Name of person Interviewed: Roland Gailitis [RG]
Facts about this person:
Age: 69
Sex: Male
Occupation: Retired fisherman from New Bedford
Residence (Town where lives):
Ethnic background (if known): Latvian

Interviewer: Janice Fleuriel [JF]

Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood

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INDEX / KEYWORDS

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- Immigrant
- Citizenship
- Cook
- Engineer
- Scalloper/ dragger
- Longliner in Florida – swordfish, tilefish
- Innovator
- Patents
- Found artifact from the sea
- IRS/ taxes

TRANSCRIPT

[00:00]

JF: Why don't you say your name again, Roland, and I'm going to make sure your mic is picking up

RG: Roland Gailitis.

JF: I might turn it up a little bit. O.K. Can you tell me your name one more time?

RG: Roland Gailitis.

JF: Great, that looks good. Today is September 23; this is Janice Fleuriel talking to Roland Gailitis at the Working Waterfront Festival in New Bedford. I have written down that you are a retired fisherman.

RG: Right.

JF: So I'll start by asking you some general questions about yourself then we'll talk more specifically about your fishing. Where and when were you born?

RG: In Raga, Latvia. 1936. The Russians came in 1939; I lived under the Russians for a year; under the Germans until November '44. Went to Sweden in an 18-foot whaling boat, with 18 people in it, including kids. Lived in Sweden for 3.5 years. The Russians came over there to demand Latvians back to their own country, because… to rebuild it. They went through Siberia. But Swedes did give a bunch back. So my father's side… this is no place, this is not safe because it's a neutral country. So he's the one who instigated… got another 63-foot sailing schooner built in 1895; he bought that with a bunch of people; and 29 of us got on that and sailed to the United States – 6,000 miles, two months. Took the trade winds down south by Canary Islands, and down to the Equator and back up. We landed in Provincetown; went through a hurricane off of Bermuda, talk about that; there are plenty of them [hurricanes now – possibly referring to Katrina/ Rita]. Anyway, we landed in Provincetown and then they called us Pilgrims from Latvia, 1948. And Life Magazine has a big spread about that, with pictures in it. I got copies of the pictures. Then I graduated and became a citizen in 1955; graduated from school and that. I ended up down here in New Bedford and I heard there were Latvian fishermen over here. I just took a bus, I was broke, and there was Men's Mission down there at the time and $0.25 a night. I walked down to Pier 3 actually and saw a boat and told them who I was. It was the *Ciprican I* (sp?) Karl Alvane (sp?) was the skipper, and I didn't know at the time. I explained… I didn't know whether I would get seasick; I didn't know anything about the fishing business. He said: "Yeah, grab your stuff." So I hitched a ride by some tourists off Pier 3, back to grab whatever belongings I had out of Men's Mission and went down to the boat. I had no fishing gear, nothing; I had to use other peoples gear. Like I said, I was a real greenhorn. But I found out on the boat, it had 4-5 Latvians on there, I didn't know; that's one of the reasons he took me. There are a lot of Latvians that ended up in New Bedford because Latvians are palm country or fish, or farm, agriculture mainly, so it's one of the trades down there. So they even bought a boat down here, *Deep Water*, was the first one. I don't know, it sank, and then they raised it and refurbished it. And *Reanna* was another one; the *Baltic* was another one.

So there were a bunch of Latvians over here, fishing. Well, from then on, I fished on a lot of boats. I fished like 26-27 years. There's a lot of water underneath me.

[04:50]

JF: So now you were a fairly small boy when you took the first trip out of Sweden?

RG: I was 12-13 at that time.

JF: What did that feel like at the time; were you scared or was it an adventure? Do you remember how you felt about this big trip?

RG: Not really. It was something that my father explained. It was safety; actually I saw the bombs fall on Latvia and I saw the Russians marching in, the Germans, and my father worked in Raga, the capital. And at the summer time we were at this beach; we rented a house on the beach. And he came this one night, he came back on the train and he said to my mother, "We're leaving; next train out of here is in one hour and we're going to be on it. So whatever you got, you're bringing it." And we were. And the train after that blew up; they got mined. That was the last train out. So my father, he explained; I trusted him, and that was it. It was one of the things you had to do, for your own safety.

