



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: February 3, 2017

Bendiksen, Tor ~ Oral History Interview

Fred Calabretta

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Background

Name of person interviewed: Tor Bendiksen [TB]

Facts about this person:

Age 37
Sex Male
Occupation Fishing Gear manufacturer
Residence Fairhaven, Massachusetts
Ethnic background Norwegian

Interviewer: Fred Calabretta [FC]

Transcriber: Michelle Murray [MM]

Interview location: Reidar's Trawl & Scallop Gear & Marine Supply, New Bedford

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Key Words

Nets, sweeps, net bellies, fishing gear, fishing boats, fishermen, Norwegian fishermen, fishing quotas, family-owned business, Georges Bank, Gulf of Maine, fishing draggers, trawlers, trawls, fishing regulations, fishing surveys, SMAST, Division of Marine Fisheries, NOAA, custom net design, New Bedford, fishing gear manufacturer

Abstract

Tor Bendiksen discusses what it's like to be involved in a family-owned business that manufactures fishing gear such as nets and trawls for commercial fishermen. He made his first fishing trip at the age of thirteen aboard his father's trawler. He understands from first-hand experience how fishing gear works and the needs of his customers. He discusses how fishing regulations have evolved from when he first started fishing to what they are today. The regulations have a tremendous impact on how he designs his custom fishing gear. He considers many factors when designing nets and gear such as boat size, engine horsepower, fish species and their behavior, fish quotas, the fishing grounds and the type of ocean bottom that will be encountered. He relies on his father Reidar's expertise as a respected boat captain. His father made his legacy as a high-liner fishing boat captain and Tor has carved out his own legacy designing gear and taking it to the next level. He loves everything about how fishing gear works and gets satisfaction from creating a quality product to meet the unique needs of his customers.

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[00:00] Tor Bendiksen gives some of his Norwegian family's background in the fishing industry after immigrating to the United States.

[04:59] Tor recounts his first fishing trip at the age of thirteen. He speaks about how his dad made the transition from fishing to manufacturing nets and fishing gear. Tor speaks about how he was very interested in the gear as a teenager and how nets were constructed.

[10:00] Tor continues to speak about nets and about how fishing regulations have changed and affected mesh sizes on nets, etc. He speaks about working on the gear as he was growing up.

[15:00] Tor recalls his early years making gear and goes on to speak about how he is now the Chief Operating Officer of the company because his dad is semi-retired. He talks about custom designing nets and gear to meet the needs of the individual fishing boats.

[20:00] He talks about the very strict catch regulations that allow for almost no error in the species of fish that are caught. The regulations have gotten progressively complicated.

[25:00] Tor talks about how scientists conduct surveys of fishing grounds. Tor goes on to speak about the behavior and tendencies of different species of fish and how this impacts the design of fishing gear.

[30:00] Tor tries to describe a "typical" eight-hour day. He walks through the process of helping a customer who comes in with a new net project. He uses blueprints and AutoCAD and discusses where they will be fishing and for what type of fish.

[35:00] He describes the process of building the custom equipment. The entire process start to finish, including ordering materials, takes about one month. He discusses copyrights and patents and how there's no way to prevent a design from being copied. What makes his company different is how they put their own flair on putting the trawl together.

[40:00] Tor designs the trawls and nets keeping in mind what it's like to have to repair a net onboard a boat. Many times fisherman will bring a blueprint of another fisherman's net and ask Tor to build one just like it. Sometimes a customer will give one of Tor's blueprints to a friend. The person tries to build his own net and is often unsuccessful.

[45:00] Tor speaks about how fishing back in the sixties and fifties was different because the catch was all different sizes and types of fish. Today with quotas fishermen target specific types of fish. The discussion switches gears to what it's like to be in a family-owned business.

[50:00] Tor speaks about what it's like being the son of the owner of the business. He talks about how he's developed his own career different from his father's legacy.

[55:00] Fred notes that there's one female employee, Sarah, working for the company. Tor states that even though she's working in a man's industry, she's earned the right to be there. He needs

to make sure the person is a good fit for the company when they are first hired. Managing the staff is a big part of his job.

[1:00:00] Tor discusses the difficulties that come with managing employees and how this is the challenging part of his job. He talks about what is the most satisfying part of the job.

[1:03:29] End of audio.

Interview

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Fred Calabretta: Today is February 3, 2017. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, funded by an 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 Fred Calabretta and I'm speaking with Tor Bendiksen. Just to start, if you could just give your full name.

Tor Bendiksen: Tor Arnar Bendiksen.

FC: And your date of birth?

TB: 7/12/1979.

FC: And born in New Bedford?

TB: Born in New Bedford, yes.

FC: And you grew up in New Bedford?

TB: The area. Yeah, I grew up in New Bedford/Dartmouth area. Yep.

FC: And could you just talk a little bit about the, sort of the family background and the family's involvement in the fishing industry?

TB: Well, I'm from a fishing family. My grandfathers, great-grandfathers all throughout their history have all been involved in the fishing industry or some sort of farming as well, back in Norway. But mostly fishing. My father came to this country in 1967 as an immigrant to fish following his uncle and his father who came here in the '50's before him to fish.

FC: So it's a real family tradition then?

TB: Yes. You grew up around the business. You know, from a young age... some of my first memories has been down on the docks with the boats. It just becomes part of your lifestyle and your culture as far as what you do in the morning when you get up. You know, some kids... I mean, I went to school but some kids, you know they have other things they do. We were always at the dock with Dad when he wasn't fishing.

FC: When you were a little kid and he was going out did you worry about him? Did it seem like dangerous work?

TB: I didn't really even think of it much. There was not much talk about the whole idea that, geez Dad might not ever come home. There's always that chance, that threat. It, you know, somehow I knew that my father was an accomplished captain of a boat and that he was very capable with

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what he was doing and you just never had it in your mind that there could be some sort of incident like that because... just knowing... I guess somehow just knowing from you know, the people that you work around and back then the heritage of the community um... you had a bunch of... I don't know you want to call it strong men. I mean they were very tough men back then that did this job. You know that old saying they talk about: the ships were wooden and the men were steel. And that was really true in my eyes when I was a kid. Looking at the men - they're a different caliber of men from that era when I was a kid versus even looking at the people today. There's just... there's little differences, you know, that you notice... um, growing up.

