



# NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: March 23, 2017

## **Ayala, Sebastian**~ Oral History Interview

Madeleine Hall-Arber

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Ayala, Sebastian. Interview by Madeleine Hall-Arber. *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. Date of interview: March 23, 2017.

This oral history was produced in 2017 as part of the Workers on the Waterfront Oral History Project conducted by New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center with funding from an Archie Green Fellowship provided by the Library of Congress.

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Sebastian Ayala interview, March 23, 2017

## Background

**Name of person interviewed:** Sebastian Ayala [SA]

### Facts about this person:

<b>Age</b>	43
<b>Sex</b>	male
<b>Occupation</b>	Norpel Supervisor
<b>Residence</b>	New Bedford
<b>Ethnic background</b>	Hispanic

**Interviewer:** Madeleine Hall-Arber [MHA]

**Transcriber:** Amy [AO]

**Interview location:** NORPEL Plant, upstairs office

**Date of Interview:** March, 23, 2017

## Key Words

Norpel, foreman, fish, El Salvador, temporary workers, fish brining, grinding, fish house, cutting, cleaning, line workers, seasonal work, factory, packing, freezer, safety, freezer ammonia, Spanish speakers

## Abstract

Sebastian Ayala is a forty-three year old foreman at the Norpel plant in New Bedford. He has been working at the Norpel plant for almost fifteen years, working his way up to a foreman position. In this interview Sebastian describes coming to New Bedford from El Salvador and his work at Norpel, including various positions in the factory as well as safety concerns.

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[00:00] Intro: Sebastian Ayala was born on January 30, 1974, in San Sebastiano, El Salvador. He grew up there and came to the United States twenty years ago for better work opportunities and to help his family. He has family in Virginia but prefers New Bedford. He started on the waterfront in New Bedford doing quality inspection of fish and has been now working at Norpel for fifteen years. He briefly describes his responsibilities as foreman at Norpel: machinery supervision, position assignment for workers, and teaching and training new workers.

[05:00] Describes his work when boats come in, his history of working at Norpel, and what he likes and doesn't like about his work. Discusses the seasonal nature of the job.

[10:00] Talks about various positions and their pay. Describes the ethnic background of the workers, and the difficulty of finding people to work in the plant. Talks about his family. Describes the clothes he wears for work.

[15:00] Adds more clothing necessary for the job. Talks about his approach to hiring employees and the use of temporary workers. Describes the one danger that he must warn new workers about is the potential for ammonia leaks in the plant.

[20:00] Speaks about changes made since he started working for Norpel. Talks about languages spoken among workers. Discussion with interviewer on the new Fishing Heritage Center and its museum.

[25:03] Continued discussion on the Fishing Heritage Center. Describes some difficulty for women working in the plant. States he likes living in New Bedford.

[30:00] Ending the interview

[31:07] End of Audio

[00:00]

Madeleine Hall-Arber: So I'm going to ask you to just say your name so that I can make sure that this is close enough to you and it will pick up the recording.

Sebastian Ayala: Okay.

MHA: So what is your name?

SA: Yeah, my name is Sebastian Ayala.

MHA: Great, thank you. And I'm going to give you a short introduction that is for the recording, so that they know.

SA: Okay.

MHA: So today is March 23, 2017. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, funded by the Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of this project, we are interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford/ Fairhaven Fishing Industry, to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. The recording and transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I'm Madeleine Hall-Arber, and today I'm speaking with Sebastian Ayam?

SA: Ayala.

MHA: Ayala, oh yes, I see. Okay great, thank you. And it is a little after noon, it is about ten after twelve, and you give us permission to interview you and record this?

SA: Yes.

MHA: Okay great, thanks. So I'm going to ask you again to say your name and where you work.

SA: Oh, my name is Sebastian Ayala, I am working for Norpel.

MHA: Okay, and what is your job?

SA: Uh, I do it uh, foreman for people you know, organize everything, make sure everything working.

MHA: Okay.

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SA: Yeah.

MHA: And how did you find your way to Norpel?

SA: Oh! (laughter) Very very long time, I got, um I've been here, I've gonna here almost twenty year, twenty-one?

MHA: Really?

SA: Yeah. I worked for a few you know companies here around New Bedford and uh the beginning I see all the signs here a lot of boards here lot of, and I come and I asked if he need people and he told me yeah, come in that day, come in, a lot of work, a lot of work, yeah.

MHA: Good!

SA: Yeah.

