



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: June 11, 2017

Bernardo, Joao ~ Oral History Interview

Corinn Williams

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Background

Name of person interviewed: Joao “John” Bernardo [JB]

Facts about this person:

Age 61
Sex Male
Occupation Upholsterer
Residence New Bedford
Ethnic background Portuguese

Interviewer: Corinn Williams [CW]

Transcriber: Michelle Murray [MM]

Interview location: New Bedford, Massachusetts

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Key Words

upholstery, upholsterer, staples, cushions, padding, foam, vinyl, leather, heater, blower, stitching, stretching, sewing machine, plywood, pattern, silicone, ship galley, captain’s chair, chairs, benches, boats, commercial fishing boats, scallopers, Portuguese workers, Guatemalan immigrants, fish house, fish cutters, fillet, New Bedford, fishing industry, dry dock

Abstract

Joao “John” Bernardo describes his work as an upholsterer for the last 38 years, including jobs for commercial fishing boat owners. Bernardo discusses his other jobs related to the commercial fishing industry, working with other Portuguese immigrants in the fish houses and how he learned his current craft.

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[00:00] Joao “John” Bernardo is a sixty-one year old Portuguese immigrant who came to America when he was ten years old. He speaks about working in a fish house early on when he was very young. He then learned the trade of an upholsterer and talks about learning from “one of the best upholsterers around,” Freddie.

[04:51] John speaks about how he does upholstery work on fishing boats. He repairs and makes cushions for the captains’ seats, for the seats in the ships’ galleys, and seats in the hold.

[10:40] He continues to describe covering the seats and gives detailed description of the work. John speaks about the tools he uses but some of them don’t have formal names. He also talks about stitching in addition to stapling. He owns a sewing machine but lately has had to pay others to do the stitching because his machine broke.

[15:12] Next he talks about the foam padding he uses in the seat cushions. He discusses using plywood for the seat bases. The material he uses to cover chairs/seats/benches on fishing boats is very expensive. It can withstand the weather and water. He discusses his work with his customers and lets them know how he can fix things. It’s up to the customer if they want to follow his suggestions.

[20:06] John talks about fixing captain’s chairs on fishing boats and when a boat has been docked for repairs, he’s able to work on reupholstering items from the boat. He talks about the differences he sees in fishing boats versus scallopers and how the wear and tear on the boats is different.

[24:59] He talks about how being a worker on a scalloper is a very dangerous job. He talks about what it was like unloading fishing boats when he was young and also about his job as a floor boy in the fish houses where he would run fish to the workers who cut and filleted fish. He speaks about how the cutters worked and how today one of the biggest changes is that they use some machinery to cut the fish.

[30:04] He speaks about female fish cutters, about Portuguese workers and about how now most of the people working in fish houses are Guatemalan immigrants.

[35:05] John talks about how he knows how to do a little bit of everything. He never caught on to welding and recounts a couple of humorous stories about welding experiences. His father was a boat builder. John has been around the fishing industry for many years and has a lot of connections. He talks about the difficult jobs scallopers and fishermen have and it’s important to have good upholstery to be comfortable on their jobs.

[39:45] He speaks about ships’ mattresses and how they are not upholstered but are custom made for boats. John discusses how he wasn’t always proud of the kind of work he does. He thought of it as “just a job.” But other professional upholsterers praised his work and he began to realize that it’s not just a job. He began feeling proud of himself. Fishing boat captains tell him how his work and the seating is great.

[44:57] John often has to wait for boats to come off the water to be fixed before he's able to do any upholstery work. He would teach anyone who has the patience and train them to do his type of work. He feels that if you put your mind to something, you can learn anything. He relates stories about car repairs and electrical work.

[47:35.3] Interview ends.

Interview

[00:00]

Corrine Williams (CW): Hello. Today is June 11th, 2017, and this is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center funded by an Archie Green Fellowship for the Library of Congress. As part of this project, we're interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford and 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. My name is Corinne Williams and today I'm speaking with Joao Bernardo here in New Bedford and the time is 7:15pm. First of all, do you give us permission to record your story for this project?

Joao Bernardo (JB): Yes.

CW: Thank you. OK, just to start off, can you just introduce yourself, and tell me how old you are and a just a little bit about yourself?

JB: Well, my name is John Bernardo. I'm sixty-one going on sixty-two. I've been on upholstery for about thirty-eight years, close to forty years.

CW: Wow.

JB: I've been very good at it.

CW: Uh huh. And can you tell me where you were born and where did you grow up?

JB: I was born in the Azores, Portugal.

CW: In the Azores, ok. What town? What town in the Azores?

JB: That's Furnas.

CW: Uh huh. Ok. And where did you grow up? When did you come to the United States?

JB: I came on sixty-seven.

CW: Ok. And how old were you then?

JB: I was ten years old when I came to America.

CW: Oh ok. Alright. Can you tell me a little bit about that? When you came to America? When you were little?