FC: So just something about them, you know, or just the way they carried themselves or something gave you confidence in them?

TB: Exactly. The way they carried themselves gave you confidence that they knew what they were doing. I mean they could tell you the stories of being out to sea and knowing where they were based on the soundings on the chart. And knowing by the compass and knowing by certain other information that they could gather to actually know their location. How to go from Point A to Point B. Where today, a lot of the people who wouldn't know how to go from Point A to Point B on the water without having a GPS. And that alone makes you know how much more confidence you have in that caliber of person than what you'd see in some cases today.

FC: Yeah, yeah. I saw in a newspaper article that you went out with your father when you were pretty young, like maybe thirteen or something.

TB: Yeah thirteen was the age that I started fishing off shore on the draggers. You know it was eighty-six foot boat that I went out on, The Narragansett, and um... I'd go for trips in the summertime um, with you know school being out and ah... I was allowed to go out because I knew the task at hand. I used to do the job on land as far as fixing the nets and helping in all the areas of the boat. So because I knew the boat well enough, I was able to be allowed to go out to sea with the guys and actually do the job.

FC: What was that like for a thirteen, fourteen year-old kid?

[04:59]

TB: Well, the first day off shore, um...we left right after a hurricane - or a hurricane that turned into a tropical storm - went by the coast. So, we steamed out through the, you know, through the sound and I went to bed because it was... you had twenty hours of steaming in front of you so the guys on deck don't need to do anything in that time. And I woke up the next morning and there was just huge ocean swells around and ah... you looked around and you just couldn't believe it because the boats in the distance, they'd be there - and then all of a sudden they'd be gone because of the swells. So you're on the crests and that was an experience in itself to be a young guy and look out and just see that kind of, you know, movement and you don't see land at all around you. And you just know, oh this is where you are for the next, you know, ten days. Just like that and ah... so that was kind of a scary, but kind of exciting experience, I guess, to have right off the bat. The night before, before I went to bed, where we were steaming still, like I said through the sound, and coming out through the channel and my dad was on the boat with me. He

brought me out on the, on the... kind of towards the bow - the top deck on the side. And he was standing there talking to me a little bit and all of a sudden he took the hat off my head and he threw it in the water. And just I kind of looked at him and I looked back at my hat and I looked at him. And he said, "See how fast that hat disappears under the water?" And I said, "Yep. It's gone." He says, "Don't fall overboard." And he walked back in the wheelhouse. That was my - you know, thirteen years old, told basically not talking about a situation looking at me literally said, "Nope. You don't make that error. That's a mistake that you can't make because the likelihood of you returning would be very slim." And that fear sticks with you. And I can remember that in my mind. I'm thirty-seven years old and I can remember that like it was yesterday in my mind. You know, always one hand for the boat, one hand for you, how you have to conduct yourself, had to be aware of everything. You know the acute awareness... you know.

FC: So it was a pretty powerful lesson.

TB: Pretty powerful lesson, yeah. Yep.

FC: Now how did your father get into the gear side of the industry?

TB: My father was always a innovator. I would... watching him, growing up, when he was in from fishing. He used to have doodles. He used to take any piece of paper, old scrap paper from anywhere and he'd be drawing up ideas and designs for gear and for things that he wanted to do to improve his boat and stuff like that. He'd always have those kind of things laying around and I started noticing those things. He had a couple ideas to make fishing gear better. And fishing gear by today's standards - the gear years ago was very crude. I think it's materials that you have at the time versus what you have available to you now. But he was sort of always on that cutting edge of - Oh how can I improve this? How can I improve that? And so he invented a couple of different types of fishing gear and then he decided that he wanted to stay home more with the family, with us growing up he was missing a lot of our functions or baseball games and our, things that we used to do. And he these ideas and he says, "You know, the boat can run for awhile on it's own. I'm going to let someone else take it." And he wanted to develop this stuff and see if he could start making it for other people. And he was actually - he made it for himself first. He used to use it on his gear. And um... he was always known around the waterfront as a high-liner captain and he always had a trip. He always, you know, was able to catch fish and find fish. So, you know, people looked at him and looked what he was doing, always wondering. So now he was going to start showing people what he does to catch fish. So, that's kind of how the business sort of had an infancy and start - was those ideas that he had for fishing gear.

FC: And when you were younger, were you interested in the technology side of it or is that something that came later for you?

TB: No, it was from a young age because when I was a little boy and turning a teenager, even though I liked to go fishing and the fishing life - I knew all the people that did that sort of thing, I was always interested in how the nets themselves worked and I'd be pulling out net plans from all over the place. I'd be asking questions. I'd be taking onion bags and other pieces of scrap netting material and actually cutting and

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shaping it to try to understand how it all went together. And then you start learning the science side of fish and how fish react and their biology and their makeup. You know - so you start to apply those things together and going, "Oh, how can I make a better, you know, fish net?" The changing of the industry from just being a... cow-boyish style - go out and just harvest the sea and come in - has been to a style, changing before my eyes, with the regulations. Because the first year I went fishing, there really wasn't any regulations yet. That next year was when they started to come in with the actual Days at Sea Program and the closed barriers and the rolling closures and these sort of regulations to try and help bring back, you know, the fish stocks. So I was there the year before it started and I've been involved in the industry every since day one on those first regulations to kind of see how it changes. With those changing regulations is where the net side of the business really started to move fast forward as far as having to develop gear to keep up with the changing regulations. And that's kind of what took my mind and my interest - was really developing that sort of stuff.

FC: And one of the early regulation areas was mesh size too.

TB: Yeah, mesh size was a basic thing because you went from a 5.25 inch mesh to, you know, the 6 inch mesh at first and then they went to 6.5 inch mesh. So yes, that was the first way of letting out smaller fish trying to retain only the larger fish. And then it kind of evolved from there like with different types of gear.

FC: And then once this business got going, when did you really get involved full-time and how old were you?

