

Name of person Interviewed: Bob Mitchell [BM] and Kaare Ness [KN]

Facts about this person:

Age (if known)

Sex Male

Occupation

If a fisherman (if retired, list the ports used when fishing),

Home port,

and Hail Port (port fished from, which can be the same)

Residence (Town where lives)

Ethnic background (if known)

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR]

Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood

Place interview took place: Oral History Station at Harbor Masters House

Date and time of interview: September 23, 2005

## INDEX / KEYWORDS

### KEYWORDS:

- Marine services
- Shore support
- School in England
- Family business
- Engines
- Maintenance
- Repairs
- Norwegians
- Ethnicity shifts
- Urging cooperation
- Stringent enforcement
- Optimism

## TRANSCRIPT

[Start of File]

[00:00]

MR: O.K Here we go. Today is Friday, September 23, 2005 and I'm here in the Harbor master's Office on the Pier 3 in New Bedford with Bob Mitchell. Could you tell me a little bit, give me your full name please, a little bit about where you're from, what you do, where you grew up, your connections to New Bedford and the fishery.

BM: Fine, thank you very much, it's a pleasure to be here, working with you on this narrative history. My name is Bob Mitchell, officially Robert B. Mitchell. My dad was born and brought up in Fairhaven. And the family, his family, grandparents. We're Fairhaven-ites. And since 1954, after dad finished the Navy and stint as a fisherman, started a business in Fairhaven called R.A. Mitchell Company. Originally on the site of where the new Holiday Inn Express is. There was a small building there that was an out-building, if you will, to the skipper, Motor Inn, owned by Leo Katz, and dad's side of the business there, marine engines and repair to engines for the fishing industry. I joined the company after high school 1961 and went to England for a year and a half to the Lister Engine Factory School. The Lister engine was primarily used in the fishing industry as an auxiliary generator engine and running pumps. Went to their factory school for a year and a half and came back and joined the company in 1962.

MR: And where was that in England?

BM: It was in a town called Jersley(sp?) in the west country, in the Coxwall hills. The factory at the time had 3,000 employees. Sold engines all over the world. Met many people from all walks of life and from all different countries that were going to the school there. And I spent four days a week in the factory and one day a week at Technical College. But what they do in the Apprentice Course in England, or in most countries where they have Apprenticeships, the apprentice will spend six months in the foundry or six months in the machine shop. As I couldn't afford the four years standard apprentice, what they did is put the course compressed it, if you will, down to spending 4-weeks in the foundry, 4-weeks in the machine shop, 4-5 weeks in assembly of different engines, different models and different machine shop tools, that getting to know each individual component, and then to the testing, final assembly, testing of the engines, and then up into the offices and sales and some of the service. So I did a year and a half of the school.

[03:31]

MR: And that's L I S T E R, Lister?

BM: That's correct. It is now been sold and merged with other companies and now it's called Lister-Petter, which is the trade name. Two engine companies, Petter was one other company in England that manufactured engines, and Lister. The two companies joined forces in 1966 and continue to build engines today under the Lister-Petter name.

MR: And they are the top of the line?

BM: Well, it's the engine of choice for most of the fishermen. In the early days, the shrimp boats, the shrimping industry and the fishing industry up here, they all needed an auxiliary engine. Most of the boats were 32-Volt, DC, direct current, using

batteries, and 110-Volt DC with batteries. They ran the main engine all trip and that ran the electrical system. When the boat came to the dock, they would start the small Lister and that would keep the batteries going for the 3, 4, 5 days they were home. Now, with the advent of AC power, most of the boats need more power and Kilowatt. They've gone to different engines. We still use the Lister engine air cooled engine, that was it's claim to fame, it was air cooled, so they could leave it running at night, 24-hours a day and not have a worry that if anything happened to the engine, the boat would sink. No connections were needed to be to the hull. Your water connections. They could just let it run. And it was very reliable. The AC generators now, they do have to run a connection to the hull... sometimes it can be a worry, but we still use the Lister air-cooled engine. Many applications on fish boats.

MR: Are you kind of the main supplier to the industry here in New Bedford?

