a Japanese, he brought a stone-must have been a foot long and about three inches thick with diamonds in it- I used to sharpen my knife, it was his. I used to sharpen my knife, he says "Eddie, if you can cut this in half, you can have half of it" and I gave it to a guy to cut it for me, it took him a week to cut it. But I still got it at home, that thing will last forever-it'll outlast me. I've had it for thirty years...it's particle diamonds and I don't know what kind of stone it was made out of. It was an amazing stone. He was nice enough to tell me that if I could cut it in half I could have half of it, and I did I gave it to a guy who cut it for me, it took him a week using a diamond cutter, and he cut it...yeah it was amazing. But those days I was the only guy that used to go around and fillet swordfish. I used to fillet it for [D] and different other people at that time.

[15:30]

MR: But you stayed in New Bedford?

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EF: Oh yeah, I didn't go anyplace else, only New Bedford.
MR: The fastest cutter...
EF: Yeah...at that time, yeah...got a story about that too, as a matter of fact I still got it at home, the story...but that's bygone. That's why I couldn't resist when Carlos was there I said, "Don't forget I taught you how to cut fish!"
MR: Yes, well we wouldn't have found you otherwise.
EF: I taught him to cut fish when he came from the old country.
MR: Well I'm glad that you spoke up because that's what this is all about.
EF: I just wanted to mention it because he's a very good friend of mine, we are very good friends today, he never forgets his friends.
MR: Thank you very much.
EF: You're welcome.
[16:22]

[00:00] Track 2

MR: We are back again and there are a couple of things that you said that you wanted to add or correct.
EF: Yes, I just wanted to add that uh, I used to be a fisherman for two years also and I worked on the *F/V Laurie Dawn VII* and I used to scallop. Shall I mention the part there, I'm not sure, and I want it eliminated, uh about the wages? I'm not sure what they get today, so I shouldn't have even mentioned it.
MR: Sure, that's okay. Sure, so we were talking about the wages early on and you quoted some numbers, but we'll just ignore that...
EF: Yeah, that's hearsay, that's what people tell me. I don't know because I haven't worked in the industry for many years...
MR: Okay
EF: Oki-doke?
MR: That's no problem.
EF: Thank you.
[00:54]