TB: Full-time... was probably at eighteen because soon as I got out of high school, I started just, you know, all in on the business side working with the fishing gear and I used to go to school at night. So I'd have night classes and stuff three days a week - college. And so I used to, like I said, full-time right there. Go to the night classes and that was my life for the next five years, you know, doing that sort of...

FC: It was a pretty full schedule.

TB: Oh yeah. I've always had a full schedule in my life. And then I currently make models at home of different types of fishing gear. Not only for my own visual aid to kind of show how things go together but also for the science community and the government to show how the fishing gear is put together and the different parts of it. So I've done models for NOAA. I've done models for National Marine Fisheries Service and for the Coast Guard - things like that. So, I've always got something that I'm doing that's involved in the business itself.

FC: And as far as actually hands on in the business, what were your first jobs or what were you... what would be a typical week or a typical work day? What would you have done?

TB: Ah...that's a tough question because it was more or less, kind of what was needed. You know, I started, this business here, started in the garage of my family home. So, after homework was done you'd go out in the garage where Dad was still working on stuff and he would tell me to take over the saw. So he had a band saw that was cutting parts and you had to just one after the other cut the parts out and I'd be in charge of when the band saw cut through, I'd push the part on and measure the next piece out and start cutting the ends. So you're sitting listening to the Red Sox game cutting parts then he's welding them together in the corner, all the different parts. So that's some of the first memories at like seven, eight years old, of doing that and then you know, taking some of the things that we were assembling, I got right in hands on assembling these pieces of gear. There was a story that I remember - but that my parents remember better - but I remember when I was probably thirteen - somewhere in that neighborhood - when my father had to leave for several hours and he left me at the shop with the gang. He had

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two guys that he had hired people. And something happened to those guys. They had to leave and we were also in R.A. Mitchell's shop which was the engine supply. So when the other guy left, he told R.A. Mitchell that, "Hey, Tor's in the other shop there, kind of watch over him." Because I was still young but I was a teenager, you know, early teens so it wasn't that young. And there was a sweep to get done which is the piece of gear that goes along the sea floor. And it had to get done and I assembled the whole thing myself. These guys had left and my father came back and he said, "Oh! Good job! These guys got the sweep done!" And I said, "Oh Dad. Yeah, they left - I don't know - hours ago. They had something they had to do or some sort of emergency." I says, "I built the sweep and got it all done on the floor." So he was surprised that this thing was all put together the way it needed to be put together and nobody was there to supervise or watch over. I just did it because I had that memory of... "Well this is how my dad wants to put it together. This is how he wants it done. All right. I'll put it together that way." You know. So, yeah.

FC: So it was a good lesson for him that, you know, that you could take on some responsibility.

TB: Yeah, right. At that young age. Yeah. So, just kind of following what was going on.

FC: How would you describe your job the way it is now and the work you do?

TB: Well, today I'm kind of Chief Operating Officer, I guess. I'm in charge of everything. My dad's still currently the owner of the business. He's semi-retired. He's still here pretty regularly working but he's kind of stepped back from all the day-to-day running of the business. I'm in charge of what's going in, what's going out, designing the gear, watching over the guys on the floor, making sure everything's done. And you sort of have to be because I do have departments and I have kind of department heads that take care of certain things for me, but you always have to be there kind of watching over and guiding because fishing gear is very unique to the customer, to the boat, and even though there are some similarities between all fishing gear, there's these subtle differences that have to be adjusted for the individual person in boat custom kind of work. So, that custom work tends to come more out of my experiences in design and I kind of have to guide my employees through it.

FC: So does that depend on you know, what the bottom is like where they fish or the size of their boat or all of that stuff...?

TB: Exactly. It takes all of that into account. It takes into account their fishing style. It takes into account the bottom that they work on. It takes into account the horsepower and thrust of their boat and it takes into account the type of doors that they use where the otter boards that spread the gear. You know, some are very high powerful doors and some are more low-tech doors. Some of these packages you can't - you have to kind of design the package to match each other because you can't take a high-powered trawl and actually put it with a low-tech door. They're not going to work properly with one another. And the service spread you can't take a high-powered modern trawl door and put it with a low-tech net because they're not going to balance with each other. So you have to kind of see that vision all the way through. So there's a lot of questions to ask the captain. If you don't know them that well, there's a lot of questions to ask him. And you're building a relationship with him over time. You know, a lot of the captains I deal with now I've dealt with for the last fifteen, twenty years. They've gained my trust and I know their tendencies and what they like so when I'm developing that piece of equipment for them, I know what's going to go into it that's a little different for that person versus the other person and stuff like that.

FC: So is every net pretty much a custom net?

TB: Pretty much. You have the basic idea. You've got a sweep. You've got a head rope. You've got cans. You've got netting. You've got these sort of factors that are all the same with every net, but the design is different based on the factors of the boat and the captain and all that sort of thing.

FC: And what if the captain comes in and says, "Oh, I'd like to try a four foot strip of smaller mesh up here." Or do they sometimes get really specific ideas about things that are maybe unconventional or that they want to try and you have to kind of make it work or...?

TB: Yep. There's some of that sort of thing that goes on and then there's also... I become part legal counsel, you know, teaching if they have an idea for something, I have to run through the regulations and say, "Okay. Is that going to be allowed based on the regulations?" The idea like you just said - small mesh.

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You know, if a guy wants to put a piece of small mesh somewhere, you go, "Oh let's look at the rules first. Can we do that? Is it allowed in that fishery?" And then same with other types of things you develop. You know you got to look at all those sets of rules and check, make sure.

FC: So that's an interesting part of it that you, on top of everything else, you've got to be able to catch it if somebody wants to do something that's outside of the regulations, or you've got to know the regulations...