MHA: So when you first started on the waterfront what kinds of jobs were you doing?

SA: Oh, I the first job when I come picking fish up there, come and pick out the broken, pick everything, make sure you know the quality of the fish is good.

MHA: Okay, and um, where are you from, originally?

SA: Oh, I from El Salvador.

MHA: Okay.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: And what town?

SA: San Sebastiano.

MHA: Okay, when were you born?

SA: I born in El Salvador, San Sebastiano.

MHA: And the date?

SA: The date is uh, January 30, '74.

MHA: Thank you. Was anybody else in your family involved in fishing?

SA: No. No I try my nephew, he working for a couple year, he working for a year, but he got to move, because the family in Virginia. The rest of my family is in Virginia.

MHA: Really?

SA: Yeah.

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MHA: So, how, what made your family come up? From, leave El Salvador. Why did you come to the United States?

SA: Oh! Why come to USA? Because it more opportunity you know for working on these different... Yeah I try it and hope the people it help my father, my mother, my family, my brother, yeah. Yeah.

MHA: So, um, let's see, I have to find the right place here. (pause) So can you tell me about your typical day? What do you usually do?

SA: Well uh...

MHA: When you're working here? What do you usually do- have to do? You said you organize, but what does that mean? Can you give me a little more detail?

SA: Oh more detail?

MHA: Yeah. (laughter)

SA: Oh no, it's ah... I try and make sure everything running, everything at the beginning, started put it the pump, make sure everything go alright, all the machine working, you know, put in the people, remind the people where they working, yeah.

MHA: So you have to learn...

SA: Yeah.

MHA: Everybody's skills?

SA: Oh yeah.

MHA: And see how fast they can work or how slow they work?

SA: Yeah.

MHA: And that kind of thing?

SA: Yeah. Got to supervise and make sure everything working you know, working right.

MHA: Do you have to do any training? Do you teach?

SA: When the people come in?

MHA: Um hmm.

SA: Yeah ... surely you know,

[05:00] SA: [continued] there's plenty of people when they come in, what do you do you know, yeah, but uh, they got to tell you but most of the people coming, or most the guy you know, regular guy trying to put another, help the guy he know what he going to do. Yeah. But uh, I show everything when they come in, show what they got to do.

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MHA: Uh huh.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: So do you, do they ever have temporary people come in?

SA: Yeah. Come in a lot of people temporary when the boat come in, because this is the work you know. They have a lot working. When a lot of boat come in you know, two boats, three boats, at least two, two like uh...

MHA: Shifts?

SA: 2 shift. Yeah, shift. I work the night and the day. I work 6 in the morning to 6 at night.

MHA: Uh huh.

SA: Yeah. Whenever busy, you know. Regular guy an hour work, like hour, now work 7-8 guy. But when they come, a lot of fish, a lot of boat, we need like uh, 23-24 people.

MHA: I see.

SA: Yeah. Each shift.

MHA: So when they're, the boats are not in, what is the plant doing?

SA: Now, we now grinding the fish. Yeah, grind the fish.

MHA: Right.

SA: Do a lot of thing. Sometime freeze a little bit fish, couple tote, couple like uh you buy a fish you know, freezing, yeah, packing frozen...

MHA: Okay. How did you learn what to do?

SA: Oh, how did I learn? I have this many years, yeah, here, I have almost I think it's 14, almost 15 years that I work here.

MHA: So when in the very beginning, when you first came to New Bedford, you started out with helping pick the high quality, making sure the fish was high quality, right?

SA: In the beginning when I coming here?

MHA: Yeah.

SA: Oh in the beginning, yeah, no at the beginning I was coming I don't remember at first, yeah I could come I working in the fish house, yeah. I working for a couple months, yeah.

MHA: And did somebody show you?

SA: Yes, somebody show me how to cut a, cut a fish.

MHA: Uh Huh.

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SA: Yeah. Clean a fish and all these things.

MHA: And then what? How did, where did you go from there?

SA: Then I work in an industrial park. One a company for make a transformer. We work a couple, I think 2 or 3 year. Now when I got to pick outside, then I started working here.

MHA: I see.

SA: Yeah I think 2001 I started here.

MHA: And you started out with, on the line?

SA: Yeah. I was there.

MHA: And then you worked your way up?

SA: Yeah, I got to move every time. You need, you know, help sometime because when I started beginning here, started here, uh very quality some people working like you go some people come and stay.

MHA: Um hmm.