BM: Yes. We do have competition, but we are one of the major suppliers of the auxiliary engines to the fishing fleet. There was a time when we probably had 80-90% of the fleet with engines and generators. And there's other people out there that make a good product. So we're probably 50-60% of the fleet.

[06:16]

MR: And where are you located now, did you say?

BM: We're located on Rte 6 on the New Bedford/ Fairhaven bridge. Been there for 16 years now in the old Dugan/Buick building. It's now our building. Moved there in 1986. I guess almost 20 years now. The first building was 1954-67 was at the old, right where the Holiday Inn Express is on Middle Street. Dad and I built a building in 1967 just up the street and right along side Park Motors Oldsmobile dealership. And we were there from '67n to '86.

MR: And '86 to now, you're on the bridge. How do you go about your business? Do people just know to come to you because they've been coming to you for a long time, or do you have to do marketing?

BM: Some do. We do marketing. We are known around the waterfront, we have 20 people, employees, and quite honestly, most of the employees are our best salesmen. Quite a few of them have been with us 20+ years and they're involved with the fishing industry. Some of them are, some of their family members are fishermen. We do a number of trade shows around the country and we travel to the shipyards that the boat builders down in Florida, Alabama, Texas. People to build the boats, work closely with the fishermen here when they are doing the design work. We've worked with naval architects like John Gilbert that do the design of the boats. We work with them on it. One of the mainstays of what we've done is provide either parts or service to the engine. It's one thing to sell an engine but another to have parts and service on the shelf to back it up. Because the fishing industry is a 24-hour a day business. It has to work, otherwise the fishermen isn't making any money, unless he's kept his engine running and his nets are on the bottom. So we have to make the systems work. It takes the parts and service on the shelf to make it happen.

[09:15]

MR: Do you import the engines?

BM: The Lister engine is imported. It's brought in to this country by a factory, shipped over from the factory. And the other engines we buy from places in America. John Deere is one of the engines of choice for the industry. And those are purchased in this

country. There are other engines that are also used. Different engines for different applications on the fish boats. So there are other diesel engines that have come into use.

MR: Now you said you go to Trade Shows, so that means your business really has, a National reach, or...?

BM: International even. We've supplied engines to fishing industries in Africa, South America, Caribbean, some of the shrimp boat industry, and that's also brought us the ability to work with other types of products. An engine drives a generator, the water pumps, and we could make generators that not only work on boats, but also run a business, run a building. And a lot of our business now is involved with stand-by generator systems for banks and businesses.

[11:15 – RECORDING PAUSED]

MR: Ok. Now you mentioned that you were working with some of the companies in Texas and Alabama, and as we're doing this interview, there's a big hurricane that has either been there or is heading... there's been several in September of 2005. How is that going to affect your business and have you been in a situation like that before?

BM: Yes, I've been in a situation. We've worked with those shipyards in the south for 25 years or so and yes there are problems. They're resilient, they'll come through it. Unfortunately this time in Louisiana and Alabama there was extensive damage to some of the fleet and some of the boat yards, although in the past 2 days we've been in touch with 2 boat yards that were almost completely destroyed in Alabama that have built boats for up here. And they're going along, life goes on. Hopefully the damages they've incurred on the buildings aren't too great. Most of the equipment was probably covered with water, but that can be cleaned up and rebuilt. The unfortunate part is some of the damage to boats that were being built. I think there's going to be quite a bit of work. But the people are still there, they haven't lost their lives and they're still going along. One good customer is there now and he's... this morning, the streets of Bialabarty (sp?) had a foot of water on it which was, from this new storm. But they'll be O.K. and they'll survive, it'll go good.

[13:15]

MR: And just for the record, that's Hurricane Katrina that was about a month ago, about 3 weeks ago and then this new storm is Rita that is coming in literally as we're doing this interview. What would you say as part of the team with the fleet, where would you perceive your role to be?

BM: Our role I think is shall we call it, shore support, for the industry. We are... as our company has the majority of the auxiliary engines and generators on the boats, I think we play a big part in the maintenance of the fleet. I don't consider us overly important but we do work with the fleet and as the fleet was growing, and constricting in many cases years ago, we were lucky to be able to help carry the fleet and some of the people with payments, they weren't able to pay for repairs and things, so you're able to carry a lot of them on credit. 99.9% of the fishermen are great credit, hard workers, know the value of the dollar. They are going to pay the bill.