JF: So when you got, it was Provincetown, what did your dad do for work when he got there?

RG: For one thing, they put us all in jail for four months; illegal entrance into the country. And then they took, at $500 per head for the grown ups, somebody had to sponsor on the outside to get us out. At that time, Senator Kennedy and Saltonstall were Senators in Massachusetts. The President died, assassinated; he became President. They put a Bill before Congress with all our names on it, for us to be legitimately to stay in the United States, otherwise we had to leave. There was no Law that we could stay here. So, that's the reason… because we landed in Provincetown, that's what they called us, Pilgrims. The Life Magazine… there were a lot of papers, Boston Globe, everyone had articles for four months, so were detained in East Boston, Immigration Station. After that, he had an Engineering degree from Latvia and then he came here and worked for Pulplo Filters, as an Engineer Draftsman. And then he worked for Gillette as a research engineer. And then he got two more degrees out of Northeastern University. He's still alive, he's retired, 92. He's got a place in Winchester, MA and he's got a place in New Hampshire and I do too; so commuting, travel back and forth.

[08:29]

JF: Now what was the first boat you got a job on, was it a dragger?

RG: A scalloper. Most of my years I've been scalloping. Most of the time, out of the 26 years I've been… 25 I've been an engineer, so I've always been in the engine room. I've gone cook; you can jump from boat to boat; it's like self-employed in a way, so it doesn't matter; you take a trip off, you go on another boat; there's no penalties on that one. So I've gone cook, I've gone engineer, I've been in the pilot house a couple times. I've been even in Florida longlining for swordfish and tilefish.

JF: What does longliner mean?

RG: Ok. It's a line that's a hook every 30 feet. And you got 15 miles of line.

JF: So it's not nets at all, just hook and line?

RG: No, it just comes out of a big wheel with hooks, and as it goes out, you bait it; you have to bait it fast to make sure the hooks don't get your hands, because that thing spins out. And then you leave it down… tilefish, you leave it down; as soon as you get it down, whatever miles you put down, you start hauling it back. Swordfish, you

set out just about sundown because sharks… daytime sharks attack the swordfish. So you set out at sundown and first light, as soon as… you eat and then get on deck and haul the 15, 20 miles of line back. As fast as you can, before the sharks.

JF: So they're hooked and you want to get them in before the sharks?

RG: Before the sharks get them. A lot of times you catch sharks on the line. Then we shoot them and drop them back. And shark fin soup, that's good stuff; I've had that. The Japanese are great for that.

JF: I've heard but I don't know anything about it, or what it tastes like.

RG: What they do is just take the shark fish; you either sell it raw, as-is, or you dry it out. Dry it out; probably right now it goes about $200 per pound. I didn't know anything about it, this was in Florida. I visited this restaurant. There was this Polish man, and he said, "Bring some in, I'll cook some up for you." You make a vegetable soup, you get the shark fins in the vegetable soup; get the flavor out of them. You throw the fins away and eat the soup. It's very spicy, very delicious, extremely delicious.

[11:44]

JF: Do you have memories that you want to tell me and I can ask questions if they occur.