SA: Try to get more and more working here, working outside, I learn everything you know, what their doing, yeah.

MHA: What is your favorite part?

SA: Favorite part?

MHA: Um hmm.

SA: What. Uh, uh?

MHA: Working.

SA: Working?

MHA: Your favorite part about the job? Yeah.

(pause)

SA: I think it's helping the guys, you know, helping, make sure everything moving, you know, like, like, when they like fixes something you know, see everything running, everything go. Yeah.

MHA: And what is the hardest part?

SA: The hardest part? I think the cold.

MHA: The cold?

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SA: The cold, yeah. The winter. I think it's the hard, like um the work is sometimes you know, hard to work. Hard a little bit you know; sometimes the winter. The winter's cold, very terrible.

MHA: I agree with you! I don't like the cold! So um, let's see, does, you were mentioning that the work changes depending on whether the boats are in, but does that depend on the season? Does it change?

SA: Oh yeah, depends on the seasons, yeah, the seasons depending. Seasons in general, but this year, no. No fish. Yeah. Last year I worked a couple of months June I think, in July. Depend on the season. Yeah sometime two month, three month, depend. Every year different. Yeah.

MHA: But you, yourself, have a full-time job here?

SA: Yes, I have a full-time job. Yeah.

MHA: So there's always something with the grinding and...

SA: Yeah, sometimes clean, paint. Doing something that run the factory.

[10:00] MH: Uh huh.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: Okay. How, which jobs in the, in the plant pay the best?

SA: What jobs pay the best? I think it's the people up in the high loading you know, the highest, the job here is um they depend you have to load a couple two or three things uh like in the tank, the people working the tank, pay a little bit more in the tank. You have to know, what they doing put all the fish out there you know.

MHA: Uh huh.

SA: Yeah. And uh, the people most, you have to learn a little bit more, you have to learn a few things you know this, a little bit job...

MHA: Yeah. And uh, what, which jobs are the very beginning jobs?

SA: Very beginning job? When it, the very beginning you know is in the packing room. Yeah. Packing room. Downstairs.

MHA: So the people mostly start there and move?

SA: Yeah. You can move its because when they come in like a, it's a lot of, a lot of part you know, a lot of position, in the beginning when they picking fish you got to make sure when the fish come in, clean it up.

MHA: Um Hmm.

SA: Other people have to know how to put it in the freezer, yeah. Explain the people do the frosting when it come and the people most in the packing room.

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MHA: I see.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: And you kind of see how they do with that?

SA: Yeah. How they do. Yeah.

MHA: And how are the people that you work with are, are there a lot of people from El Salvador? Or is it all mixed?

SA: Um, yeah most people are uh, most mixed. Guatemala, El Salvador, a few people Honduras. Yeah. Most people coming, a lot of people but not too many people like the fish house, not too many people like the fish house. Most people you can see working is the people from Guatemala, San Salvador, the fish house yeah.

MHA: And why do you think that is?

SA: I don't know. Probably it's the fish, how they smell, maybe, I think it's... I don't know. Yeah.

MHA: There's something that has come up in other conversations with other people that there aren't very many young people starting in processing plants, even on the boats, that a lot of people are going grey. (laughter) So how about, do you find that here? Or are there still a lot of young people coming into the plant looking for jobs?

SA: Yeah, sometime no. Sometime hard finding people like in the summer, when the most, most people working different job outside.

MHA: Um Hmm.

SA: Yeah hard sometime, but in the winter you find more people because a lot of people staying home, you know. Yeah.

MHA: They don't want the cold?

SA: No, the cold, yeah. Yeah.

MHA: And do you have a family?

SA: Yes, I have my wife, I have my daughter, one son.

MHA: How old are they?

SA: My daughter she has a fifteen years to go, my son is ten.

MHA: Oh, nice. And do they want to do anything in fishing? In the fishing plants?

SA: No, (laughter) No I ask, I say you know, I tell you want to work with me? No, no, no, they say.

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MHA: So what does he want to do?

SA: He want to do different, my daughter she want to go, she want to go a like a um... not doctor, the other, but like help them...

MHA: A nurse?

SA: Yeah, a nurse.

MHA: Good! That's...

SA: Yeah my son, he no know.

MHA: He's young.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: Let's see... so this is what you typically wear? Most days you wear a jacket, and a hat? Or do you have other special clothes that you have to wear?

SA: No this is the, this is the normal because now cold it is.

MHA: Yeah right.