TB: You've got to know the regulations. And today what is tricky, with today with the current regulations is the way they have it divided up by species and quota per species. To develop a net to try and target their majority species. For instance, if you try to target haddock, because that might be a dominant species in their quota set that they have to catch. And they're going to look for haddock and you have to try and get rid of all other by-catch. It's possible you can do a lot of this but with the low quotas of codfish and dabs and other species that are out there and if you catch one per haul - one fish per each time you set your net out, in a half a year you could catch up your other quota of codfish. That's how, you know, a mess the regulations are today. You know, there's no balance where it allows these fishermen flexibility to really work their year even if they're trying to work their year in the most sustainable manner possible, that there's no, you know, flexibility in these sort of things. They could actually have one miscue where they set the net out in the wrong place and they catch a big bag of that species they don't want to look for and it would count against their quota and could shut them down for the year. So, it's, you know... it's a huge issue in today's fishery.

FC: Do you feel like it's just gotten more and more complicated year after year... not necessarily every year, but there's just been this progression where...

TB: It's been a progression - more and more complicated. What I look at being involved from the beginning stages up until now watching the industry and developing with the industry, is that every time we have a new group of people sitting around that council table and around those different tables where they come up with new ideas, they don't have a reflection of where the industry had been. They always talk about the numbers and they don't really have that full knowledge set. We call it like the "elder knowledge set." You know, I learned from my elders. I learned from my father. My father would tell me stories about when in the seventies he was fishing and certain time of the year, in the wintertime, he says, "The only place you'd find fish, certain types of species of fish, would be on what they called Brown's Bank." He says, "That's where you had to go to go fishing back then. He said, you wouldn't catch fish in shore and over here and over there. It would be...there'd be nothing on the bottom. The bottom would be quote-unquote dead. There wouldn't be anything there. But you'd have to go to Brown's Bank and that's where you'd find the fish." And today by current regulations, that's the Canadian waters. So when the people go out and do survey now, and they go out in the wintertime and they go and do a certain area, they do a survey and they say, "Oh, there's nothing out here. There must be no fish. The fish are depleted." No - like if you listen to the elder experience of what they've done over the last how many years, they tell you that the fish at this time of year was at this spot or because of this weather pattern it was over here in this spot. But, "Oh no. We've tested all the bottom over the last how many years in this spot and this is...we see there's nothing out there so it must be so." And that's what gets frustrating for the industry side is the industry understands these intricacies of the fish and the bottom and what happens with the tides and the temperatures and all that sort of things. I know science has some understanding of that but they still have that element of a hard, fixed, this is my tool, if I can repeat it every single time in the same spot, I'll get my answer through the long term survey. And fishing doesn't work that way. It doesn't work the same. I know this because I'm an expert in fishing gear and I know fishing gear constantly has to be tuned a little bit. You know, it's kind of the idea...I told a scientist once, I said, "You know, when science

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started looking at different elements under a microscope, they had that two or three times power microscope. They'd go in and look at something magnified three times. Then ten times. Then a hundred times. Now you've got micron microscopes. And you've got some sort of a high-powered microscope. Now that same element you've been looking at, you have a whole different picture when you have that high powered microscope than you did when you only had the one power, two power microscope. That's a big change but now you have a better understanding of that element." I says, "In fishing, you're saying you're not allowed to change. You have to do the same thing the same way. How about introduce some better technology? It gives you a better sample, it gets you closer to the goal." And they step back and they say, "We can't do that because this is the way we've always done it." It's kind of - it's hard because, you know, fishermen all have been, and myself, I feel like we're elements of science ourselves - that we're constantly making adjustments and learning and understanding. You know, it's why we get into issues of today, modern, where we see fish all over the bank. It's returned. My first year fishing back in '93 - thirteen year old child - I remember fishing for two hours. You'd haul the net up after two hours. I'd have four baskets of black-backed flounder. Four baskets. Orange baskets full of black-backed flounder for a two-hour tow. Codfish in count... maybe five or six codfish. Today you go out there and you put out your net and you have an hour set. You haul it up back after an hour and you could have fifty thousand. And science says that the industry is doing - the fish are doing worse today than they were twenty years ago. And you sit there as a fisherman going... you're baffled. You're shrugging your hair and your head going, "How is that so when I physically saw it?" I worked for, you know, ten days straight to bring in a small amount of fish in '93 and then now in 2017, these guys' reports now - because I'm not fishing regularly - but reports from my captains is: everywhere they go they're getting bags of fish that they have to throw over the side dead and they say the industry's at a worsen state than it was x number of years ago.

FC: So it has a major impact on you then.

TB: It does. It does, yeah.

FC: One thing that you mentioned that's interesting too, earlier, was that in building and designing nets is knowledge of the fish and sort of the... behavior or....

TB: The tendency of the fish. Yes. Behavior, yeah.

FC: That's an interesting...I mean you got the legal stuff on one hand and that's a totally different piece.

TB: Yeah, you've got fish like yellowtail that are more active daytime than nighttime. You've got black-backs that are more active at nighttime than daytime. You've got codfish that when they're encountered by an obstacle they want to - they want to try and scurry and hide behind a rock or somewhere on the sea floor. And you have a whiting that will encounter an obstacle and it'll want to turn left or right when it's encountered by an obstacle. And a haddock wants to rise up high - it wants to go straight up and over. So these quick tendencies that you know of - how a

fish reacts to some sort of a disturbance is something that you actually utilize in designing your gear.

FC: And how did you learn all that?

TB: You learn it from...you learn it from the industry. You learn it from the fishermen themselves. You listen to their stories when you're on the boat talking about developing the next piece of gear. And they say, "You know, Tor - you know, I catch more black-backs at night." Or, "I catch this at this. And I do this at that." You know, learn from those captains and then you learn from what you read and study from everywhere else. You can go online today and type in any question you want and you'll bring up articles from all over the world. And then you learn from the actual scientists that you work with on a regular basis - from SMAST. We have some behavioral fish experts there. We have a research department - Division of Marine Fisheries - that has some very capable guys that I've been involved with for many years in the industry that you can kind of talk to them about certain things. And also there's people in NOAA - all different parts of NOAA now. They all tend to move around, but over the years I've worked with a lot of guys that you know, you listen to what they talk about because it all has an aspect to what you're doing.

FC: So it makes sense to take advantage of different sources.

TB: Yes. It does, yeah.