RG: Ok. This is kind of weird; its part fishing yet it might sound religious, but it's fascinating. Fishermen are a different breed. They go out, they work hard, they come in, and they more or less party. I don't know what it was, but I was on the way out, I was the engineer, I think it was *Rianda*, one of the boats. You get seasick because of a hangover; you hit the bottom waiting for your check and you leave the bottom going onto the boat and that's the standard procedure. On the boats that are rocking, boy, you're sick. I don't know why, because it happened so many years ago, but I was praying to God and I was getting mad at Him, kind of. I said, "Look, God, if you're listening to me, show me a sign. Anything, or am I wasting my time." In my bunk, I have to get up there and start working in a couple hours, and they are already working because I can hear the drags clanging on deck. I had to go to the bathroom, and when men go to the bathroom, they do go on deck, because it washes all over the deck, ok. And I go on deck, and the drags are just dumped and haul up the whole bottom from the ocean; everything is in that pile and you pick it through with your hands. And out of the middle of the pile, this weird thing was sticking out, in the air. This is after I talked to God, a few minutes afterwards. The shape of it and everything was so weird that there was something wrong with it. So I went on and grabbed it, and it was heavy, it was a bone. And these guys are working on deck; nobody noticed it, the pilot house, the captain didn't notice what it was. I grabbed it, it's a bone, and it looks like an elephant tusk. So I wrapped it in plastic and put it underneath my bunk. So it stayed there underneath my mattress. And I talked to somebody on shore, another fisherman, and he knew somebody out of Woods Hole, Professor Emery. So he calls him up on the telephone and this Professor Emery tells me to bring the bone down. I bring it down, he examines it, and he says, "I'll get a hold of you in a couple days." He calls be up to see if I can come back to talk to him. He says, he also asks me to find out where I found the bone, where the drags were, where we were fishing. So I did get this from the captain because we had just started fishing. So I knew the location. So he says, "It's a walrus tusk; around 20-25,000 years old. And it is a

record find because it was 23 inches long, almost 2 feet long and about 2.5 inches in diameter. It was a record find, so he wanted to ask if I'd donate it to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. I said, "Sure, as long as my name is under it." He says, "Ok." What it is, that area where we were fishing was actually dry land at one time, 25,000 years ago, it was dry land. And there were walruses out there, so this old time walrus died and got buried and we dug it up. So anyway, what it amounts to: if you're playing horses or gambling odds, odds or probability, when I asked for a sign, what are the odds for me finding that bone at that time? Nobody else saw it. It's weird. Really weird. Especially 20,000 years old; it's not something that was a few months or 100 years old.

[16:46]

JF: So when you first found it on deck, had you figured that it was the sign that God sent?

RG: Actually I didn't. I know it was something different; I was fascinated. I actually maybe it was an elephant tusk because it was so big. But what's an elephant doing out on the ocean? That's what I couldn't figure out. I had to go on deck in a few hours; starting a trip is not really a happy time. You got two weeks. I figured out in one week I was working 115-120 hours per week. Sometimes you only get 3 hours of sleep; actually you don't get 3 hours of sleep because you eat for the three hours and sleep after. So you have a couple hours in the bunk. You work like 9 hours straight, then 3 hours off.

JF: Do you get used to being tired or no?

RG: Yeah, you get used to it so you can stay up for 2 days, up tot the point of thee. Especially when you come in; you have to wash everything down, then you have to repair the gear or whatever it is for the following trip; as much as you can. You got to unload, and being the engineer, you not only have to wash the engine room, change the oil, get the engine ready for the next trip. This is all on the same trip, so it's plenty of work.

JF: How did you end up as engineer? Did your dad teach you things, or did you just have a knack for it?

RG: I don't know. I guess sometimes people see something in me that I don't really see. I've been very innovative; if there's a problem, I have a tendency to come up with a solution. I got the thing: if there's a will, there's a way. There's no such thing that you can't do something. It depends on your will. I've tried; I even tried patenting my own, reading patents. My father, he's got a whole file in Washington with patents in a commercial. Then I worked in a research lab before I went fishing, so in there, they patented a couple things that were mine. If you work for a company, the patents belong to them. Whatever idea you have belongs to them. I worked for Avon Saul in Avon, MA in the lab. One thing that was printed in the Weights and Measurements in Washington, was the flexibility of rubber, like soles, they come out in 3'x3' sheets. If you stamp it one way or the other way, is the flexibility. I made this pattern, these measurements, in 30 seconds… the number of degrees it bends with a 100 gram weight on it. And Washington accepted it as parts of Weights and Measurements. I got to see the letter that they did it. And consequently made thousands and thousands of dollars of the same piece of material because they cut it differently. I got a hand shake out of it.