SA: Yeah. Yeah. But normal is this, this stuff.

MHA: And do you have any special

[15:00] MHA: [continued] tools that you need to use?

SA: No. No.

MHA: How about for any of the jobs in the plant? Are there...

SA: Oh, there are the people working use an apron, then some the other one use the orange paint, use a jacket. Because water... you got to use some boot.

MHA: Right.

SA: Special boot because of the water everything. Yeah. Yeah.

MHA: Okay. When you're looking for somebody to hire, I don't know, do you get any, are you able to hire people yourself? Or does it have to go through...

SA: No, I hire.

MHA: So what do you look for? What are you trying to find?

SA: No. I try to give a chance when the people come, you know, I don't... make sure the people like he want to work. I ask, "You want to work?" And the first thing they got to tell you, "You want to work in the fish? I show you most. Show you around. You want to work with this? This is the job. And if he say yes, you know he can come and work, yeah. Yeah. I don't... Sebastian Ayala interview, March 23, 2017

but special people I ask him you want to work in others? I explain a few position when they started working... you know. Yeah if he, you want to work you know there's a lot of...

MHA: And do you find that most of people that you hire after they see and they say yes, do they stay with it for a long time?

SA: Mmm, not many. No. The other thing is especially is ah when they come in the position and lot of worker equal from different places the people come in like day different, I don't know is employment? They send the people like temporary, like a two or three days?

MHA: And so those people are always changing, right?

SA: Right. Yeah. For some like come one week, two days, but most people is working temporary, no not temporary, but...

MHA: Permanent?

SA: Permanent, yeah.

MHA: That I would imagine that's better for the company and for you, if somebody was here.

SA: Oh yeah. That's easy you know, it's working. It better to have people like that. Got to explain, you know.

MHA: What about safety issues? Do you have to explain? I don't, I haven't seen this plant, I've seen some herring plants but I haven't seen this plant, um is there anything dangerous?

SA: Yes. We work with ammonia. There every year, oh every, like um, a lot of people working? I show you how the ammonia, I show you how, what happen when the freezer leak ammonia or something you got to go outside, or when the alarm, everybody have to got to go. I don't see a lot of ammonia when they stay here but it sometime the smell sometime when you open that the freezer, like a leak a little bit smell you know. But the people have to know what to do, like stop you know. Yeah. And if you smell a lot you have to got to go outside. Yeah. So a little bit, I don't feel something happen, you know it leak a little bit. Yeah.

MHA: So people just go out and then it clears out? Somebody checks?

SA: Yeah. He call me somebody have to check they got to call, they got t go look the leak or something, yeah. I think it's the most, but it's dangerous, you know. The machine danger but it's safe for the people.

MHA: Yeah um, I would think that anything that is moving would have some dangers- some people's hands might get caught or something like that.

SA: No, like a machine, you know you have the belt, but it's not no,

[20:00] SA: [continued] it's no something like uh, how would I say something very dangerous, no, I think the most thing is the ammonia.

MHA: Yeah, yeah. And um, do you think you'll stay here for your whole career? Do you like working for this company?

SA: Oh, yeah, I like it. Yeah I like it. Yeah. I like it. Yeah.

MHA: You've been here almost 15 years. Have you seen uh, changes in the technology? Has the plant changed at all? Or has it been pretty much the same the whole time?

SA: No. It change. A lot of things. I remember when I started, no, its... every year change a lot of things different. Yeah.

MHA: Like what kinds of things?

SA: I remember when it started, you know have like upstairs, you know the roof is uh started have everything open. Yeah. And uh the factory it's not too small, it's a big one. Yeah. It change a lot of things you know. Control, move, the ....

MHA: And how about Eoin was talking about the grinding? That's new isn't it?

SA: That's new, that started last year. Yeah, that's new. Grinding machine. It's fast. Fast.

MHA: Was it easy to learn?

SA: Yeah, the machine put a fish down because the head engineer, he got to make sure you know how to like stop machine and start it. He train me, yeah... special people like for when starting the machine, the engineer. It's easy. No hard, no.

MHA: Now, when you said, you mentioned that there were a lot of people that speak Spanish in the plant. Do people normally speak in Spanish during the work day? Or are people trying to speak English, to practice their English?

SA: No, normally is more Spanish, but ah, yeah.

MHA: Okay.

SA: A few guys speak English. Not too many.