FC: What - sort of a change of pace -

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if you could kind of describe a typical day, if there's any such thing. After you come in here in the morning, how are you likely to spend the next eight hours?

TB: Eight hours? Yeah, it changes every day. Well, the beginning of the day, you're getting your workers set with their general tasks and I call them the longer term goals. That's fishing gear that guys have put orders in for that you're trying to put together and get ready for a certain season. Maybe it's two months away, a month away, several weeks away. And then comes the daily influx of people that are getting ready to go fishing that day or within the next couple days that need certain products. So you have kind of - you know - like I say, long-term projects you're working on. You're working all the details then you have those things that just - we need it now. We got to get it done now and they've broke something and they need something fixed right away. And then you get calls from guys off-shore that are having issues. You know, and I'm the ear. I'm the counsel when they have an issue with something not quite working right. And they'll call from their satellite phone and say, "Is Tor available?" When it's usually on a satellite phone, my secretaries usually patch me through right away because they know it's hard to get communications back and forth with satellite phones sometimes. And they'll ask me questions 'cause they're having an issue on the bottom. You know - "Geez, my doors are sticking." Or, "My net can't get the spread." Or, "This is happening." Or, "That is happening." And then I have to listen to what they're doing and think about it, kind of have to do a diagnostic and "Oh, well

tell you what. Why don't you try and doing this, this or this and see if it improves what you're doing?" You know, so then you finish with that customer on the phone with and you come back and something was put together wrong on the floor and you have to have them take it apart and put together right. And you know, and sometimes you don't even eat lunch. Sometimes you - like right now - I haven't ate lunch. It's two o'clock in the afternoon and didn't stop for it.

FC: You're stuck here talking to me.

TB: I'm here talking to you right now and I hadn't stopped. And that's just how it goes, you know?

FC: Yeah. Yeah. What about for a new net project? If you could just summarize that. Somebody walks through the door and tells you what they want and where does it go from there?

TB: From there? All right. So they come in and they want a new net. This year, might be they wanted a new haddock trawl and they say that they're going to be targeting haddock and they really don't have much codfish. They really don't have much, you know, flounder stock to speak of. They can't afford to go buy any quota. So they say, "Well, what's the best net to use?" And you say, "Okay. Well, I've got these types of designs that we work with for haddock. Here's type one, two, and three." And they look at them and they say, "Okay. This one is a two-leg trawl. It's a box net. This one's a three bridle trawl box net." And you take the advantages of each type of net - what's good for one and what's good for the other and what's good for their tendency. Like, "Would you be able to adjust a three bridle trawl. Is that something that you can get your mind around and understand, or do you want to go with something more simple?" They make the decision of which way they want to go and then comes the actual development of their trawl because I might have been showing them plans that might not fit their horsepower, but it's just the concept design. And you design the net and draw it out based on how they want the net to work for their boat.

FC: And are you looking at and they're looking at a computer screen at that point...or paper?

TB: Sometimes. Sometimes. A lot of times I have all my drawings on the computer. I use AutoCAD to do my designs. So, sometimes it's on the computer on my laptop. Sometimes I just print out on a piece of paper the general blueprint and let them look at the blueprint. So once they establish what type of design they look for, then we say, "Okay. Where're you going to fish for these haddock? Are you going to fish them in the Gulf of Maine? Are you going to fish for them on Georges Bank? Are you going to fish for them in the Southeast Parts? Or what bottom are you going to be working in?" Then they'll explain, "Well, right now the area's mostly this area here - the Gulf of Maine." "That's where you're going to be putting your net. Okay." So knowing the Gulf of Maine - its deeper water - the bottom content is more of soupy mud. It can be soupy and it can be clayey - like a clay mud - very sticky. So now you have to develop a sweep that's a little bit lighter on the bottom so she doesn't dig into the bottom as much,

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to kind of get up over that clay and not collect it in the trawl. Versus when you go on Georges, it's more of a sandy, coarse sandy bottom. So now you can have something that's heavy to tend the bottom but you don't have to worry about it ever building up in front of the trawl. So I just say, what type of sweep. You get that sweep done. Cod - and sometimes they ask because they have a certain regulation on cod and if they're working with... and then you, and then you of course always verify what type of doors they're going to be using with that trawl. And then it goes to the stage of me drawing it. Getting it set up on blueprint and then usually the blueprint goes to two different facets of my company. I've got the net builders who actually put the trawl together itself and then I have the guys that do the sweep work and the wirework and all that sort of stuff. And they build their aspect of it. And then within a week to two-week period of time, both those people getting their jobs done, it all starts to come together as a complete unit on the ground.

FC: And a couple weeks would be typical?

TB: Typical from start to finish. In this day and age, it's like a month.

FC: A month.

TB: It doesn't take a month to build a trawl, but it takes a little bit of time to get the materials in that you might need to design the trawl itself and then the actual building and then once it's built, you're establishing when they're going to take delivery of it and that sort of stuff. So the average is a month from the time I originally talk to the guy to the time the guy's actually taking the net on the boat.

FC: As far as the physical part of it - the two key pieces - it's the wirework and the sweep and all of that and then the building the net.

TB: Then the actual net work itself. Yeah.

FC: And then putting it together. And then - and so are you out there a lot, periodically checking in and making sure...?

TB: I do. I check in as often as I can. They tend to come to me more these days because I have all sorts of jobs that I do, so they'll come flag me down and stop me and they'll make me look at something and say, "This wasn't quite right. You know, we need to fix this thing or that." And I'll have to go through the numbers and check it and work with them on getting it corrected. And then, actually my blueprint goes through several stages because I have that rough draft and then I have the actual working draft that when they're building it and then when the final draft goes out is actually when they send me back the paperwork when they finish the trawl. I take all the information they wrote down and I re-write it on the drawing so that the record is there of what we did... for them.

FC: So you keep a file and all of that information?

TB: Yeah I keep a file. Today it's mostly on the computer. I have all the net plans labeled in the file folders on the computer with the different boats' names. And I try to keep pictures of the boats and records of the boats in there so I can reference them against, sometimes other boats when they come and say, "Oh, I'm like so and so." Or, "I'm like so and so." You can kind of pull out those other files and kind of check that out and say, "Oh yeah. You're like such and such a boat." You can kind of compare notes and that sort of thing.