[21:01]
JF: So you were always just sort of clever that way?
RG: I don't know why; I have no idea.
JF: I don't know too much about the work of an engineer on the boat, but were you doing all the same work as the fishermen crew but also engineer?
RG: It's all extra. The engine part is on my own time. When everybody goes to sleep I have to work on the engine room. First thing when I get up, I have to go down in the engine room to check the oil, make sure everything is running. The last thing I do, I have to go down in the engine room, after I get work done, and I grease everything that's grease-able, three times a trip, every three days, I have to grease everything that moves. You have to change the oil, wash down, put the zincs in it because of electrolysis happens in water because you got electricity on the boat, you have salt water, and it eats all the metal. You have these zinc plugs that you put into the engine and in the water system, what happens is the zincs are attacked by electricity first and it's eaten away and it saves all the metal of the engine or the boat.
JF: Did someone else teach you all that or is that something you just knew?
RG: Well they asked me if I wanted to learn to be an engineer. There's a down fall in that; I can always find a job because everybody wants an engineer on a boat; it was a big demand. But you almost couldn't get away from it; if you wanted to you couldn't get away from it. I've been in the water two times; both Christmas trips; I have takes of it. Where I had to be hauled onto another boat and taken ashore in a survival suit in the winter time.
JF: When was that? Many years ago?
RG: I can't tell you… I have tapes at home, but it says on the tape, the year, "Christmas trip such and such…" Both times it was Christmas trips.
JF: And what happened each time?
RG: One time I cut a piece of my finger off from a drag, setting out. The other piece was in my glove. This one here was just hanging, wrapped some paper towels around it and put in a survival suit on. There was boat going back in. So they got together; they threw a line over, put a line across me, and I jumped in and they hauled me over onto the other boat?
[23:58]
JF: Was it scary or was it all worked out so you weren't scared?
RG: I don't know if… something you don't really think, you do it. Pleasant? No. You stand on the outside of the rail, over the rail, outside. And when they get ready and say "Jump!" And you jump backwards into the water. You go under the water, and then you come to the top again. I don't know.
JF: What was the other time?
RG: I had contracted jaundice. My skin turned yellow and everybody thinks, in my family, it's from eating raw scallops. At the end of the watch, we bag up the scallops, wash them real good and bag them up. Well I was bagging them up. I was popping them like candy, eating them raw, it's good; they are really sweet, a nice taste. And, I don't know, I have no idea. They were afraid of me because I was turning yellow. That it would contaminate the scallops.
JF: Oh that's what they were afraid of; they weren't afraid for your health?

RG: They got rid of me! I got the tapes at home; I talked to Mrs. Bendiksen, and if you guys want to copy those tapes, it's like a heirloom… they've always already been down to Woods Hole, to he Maritime Academy, I didn't even know it. The only thing I'd like… the machine I has is a VCR tape deck; they are 2 hours a piece. The working parts of the boat, everything is recorded; on deck, the storm, me going over the side; it was my camera.

JF: Was this a scalloper?

RG: Yeah. I think both the times it was the *Ambassador*. It's still out there, on the other side. A big red boat, owned by the Tennison's, Norwegians. If I can get a copy, you guys make a copy, give one for me, so I can store these tapes. I got three VCR's but what it is, I didn't know it, I can tape from the TV but I can't get from tape deck to tape deck.

JF: I think they have special chords.

RG: No I think it's a program. I have chords. I can't copy tapes, period. They didn't tell me that when I bought them.

JF: Laura might someone that can have it done.

RG: I didn't bring them because I didn't know what the situation was.

JF: It's probably just as well you didn't bring them this weekend.

RG: The last time I did it, the next thing I know they were down in Woods Hole, I didn't even know it. When you guys are around, get a hold of me and I'll do that.

[27:47]

JF: How long were you a galley cook?

RG: Well, I've done that quite a few times. The first time, I forget the name of the boat now off-hand, but the guy, he lived on North Street. Dave's Electric, in Fairhaven, their father, he was on the boat. I didn't have a job. I had taken one off; he comes back, because I was staying with him, renting a room. He owned the house, and he said, "Hey, we need a cook." I said, "I've never gone as a cook." They are going to leave in a couple days. So what I did, I bought Betty Crocker's Cookbook, that and between me and him, we made up the grocery list. I started with that; how to make gravy's and that. Also, the cook also has to work out on deck; that's extra, everything is extra. That's how I started. I've been fishing before, I know how the other guys worked, but I hadn't cooked. I would go cook; I could do most things.