MR: What's the range of prices of engines these days?

BM: Well this morning we just quoted a generator for a boat, \$23,000 by the time it gets installed and in there, might be \$30,000 as a high number for a boat. The smaller generators at this working waterfront festival we'll be exhibiting a small 4 cylinder,

30 kilowatt generator which is \$10,000. Some of the small ones, the belt drive, alternators, and that, could run as low as \$4,000. We're also starting to get up into propulsion engines for lobster boats and bigger boats, like a 60 foot dragger. Those engines will go up into the \$70-80-90,000 price range.

[16:07]

MR: What's the life of an engine if it's maintained?

BM: Life of an engine, a generator set, is running continuously 24-hrs a day while the boat is at sea, most of the bigger boats have two generators and they alternate running them. But we'll expect to get 20,000 hours of run time, which is 2 ½ years continuous 24-hrs a day, 7 days a week. Usually life span is measured by hours, hours of run time. Some of the engines start out when they are new, to be expensive because they have re-buildable cylinders, so you might run it for 20,000 hours and then it's a minimal expense to change pistons and cylinders and let it run another 20,000 hours. Some of the smaller engines today and some of the lesser expensive ones are what we call parent bore engines and need to be removed from the vessel completely to be rebuilt. That was always one advantage of a Lister engine is that you never had to take the engine out, you could just take the cylinders out and change them.

MR: Is this business going to be passed on in your family?

BM: Yes, I have 2 daughters, I have 3 daughters, but 2 of our daughters work in the company full-time, sometimes called mother's hours, after taking care of the kids, but work full-time and best thing ever happen to me is have the kids working there.

MR: Have you, yourself been a fisherman at any time in your life?

BM: Sport fishing, I like sport fishing but no I have not been out fishing. I always wanted to make a trip to see what it was like but my mother never would let me. Then when we got married, my wife would never let me go out and make a trip. I've been out on boats and know how systems work, but I've never actually made a trip.

MR: What would you say... you've got a perspective on what, the last 45 years, watching the industry and watching the industry in New Bedford, what are some of the things you've observed that have changed over time?

[19:03]

BM: The early fishermen in the '60's that I can really recollect, very hard workers and had to struggle to make ends meet. A lot of the struggle was in those early days... fishing equipment, the fishing gear itself, the vessels needed a lot of repair and the boats were out 7,8,10 days. The prices they got for their fish and scallops were not good, and thanks to the Seafood Producers Association and the Seafood Co-op that was started, some of that is now changed. The Seafood Producers started to do their own marketing of fish and seafood. What they did was went out and created a demand rather than have the fish dealer tell them how much they would pay for scallops and fish, the general public created a demand for fish and seafood which required the fish dealers to... in order to meet that demand from the public, started to raise prices. Unfortunately just this past month here with scallop prices, it's almost too high. It needs to be a little bit of a balance, but today's fisherman, it's just written in the paper or reports... that people have done from UMass Dartmouth, the fishermen can only put in 88 days of fishing time, and because of some of the fishing restrictions and some of the conservation measures that were taken, in restricting the amount of vessels that could fish, they have allowed the scallop in this instance, to

reproduce and it's truly a sustainable fishery. And some of those area closures worked. The fishermen now and boat owner, has a good income stream, it's still not easy, but with the price of scallops the way they are now, and the volume of scallops available, it's working, the fishermen are making money, the boat owners are making money, the boat owners are paying the bills. And some boat owners are planning on new vessels.

[22:26]

MR: So that has the ripple affect of making your part of the industry look rosy.

BM: As some of the older boats are going out, they are catching good quantities and good quality fish and scallops. And when those boats return to port, general wear and tear requires us to fix engines and generators. And also many people will upgrade and expand and put more equipment on the boat, requiring bigger generators so they come and see us for bigger generators... yes, definitely a ripple affect, and it's a good effect. I'm glad that this Waterfront Festival is doing its part to inform the general public of what goes on on the waterfront. So many of the people come down and they see the rust on the side of a boat, that's today's rust, it's not yesterdays. Most of these boats, every one of them is worth \$1 million. And yes there's a few that need some extra help, but by and large the fleet is constantly being upgraded and they are taking care of things.