FC: Is there any sort of issue with copyright or patents where you build a net for somebody and you've added your personal touches based on your experience, and this guy fishes with that net and somebody else who's in your business sees it and says, "Oh, I'm going to do the exact same thing." Or maybe do the exact same thing for less money or something?

TB: Yeah. You have a little bit of that going on. There's three or four main net builders - designers - in this area in New England. I tend not to look back at those guys and what they're doing. I really focus on what I'm doing and if they want to copy a trawl plan that I've designed, I kind of don't worry about it because in one sense, I've moved on from that. Once I've built it, you know each one of these is like my special project in a sense. It's artwork what I do. So once I've designed it and I've built it for that customer, I have to give them a blueprint to fix it. That blueprint can go anywhere. There's no real laws that say that, you know, that it can't be copied. I mean, a net is a net in one sense as far as it's got a set of wings. It's got a set of bellies. It's got a set of, you know, square. It's got these sort of facets. I feel like what makes us different is how we put our own flair on how we put the trawl together. You know, I take into account when I build the trawl -

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not just the fact that what it looks like when it's completed, which I try to make it look as neat and beautiful as possible. I also want an element of functionality to it. So that... because I know that when the nets sitting on the deck of the boat tore up, what the gang goes through. I've been there. I've been on the boat when the net's all tore up. And I know what they need to see and have for that net to go back together properly. So I try to build certain things in a certain way so that it makes it easier for that captain to put that back together. Where another company would do the same exact net as I just did, but they'll put their own flair on it the way they do things at their shop. And to me I feel like, "Well. All right they did that a certain way, but my net may be that much better because my captains know how to fix my net." They don't get all concerned because I take into account of what could happen and all these sort of things - if that makes sense on how I'm trying to explain it.

FC: Yeah.

TB: You know, I can walk down the dock and I can look at the boats and I can look at the nets stretched out on the pier and I can identify another company's net based on what it looks like. I can say, "Oh that was built by so and so." Or, "That was built by so and so." Or, "That was built by so and so." And then same respects, those people can tell the net that I built because they can see what goes into it. And like I say, I concentrate on my stuff and what can make my products, you know, work for the customers.

FC: Yup. And you do give the captain a copy of the blueprint?

TB: Yes. And I usually and I give them a copy with right and truthful information, like, on it. Like I've seen over the years, I've gotten plans from competitors because a customer of mine comes in. They say, "You know... so and so on whatever boat... he's been catching fish and he is using a Swan net, or a Flag net or this and that... And this is the plan that he has." And he'll give it to me. "This is what he has. I want one like this." And I'll look at the plan and go, "You want one like this?" He says, "Yeah." I usually, if I can help it, I don't make that plan exactly like Flag's net might have been. I say, "Okay. I'll make you one like that, but can I put my own spin on it?" I'll ask him, you know. "What do you mean? I got to make sure I can catch just like the other guy." And I says, "Well, if you want to look at this, here. Let me show you this one." I'll pull out a plan from another Flag net that someone brought me. And I'll put them side-by-side. And I says, "Well, your friend has four-hundred horsepower right?" And he goes, "Yes." And I'll say, "This guy over here with this net - this guy has seven horsepower." He goes, "Yup." I says, "Look at the two plans." And he'll put the two plans side by side. "Look at the numbers." He'll look at the numbers. "What's going on here?" And he's like, "Well, have you noticed that the bellies are the same dimension? The squares are the same dimension? That his is the same dimension?" "Yeah, I know they are. But this is what this guy is towing." I said, "I bet you your friend isn't towing that net because that net is meant for a 750 horsepower and if he's got 400 horsepower, he can't tow that net." I said, "Flag probably built your friend a net and gave him that drawing to say that was his net." So again, I says, "Can I design the net that's going to fit your boat and what you need to do?" And they usually, "Yeah, that's good. Good point." And I'll design a net that is actually proper for what he needs to do. I've seen that happen to my net plans where I've developed a net. I'll give it to somebody and some of their friends want that same net that I built them and, "Oh yeah. Here's a copy of it." And they'll give them a copy of my net and they'll go and build a net just like it. And all of a sudden they can't tow it. And all of a sudden I see that guy in my office, "Oh Tor. I'm having trouble, Tor, with my net." I'll go, "What do you have?" And they'll show me the plan and I'm like, "Well that's Joe Smoe's plan." "Well, yeah. I wanted one just like it. So I built one. I did it myself." They'll build it themselves. And I'm like, "Yeah but that's not meant for your power for your boat." They kind of get stuck, "Help!" (laughs)

FC: (Laughs) Yep. So are there fishermen still building their own nets? I guess in the old days that's how they all did it, right?

TB: That's how they did it. The old days, my father included, you had the net guys - the net companies were like section companies. They made netting or they brought netting in and they cut panels. A lot of guys had the same cookie cutter nets. They had the Yankee, you know, Thirty-six or the Yankee Forty-one or the Yankee Three-Quarter. Or they had a certain basic nets back in the day. And then today, it's all - everyone's actually got a lot of the same netting, but it's all these different shapes. So we'll cut panels for repair. We'll obviously we'll put nets together.

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TB: Back then, they would get all their sections and on the boat they'd assemble everything. Guys today can't do that as much.

FC: So it sounds like maybe the biggest change in the structure is that it's just a lot more sophisticated. It sounds like it's based more on research and factoring in all these details that you talked about.

TB: Yes. That's correct because we don't target everything on the bottom as far as how we go fishing. We really target what we're trying to target based on today what our quota was or is quota. Back in the sixties and the fifties, the catch consisted of all different sized fish. They had a lot of, if you look at the cull you'd have a lot of scrod on the board. You'd have a lot of this. You'd have a lot of that, you know. All these different terminars they had. And they kind of did a more general kind of catch. Whatever was there, they caught and they would separate it on board the boat and move on. Today, you try to target as clean a product as possible: for A, for the quality of the product, and for B, it's less for the guys to have to handle on the deck. So it's really very different.