JF: Was it very hard to cook on ship? Sometimes I've been on boats, they are smaller, I couldn't stay on my feet, never mind cooking?

RG: Yeah, because everything bounces. The pots and pans they are in with long springs on the stove, and the stove is… when I cooked, it was oil fired. Oil underneath, almost like an oil heating system except it was a big cast iron stove. On one corner, they had a big kettle for hot water, always fresh, hot water. Everything fly's, everything bounces, a lot of times everything goes over the floor and you end up starting from scratch and cleaning up the floor. How would you explain it… it's like… O.K., you've been on a bus, right? Like downtown somewhere, where there's cobblestone, railroad track; well try cooking on the bus. Everything you put down, moves.

JF: So you must develop a whole different system?

RG: You kind of walk with the waves that roll, you kind of go… everything. You hold a cup in your hand; you don't put it down. And then when you set the table, you have

a table cloth. You have a frame in the middle; that's where your pots and pans go; there are rails on the side. Then you have rails on each end of the table, surrounding it, so nothing can really fall off. It will slide, but nothing can fall off. You do have a table cloth on it, and you wet the table cloth. You put a roll of paper towels down. Everything is wet, so it sticks. It keeps as much as you can in one place.

JF: Was it very hard to please a whole crew when you picked what to cook? Or were they so hungry, they were happy?

RG: Yeah. I remember… ok. I think it was… the time I started cook on that one boat, the same boat, and there was a guy named Red. Actually, he committed suicide; shot himself in Alaska, he went to Alaska, I don't know why because I wasn't there. He borrowed a bartender's gun, he didn't know why; he went out in the alley and blew his brains out. Something to do with his girlfriend downtown with a taxi driver down here; bad information. Anyway, once a trip, you have all the leftovers… and you make a meal from everything that is left over; it's a catch all, a little bit of everything. I cooked up hotdogs, left over hotdogs, with beans, kale soup or whatever. I took the second table in the evening, and I ate too. So I grabbed a hot dog or whatever it was. And Red, he got mad because I took the hot dog; he wanted the hot dog. So we ended up throwing the hotdog at each other. So nobody ate the hotdog because it ended up on the floor. The food doesn't belong to anybody; take what you want….

JF: First come, first serve…?

RG: First come, first serve; because it's leftovers. It's not that there was a hotdog for everybody, that's why you have leftovers because there's more than you would eat. It's unusual to have a problem, really. Most of the time, a joke turns into a problem.

[33:42]

RG: One time I was cook on another boat too. And this Polack, he was the mate on a boat. We were sitting in the galley, at mid-night, it was off-watch, and there was a bowl of fired chicken in the middle of the table. And it was fairly calm. And he was eating watermelon and he was popping his watermelon seeds at me with his fingers, they were hitting my hat. I said, "Don't do that." And he didn't take it, and did it again. "Don't do that." He did it a third time; I took that big aluminum pan of chicken with all the grease in it, and put it right on top of his head. He didn't have a hat on. Grease, oil, running down his cheeks and everything.

JF: I bet he didn't do it after that! Interesting. Was there one kind of fishing that you liked better than the others or whatever you could go was ok?

RG: I've been on a dragger too, usually as a cook or engineer on a dragger. Because I'm not really a new mender that way; I try it, but it's a different art. I work on steel, steel draggers. I like scalloping better, I think. Florida wasn't good because the boat owners took 50% right off the top. Then you pay all the food, oil, ice, bait… comes off after the boat owner. Then the Captain takes half of that, what's left. And what's left then, is divided up between the crew and there isn't a heck of a lot left. So I didn't stay there that long. I ended up moving back up here.

JF: Now when you were up here doing engineer and cook, would you get extra money for that?