MR: Are there any other observations that you'd like to make about the industry, about New Bedford in general?

[24:16]

BM: The unfortunate part of some of the area closures and some of the restrictions that fisheries service has placed, it seems to be 'them against us' kind of mentality. Some of the people at National Marine Fisheries Service, however well intentioned, haven't been as directly involved with the industry and they come up with rules and criteria that the fishermen must follow. And most of the fishermen, most of them are honest and will try to do things the right way, but for many reasons, some of them haven't been as sophisticated learning the rules, learning to read, learning to read English, and the Coast Guard is quick to, an enforcement agencies, are quick to come after those fishermen for minor infractions that, however well intentioned the fishermen is, practically an impossibility to obey... it's practically an impossibility to avoid an infraction. Yes there are people out there that will purposely break every rule they can to bring in as much as they can, and those people should be persecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and a few recently have. But when it comes down to interpreting rules as in if you bring in more scallops from a closed area trip, each bag of scallops weighs 50 lbs, approximately. Just the natural effect of a scallop in the fish hold for ten days or whatever of a trip, it is going to gain weight, and if a boat brings in more than its allowed limit, closed area trip, he can lose the whole trip if he's 10,15, 20 lbs over. And when you're working with 18,000 lbs, you're working 10-12 days, trying to count, there is not such thing as a delicate scale on a fish boat, if you're off a few pounds, they can confiscate the whole trip, and some of them have. A lot of times it's not logical thinking when setting up some of the rules.

[27:28]

MR: Now are you alluded to people learning to read and learning to read in English, what changes in the ethnic make-up of the fleet have you seen over time?

BM: I think when I first started out, the majority, or a lot, I shouldn't say the majority, but a lot of the fishermen, there were quite a few people that came in from Latvia, one of the old timers, Bob Breeze, Karl Trutzes (sp?) were people that escaped from Russia and Latvia, just before it was taken over during the War. There were probably 50 or so Latvian people that came in. Quite a few Norwegians came over, the Jacobsens, Isaksens that came into this country and started and worked and did well. Some of that shift is now gone over to Portuguese and Italian. Some of the crew members now are Guatemalan, Venezuelan. On scallop boats it's still mostly I think American now. The draggers primarily Portuguese. It's always been a very good mix. And luckily we've always been able to work with all those ethnic groups. I don't consider a business an ethnic business, we like to treat each individual sale or individual contact with someone as an individual person, doesn't matter where they are from.

[29:54 – STOPPED RECORDING DUE TO INTERRUPTION FROM OUTSIDE]

MR: I'll say we have been joined by Kaare Ness [KN] who has known the Mitchell family for a long time, so we're kind of adding to this in talking about the Norwegians role, and I will give you your own microphone in a few minutes but thanks Bob for... these are pretty sensitive, so they'll pick it up.

BM: We were just talking, before Mr. Ness came in, we were talking about the ethnic changes and I said yes in the beginning in the 60's there were a lot of Norwegian people and now it's kind of shifted to a lot of American people on scallop boats and Portuguese primarily on the dragger fleet. While you were here, did you see much of an ethnic shift, were there many American fishermen when you first started out?

[31:00]

KN: [Thick Norwegian accent]. Not so many on the scallop boats because most of the Norwegians they did not know how to be scallop boats. Not only that but I would say a good part of the Norwegians came from the same island back in Norway which was Karmoy. Yeah. Of course I had 13 wonderful years here in New Bedford/ Fairhaven area, we thought we were doing alright. I had a son that graduated from Fairhaven High School in 1968 and later on of course he left here before we left the same year, and went out west to go to Tacoma (sp?) to go to school. And we left also in '68. The reason we left is, we had been out west to take a look around to see what it looked like out there, I had a boat out there that was doing alright. So I came back, I'd been doing some king crabbing, with my brother up there, I came back again and I thought if there was any way of getting there, that would be nice to get out west. While I was up in Kodiak, AK, I met some fish buyers there and of course they were talking about scallops and in them days they had a local boat that was going in some scallops into Seattle. They said if you can get some money together, would you be interested to come on out this way and do a scallop charter.