FC: A little bit of change of pace, but I wanted to ask you a little bit about the family business. You're involved in a business where your father's involved, your mother's involved and you and your brother. What's that like or what are the best things about it and maybe also the challenges a little bit?

TB: I would say some of the best things about being a family business is you know, for me A, yes I get to see my family all the time and talk to them. It's something that's unique as far as people and generations now it's this thing where you have your mother and your father and you move away and you get your own job or your own career and then you start to establish your own family and you kind of have those ties that separate. With me it's...I see my mom and dad still almost every single day. I get to see my brother pretty much every single day. So it's nice having that connection because you have that blood relation, bloodlines. You can depend on your family the most when, you know, you get busy times and things happen. Your regular crew, if you ask them to come in to help you or stay late to help you, you get a lot of, you know, aggravation and aggression about it. They just want to do their eight hours and they want to go home. And when you have a business and you know that customer's depending on that trawl the next day or whenever you need it, at least your family's there. They'll be like, "All right. We'll get that done." Because you're all kind of working for the same goal for the company. So it's like, "We'll get that done." And everyone stays late to get it done where you don't see the regular crew staying late to get that done. So those are the plus sides of it. The negative sides is you see your family all the time. (laughs) So the dynamics of what's going on in your family can make things challenging because you have those little fights that you have that you hold over the next day and you can't kind of separate business from family. You know and things always do come up. At the end of the day, you always... you'll always love your parents. You always love your brothers and sisters and all that sort of stuff, but it can be challenging when those things come up. And then you work all week with your family; your mom and your dad and your brother. And the weekend comes and Mom goes, "You want to come over for dinner? I haven't seen the grandkids and I haven't seen your wife in a while." And you're sitting there looking at her going, "Well, sorry Mom but I haven't seen my kids all week because I've been working with you all

week for forty hours a week and I just kind of want to spend a Sunday relaxing with my kids and my wife." (laughing) You know. So that can be a little bit challenging because it's like, you know, who works around it and then who doesn't see certain things. So that can be the challenging...

FC: What about the...my father was a building contractor and I worked with him some. So I know that can be interesting - the father-son thing can be a challenge. On one hand, you're learning a lot. You're working with somebody who's a family member you can trust and everything, but sometimes they have certain expectations or they can be tougher. I felt like he could be tougher on me sometimes than he could be the other guys. You know?

TB: Yeah. It is. And when I was younger, you definitely felt that. There was no slack because you were the son.

[50:00]

You had to do things much better and much faster. You had to prove... you know, I was nicknamed "The Boy," "The Boy," "The Boy" by some of the community around here. When they'd come into my father's shop - at the time it was more my father's shop than it was my shop - and "Yeah, can the boy do it? Can The Boy get it done?" What was unique about this business is I've developed my own career different from my father's legacy in respects to, he was a well-known established captain for thirty-five years. He always brought a trip in. He was a high-liner on the board and everyone knew that Reidar Bendiksen, when he went to sea - follow his boat around. It was a big red-orange boat that people used to look for on the horizon because if Reidar was over there you knew he was on fish. So that was his legacy and then he decided to step on land and develop a business building gear, whereas I took that part of it over. When my father, even though he liked gear and was interested in it, I really took it and developed it to the next level. So, we have this balance where he knows that I'm much more intelligent on the gear aspect of it and how it all works but he still has the facet of how's it going to work out there. And I can lean on him for a lot of information of, "All right. I'm doing this Dad with this type of net and this is how I'm designing it. What do you see the flaws in it? What's going to happen when that goes out to sea? What do you see?" "Well, you know you're putting this together with this, this and this and when you go across the Cultivator Shoals and you're working on this area, you're going to have a lot of tide. You're going to have a lot of this and you're going to get hung up. You're going to get this and you're going to get that." So he has that knowledge of knowing what could happen to it where I don't have quite that experience. I've been to sea and I've worked on boats and I know how it all works. And I mechanically know how the deck works and how all that equipment works and what happens, but he really had seen time and time true what happens to the gear. So you have that balance. You have that conversation where we're not in each other's - we're not in each other's legacy. He's not watching father and son, where the son's really trying to take over the dad's position, because I'm blazing my own position and he's had his own legacy. So I guess that's what makes it solely work in this business for us here. My brother, he's younger than me. He's not quite as interested in the fishing gear, the nets, the designs as I am. But he's able to understand it and back me up as far as if I have to get something made, he knows how it goes together. If I have to send one of my products out to a boat, he's usually the deliver guy. He makes the deliveries and when he gets on site, he knows how to talk to the captain about it and

get it all set up. So where if I just send somebody else from my shop to go deliver it, they'll drop it off and be like, "Uh yup. You got to go talk to Tor. I delivered it. It's done." Where my brother can actually get on the boat and say, "Oh no, no. You've got to hook it up like this. You've got to set it up like this. You got to do it like this." Because he knows how I think and he knows what - how it needs to all happen. So he's actually a guy unique where he's a jack-of-all-trades in this facility. He can step in and work in the welding shop. He can step in and work in the wire shop and the net shop and the trucks. He has all that dynamic. So we don't get in each other's way because he's not trying to design a piece of gear and I'm trying to design a piece of gear. I do all the design and he just helps me execute on the floor and helps the guys on the floor if there's a question and all that sort of thing. So, what I'm kind of getting at is we're out of each other's way even though we're all still part of the same product that leaves the shop.

FC: It's sort of like you have your own identities. You're not trying to be somebody else. You're not trying to be your father.

TB: That's right. I'm not trying to be my father.

FC: You've got an identity and it works and you respect each other. It's not easy to do.

TB: Yeah. Yeah.

FC: Not always easy to do.

TB: No it isn't. What's kind of unique is I'm in the...I'm the middle-man. I'm in the middle of it all. Because obviously I'm in charge of everything but I'm in the middle. (laughs) I've got all these dynamics. Yep.

FC: Yeah. Interesting. What about, a couple of other things and then I'll let you get back to work. We talked to Sarah before.