RG: Yeah, you get a bonus. I personally ran into a lot of trouble like that; I got in trouble with the IRS. The one time, the boat owner, I forgot… it was a guy from New Bedford, became a politician; he owned day boats down the Cape somewhere. If you

had 9 men or less, you could call that boat self-employed. Before that, they always took taxed out; Social Security, taxes, the whole works. But if they became self-employed, they didn't bother taking it out, the tax part. Yet the IRS says the people, the cooks, engineers, and mates, including skippers, they receive a bonus because the work they do. And if they receive a bonus or per they call it, you're not self-employed anymore. The IRS says that. I didn't pay the taxes, then I didn't have the money, then the IRS was after me. Then Clinton as President, because New Bedford was such, the industry was all fishing industry and the boat owners owed something like $17 million dollars, they had to chock up to the IRS, because of that, Clinton excused them because of the economy. But the people: engineers, mates, cooks, did not get that pardon. We got left holding the bag.

[38:03]

JF: Do you think they just didn't realize they needed to add you in, or do you know why?

RG: He didn't care. He cared about the boat owners which most are… these are million dollar boats you're talking about. They cared about the boat owners and their millions and the industry…

JF: As a whole but not….

RG: Yeah, I'm just a little ant in the ant pile; I'm nothing. So all these guys got to hold the bag. I went to the IRS, I fought them for years and years, I ended up I didn't have to pay; the Statue of Limitations ran out. At first it's supposed to run out 7 years, and then they upped it to ten years. It took me 11 years to get rid of the IRS.

JF: You know, by the time you paid those kinds of taxes on it, it wouldn't be worth doing.

RG: You can't, you can't do it anymore because, actually I tried to pay it back. I paid back what I actually owed them in real money, but the interest… not paying taxes, a fine. Not paying them on time, another fine. Fine on top of a fine, then you ended up the top percentage interest; something like 29%; every year it grows. Every year they put another fine, plus the interest. That thing is like a snowball on the Himalayas coming down the mountain; it grows so fast, you can't do it. I survived.

JF: You hear a lot about the regulations, but I hadn't heard that aspect of them from anyone.

RG: The funny part, the only reason, he was making the Law through Congress being for self-employment of fishermen, because he didn't want to pay taxes on a business he was running.

JF: Oh, he was doing it for his own use.

RG: Right. His personal use, that's why he made that Law, so he gained, while everybody else got screwed in the process. Those are all facts. I had a nice lady, IRS right down at the Federal building, she was helping me out. She was investigating the whole process for a long time. I didn't pay anything.

JF: That's good, but what a hassle?

RG: By the time you get your credit back. That's another thing; everything goes into the credit bureau. Now I have good credit and that.

JF: When did you retire from fishing, how long ago?

RG: In 1992.

JF: And how long had you been doing it at that point?

RG: At that time, about 26-27 years. I started fishing, I think we were getting $0.57 pounds of scallops on the market. Right now they are getting about $8 or more because in the market at Stop and Shop, you're paying $12.99, $11.99 a pound. You used to buy in the store $1.10 a pound. Things have changed.

JF: When you started, were the boats the older kinds of boats, the wooden ones?

RG: Yeah, the wooden. I was on a boat named the *Bear* which was a WWII… it was owned by Latvians, people from New York, Latvians, they got together and bought this boat as an investment. The owner was never on the boat, it never really made that much money. But it was a torpedo boat, chaser. It was long, real long, and sleek, wooden boat with a huge, Superior railroad engine. I wasn't a modern engine; it was just like the railroad has. That was something else. That thing rolled… it was shaped like a cigar and it rolled like a cigar.

JF: Did you ever get seasick when you started fishing?

RG: No. When I was living in Sweden, I was motion sick. I couldn't go on a bus, a train, a street car… anything that moved I got really sick. And then when we got on this boat, coming from Sweden for the two months, the first two weeks, I was violently sick; I couldn't eat, really sick. In fact, we hit a big North Sea storm, a real bad one, and we had to go into Dover, England and lay over there. After that, after 11 days we headed back out again…

[43:44] END OF INTERVIEW – Interview ended mid-sentence.