MHA: Now, how about the fishing industry in general, do you feel like you're part of the New Bedford fishing industry? I mean, it's hard to explain what I mean. Some, sometimes when I talk to other people that are not in fish plants, say the people that deliver the fuel to the boats, they were saying they like their job, because they know it's helping the boats. Because the boats need fuel, so they have to have somebody come and put fuel in. The processing plants are important too, um, because the fish has to go somewhere; the fish has to be processed and sold.

SA: (coughing) My cold. (laughter) Sorry.

MHA: It's okay. So do you feel a part of the industry in that way? Do you know what I'm asking?

SA: Yeah, I think its yes. Yeah.

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MHA: So, um have you ever been to the Fishing Heritage Center?

SA: Fishing Keri?

MHA: Fishing Heritage. It's like a museum, it's right over here on Bethel Street. It's very near the Whaling Museum. It's just down the street a little bit. And it shows the fishing industry. So sometime you should take your kids there, just to show them.

SA: Yeah, every year I go there. Yeah.

MHA: Oh, it's not the Whaling Museum, this is new.

SA: This is new? Because I see like, the show like a kind of the boats, how to work in the boats here. (crosstalk) It's got like a festival.

[25:03] MHA: Exactly. Yes. Well, now it's not just a festival. It's the same people, the same people that started the festival, now have opened up a museum.

SA: Oh, a museum, wow.

MHA: Yeah. So it's small. But at least it shows a lot of things about the industry, so you might enjoy going to see it. It's only open Thursday through Sunday. So Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Yeah. And uh, and it's free right now so anytime you can go. So if somebody was just starting out and maybe just came to New Bedford, and they had never been in the fishing industry before, what would you tell them, how would you tell them to get started?

SA: How would I tell them started work?

MHA: What advice would you give somebody?

(laughter)

SA: I don't know I understand that.

MHA: Okay.

SA: If somebody coming.

MHA: Yeah. Would you advise them to try to get a job?

SA: Oh, oh, oh... You got to explain them the companies is around here, you know, I tell them look and go and here, or go different, yeah.

MHA: I know there are at least a few women who work here. Is, do the men and the women get along okay working?

SA: The women in the?

MHA: I know that the women for example, Jackie, are there other women?

SA: Yes, the cleaning. Yeah.

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MHA: And do the other workers get along okay with Jacqueline for example? Are they okay together?

SA: Yeah, okay. Yeah. When they having more people of course you have girls picking fish, and here right now, not too many like um, work for women because sometimes it's a little bit heavy, like you have to pick them up, yeah, it's not comfortable for women. She was fine, but not for a lot of women because sometimes very little you have to pick them up, can be like 50 pounds, yeah.

MHA: Right.

SA: Yeah.

MHA: It used to be that a lot of the fishermen were made very nervous when women were doing work on the dock or on the boats, um, but there were always a few, a few women who would work I think there was a big superstition for awhile... bad luck! (laughter) So I don't know, is there anything about your job or about living in New Bedford that I haven't asked you that you think I should have?

SA: Um, no the beginning coming here I like it. I like New Bedford. I feel comfortable here.

MHA: Good.

SA: Some people say don't like it so I tell you I lived in Virginia five years before, I like Virginia, it's beautiful, but I like New Bedford, more comfortable for me.

MHA: And why is that?

SA: Cause um, the living here is different. In Virginia, more and more expensive everything more. The rent is more and more expensive, the job, there's a lot of job but it's, we have to move, we got to working very far.

MHA: Oh really?

SA: And when they coming here I feel comfortable in New Bedford, I like my job too.

MHA: Good. Do you live in New Bedford?

SA: Yeah, I live in New Bedford, in the South End. Yeah.

MHA: Good. Is the community, are there other people from El Salvador that live in the South End where you are?

SA: Yeah. I see a lot, a lot of people in New Bedford, yeah.

[30:00] MHA: All right, well, I think I've asked you everything that I was going to ask.

SA: Yeah?

MHA: I feel like there should be more questions.

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(laughter)

SA: Yeah, probably.

MHA: But I don't know quite what to ask.

SA: I don't have a like, express English very...

MHA: That's okay, you do fine. Yeah, I had no trouble understanding you, so that was good. So, thank you.

SA: Okay. Okay.

MHA: You wouldn't believe how noisy it is through this, because I can hear all the trucks, because this picks up everything.

SA: Oh, it picks up all the noise?

MHA: Yes it's very loud.

SA: Okay.

MHA: Alright.

[31:07] End of audio