[55:00]

Do things work out all right as far as having guys and girls working? They get along okay for the most part if they're working together on a project? Do the guys respect her and don't say, "Oh she's a girl and she doesn't know what she's doing?"

TB: Yeah. I think it's all personality related. I mean it has all different types of people here worked for me over the years and on a day-to-day basis, when we're working, we're not looking at gender. You know, she's... Sarah's a woman, but she's involved in a man's industry but we don't even say, "Oh she's just a girl in a guy's world." I mean, she's actually earned the right to... she knows how to torch with the torch. She knows how to run the forklift. She knows how to sew the nets. So she's just one of the group. One of the group in the industry that can handle this. So I think there's a lot of respect there and you don't see this sexism - is that the right word? You don't see that going on as much. I mean yeah there's always the few guys that do the little joking whistle here and there and there might be fishermen that come in here, not necessarily my own staff, and you know, and day-to-day someone with a personality like Sarah kind of gets a kick

out of it and has a little fun with it and goes back to her job. There's no real, you know, I don't think there's issues in our shop, but I think it's because of the different types of personalities that we work with. I've had several ladies at once working here at times, too, and right now I'm down to one lady, but I think we look at the personality for the job and if they can handle it.

FC: It's the person.

TB: It's that person. It's not the gender. It's not the ethnicity or anything like that. You know I've had all different types of backgrounds working for me and it's just can they handle the job? Can they do it? Are they interested in it to remember it? And that sort of thing.

FC: And as far as hiring someone or getting help, is that one of the most important things is making sure they're a good fit and will work as part of the team...?

TB: Yes, that is the big part of it. I've been up to - what I do nowadays is I hire more people than I need to fill the actual slots because I have to see which ones are going to fizzle out real quick, which ones are going to have the staying power and can handle the job. So you have to kind of - a lot of times you have to look at them for a couple or three weeks to really understand how they really work because everybody is a superstar on the first two days of work. I think people, when they come to work, their senses become heightened on those first couple of days. So you look at it and they are a superstar because they're really tuned. They're like, "This is my first day on the job. My first couple of days on the job. Got to make sure everything's done right." It's that two-week window when they get in a couple weeks in, then you start to establish - okay, can they handle this? Can they really do it? Because you'll start to see those little flounders and falters and things like that. It's personality dynamics and if they're really into wanting to do it. You know what I mean? I tell everybody that works for me, I say, "I don't want you working here if you don't want to do it." I says, "You know, find your own life and find your own means and if you come up with something that you want to do in your life, go do it. I can use you here for the interim. I'm not going to necessarily fire you, but if you think something's better and that's what you want to do with your life, go do it. You can't spend twenty years just - this is just the job and this is all I... you know. Find out." In that case, I have a lot of college kids that I have a couple of down there now that are going to school earning their degrees in certain backgrounds and I know that four years from now they're going to be gone doing their own degree. But I'm utilizing them and trying to teach them now knowing that they're going to be gone. You know, and then you got someone like Sarah who you interviewed earlier that she has a degree in education. When she got out of school, she really didn't find a job - couldn't get a job. There wasn't anything available and for her it seemed like it was a fit to stay working for us. Personality-wise it seems to fit too, as far as how her personality is with the guys.

FC: So the staff part of it is a big part of your job. Finding the right people and keeping them here and seeing who fits. It's like family members.

TB: That's right.

FC: They have bad days, they have good days....

TB: And it's tough for them too sometimes because they sometimes not only have one boss, they've got four bosses. And they know who the Boss is. They know who did the hiring and the firing and all that sort of thing as far as like I'm in charge of the work force.

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But when they see Reidar walk through the shop, or they see Kirsten walk through the shop or my brother, to some extent, walking through the shop, they know, I don't want to say they can't get away with stuff. They know there's other people that they have to answer to not just Tor. It can be challenging to them too because they get four bosses. You know? (laughs) If my Dad's walking through his shop, even though I'm the one in charge of those guys, if he sees something that they're doing that he doesn't like, he walks right up to them and says, "What are you doing? Why are you doing it?" Not necessarily about the actual job itself, but certain things that employees like to just get away with. Today, one of the hardest things to deal with on the floor is their connection to social media. They still have to have their phone. It's like it needs to be on them at all times and you ask them to not have it on them when they're on the work floor and they look at you like, what do you mean I can't have this on? I need to have it on. It's like, "Well, you don't understand. If you need to sew the net with both hands, how're you supposed to hold that phone in your hand and talk and use both hands?" They don't understand that you're on my time now and utilize it the best that you can. So the phone thing can be an issue. Then they have things like cigarette smokes. A lot guys have, they just have that addiction to cigarettes. It's like they can't go more than an hour without stopping for a cigarette break and that becomes challenging at times. And then you have their extra-curricular activities that they do on weekends and sometimes nights that roll over depending on how wonderful of a night they had the night before.

FC: How much they partied, yeah.

TB: You know they won't show up to work and they'll use a sick day and you're like, you know darn well they're not really sick because they come in the next day perfectly fine. And "Well, what happened to you yesterday?" "Oh, you know...I was sick." And I was like, "Yeah, what are you sick with?" They won't tell you the truth that they were hungover because they had so much fun the night before that. But you're sitting there going, "Geez, I rely on you. You're supposed to be intricate part of getting this job down. Now I just completely missed eight hours. I got to start over again." You know...so it can be challenging at times.

FC: Yeah. We talked about some of the challenges but maybe for the last question I'll ask you, what's the best part of it? What do you enjoy most about the work?

TB: The satisfaction I get from a lot of the customers. Providing the quality product and accomplishing the goal set out each time. Like I said earlier in the talk, you know, I love fishing gear and how it works and how it works with the ocean and the fish and all that sort of thing. And how they use it and all these different designs and all these modern things we're coming up with. To be able to create those things and then have it being utilized properly with the boats offshore to accomplish that goal, is some of those big powerful achievements that you feel proud to be doing what you're doing, in that sense.

FC: Yep, yep. Well that's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add here that we should have covered?

TB: No. I've answered all your questions. I think I'm good.

FC: Yeah. That's good.

[1:03:29] End of audio