[32:42]

BM: That was when the fleet here from '65-1970 or 73, 74, were having a tough time scalloping and that's when 2-3 boat owners got together with you and took the boats out to Alaska.

KN: We left early that year in '68, we had a 40 day charter with the National Marine Fisheries, state of Alaska, and the buyers out there, fish buyers, and before the year was over in '68, there was 18 boats that left New Bedford for Alaska, so there were



quite a few boats. Although scallop fishing never really turned out to be what a lot of people thought it was going to be. I myself was in scallop for probably only a year and a half. Then I started in king crab instead, which was the big thing out there in them days.

BM: Right. Mostly of the king crab. Now of all those boats that went out, there were you said there were 14 boats or so that left here and went out...

KN: I think there was a total of 18 that left.

BM: 18. How many came back after a number of years. There were quite a few that came back weren't there?

KN: I think most of them probably came back. Some of them, there were a couple of the boats that was changed over to king crab out there. But even my boat, the *Viking Queen*, I sold out to my partners because I built a crab boat and the partners, in turn, there were four boats in the partnership, two of them stayed out west which were the old XXXXX and XXXXX [indecipherable names of the boats; names sounded Norwegian]. Two of them came back here which were the *Bountiful* and the *Viking Queen*, but they were sold out by the people that bought me out too, it was a big fish company out west called New England Fish Company that bought them out and send two boats back here.

BM: Ok. Because I knew there was quite a story there with some of the boats going out and coming back in again. It turned out I think at the end, I think it turned out rather well. It took some of the pressure off the scallop fishery here and allowed some of the scallops to come back. And quite a few of the fishermen, not only the boats, but quite a few of the men from here went out to Alaska and a lot a fishing, Dutch Harbor, Kodiak, and that area.

[35:14]

KN: I know when I think of some of the people that came out west for the king crab, most of them came from New Bedford, of the Norwegian guys, they had all been in New Bedford before they came out west. Almost all of them, more than 90% of the guys that came that way when we left, they came from New Bedford.

MR: This is interesting and we'll get more of that story when I do the interview with you. Part of the reason I was asking about the ethnic make-up is because one of the opportunities of doing this Oral History project is we're kind of documenting the industry as it is changing and because I'm certainly interested in a lot of maritime information, but also how people have always have always come to Massachusetts because we've had a strong economy, they come here to work from other parts of the world, from other parts of the country, and we can kind of see where people go, what industries they are attracted to and for the ages that we're documenting this material for, it's going to be really invaluable. So if we want to finish up, is there anything, Bob, you want to say.

BM: No I think everything, ... most of the fishing industry now is doing O.K. The majority of the fishermen seem to be doing well. They've conserved, they've cut back where they've had to cut back, and now they seem to be on a fairly steady course to success. We need to keep some of the closed areas and the fishing industry has to work closely with the fisheries service to continue with sustainable fisheries. Without too much big brother looking over the shoulder, I think that the fishing industry definitely can and will survive as long as everybody is willing to work together to

make it a win-win for everybody. I think sometimes in the past the fisheries service, the Cost Guard and the fishermen were kind of all pulling in opposite directions. Hopefully the fisheries department in Washington and the people that control this area, and the Gloucester thing, can look at it as, without a fishing industry, the economy stagnates and it's not only fishing, it's those people that work in agriculture, forestry, oil drilling, those are the beginnings of an economy. It's nature's bounty and yes we have to be good stewards of that bounty, but everybody has to work together, that's the beginnings, this is what's fueling all of the economy. And without it, all we've become is a service business. Like mine, O.k. we're strictly a service business, we don't create wealth, we use wealth. Fishermen create the wealth, he's the first person in the chain and yes we need to, as I said before, we need to be good stewards of the bounty that has been provided, and we can make it work.

MR: What a way to end. If you're ... well I will say thank you very much on behalf of the Working Waterfront Festival and I'm going to turn this off.

[39:45 END OF INTERVIEW]