JB: When I came to America? There was nothing for me to learn. All I wanted to do was ride bicycles, fix bikes and ride 'em. That's it. Nothing else I think in my mind was nothing there.

CW: Uh huh. And how did you get involved in the fishing industry 'cause I know you've had other jobs.

JB: Fish industry is when I was eighteen years old. I started working on the fish house.

CW: Ok. And what kind of work did you do over there?

JB: I was unloading boats.

CW: Oh, ok. Yep.

JB: Then from unloading boats, I end up taking care of the fish cutters as a floor boy. Seventeen fish cutters. Alone.

CW: Ok. What company was that?

JB: That was D Fillet, UF and there was another one that I can't come up with the name.

CW: Sure, sure. Yeah.

JB: I work in a lot of places. A lot of fish places.

CW: A lot of fish places. And how many years were you working in fish houses?

JB: I worked for quite a few years. I got hurt. Then I quit.

CW: Uh huh.

JB: Then I started doing upholstery.

CW: Oh ok.

JB: That's how I learned. I learned from professional people. Old timers. They very good it at. They had kind patience. With young guys you can't learn. They just tell you and that's that. And you pick it up from over there. These old people - they show you how it's done. And they make me do it. And I picked it up and they said...

CW: Tell me a little bit about the person who taught you how to do it.

JB: His name was Freddie. He died already. He was one of the best upholsteries guys around. He could make anything. Anything. He could make even a pair of gloves if he wanted to. That guy was so good. He was top of the line. When he passed away, the business went down because nobody was as good as him because he was ahead of everything. He was the best in there. And I

learned was from that old man. And when I learned and he see what I can do, he says, "Ain't nothing else I can show you here. You know what to do. You have the touch. You've got the movement. You've got the patience. Especially patience." You've gotta have patience. You have a lot of personality of movements of playing with things and working it out because a lot of things you can't just stretch it. It needs heat to stretch out the material. It depends what you working with. If you work with leather, it's a lot of times it takes a little bit of heat. Not too much heat because you'll burn the leather. Same thing with the vinyl. You can't keep the heater too close, the blower too close to the vinyl because it'll stretch too much the vinyl. It'll take the look of the varnish - it shines it on the corners instead of having the same faded on the top. It shows like too shiny on the edges because you're cooking it.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

[04:51] JB: So that's no good. So that's a lot of work. There's a lot of stretching, pulling, and a lot of bending and you have to be good with your hands.

CW: Sure. Sure.

JB: You have to be very good with your hands. And the staple gun that does all the work. You stretch but the staple gun does everything.

CW: Um hum. That's a big part of the tools.

JB: Yeah. That's a big thing.

CW: So tell me a little bit about how you got started because I know you've done a bunch of fishing boats - commercial fishing boats.

JB: I did a lot of boats. I did a lot of customized cars. I customize a lot of vans. Which is I have one customize out there. It's top of the line, you know, nobody ever beat me on doing upholstery because I'm very good at it.

CW: Yeah, yeah. Well tell me about what it's like to do the upholstery on a commercial - like a scalloper or a commercial fishing boat.

JB: Well a scallop and a fishing boat - they just about the same. The seats are the same. The stools on the bottom which is they call 'em - what do they call those like ah...where they eat

CW: Like the galley?

JB: Yes. All that - that's all plywood. And some of the plywood is good and some of them ain't. A lot of them they have a quarter of an inch and a quarter of an inch ain't that good. You need a half-inch. Especially for a boat. And you have to seal that thing right after you're done covering it up. You have to get a good padding and a good material - a good vinyl that's made for weather on the...out on the sea.

CW: Out on the sea.

JB: Yes. Because that's all salty stuff. You know what I mean? That thing rottens up fast.

CW: So you do like the seats that are for the captain?

JB: I do the captains' seats and a lot of times the captains' seats - they don't like the way the captain's seats are because they get sore backs. I make them a special padded cushion that I put on the back before I cover everything up with material. And they are very happy with that and since I done that I've been having the work left and right.

CW: Wow. Wow.

JB: I have a lot of work. I do houses. I do chairs for the houses. I do stools. I do bars. I do restaurants. I do everything.

CW: Yeah. But it sounds like you have a lot of people that you know in the fishing industry...from all those years.

JB: Yes I do. I do know a lot of people.

CW: Yeah, yeah. So is it all pretty much word-of-mouth that you get these referrals to get to do a boat when you're...?

JB: Sometimes...I get loaded. Some of the times I don't get *nobody*. But when they come, they always come all at once. You know what I mean? And that's how it goes. It's not every week doing that. Sometimes it's a month, it's three weeks, it's two weeks, it's three days. It depends. You know like now I just finished doing a restaurant. I did all the stools for him. I did a guy's stools on first base. You know, I been kinda busy. Now I got a lot of chairs yet to do on these properties from these ladies' homes that they get the tables - the eating tables there - doing all the chairs and stuff like that.

CW: So when you're doing a boat - a fishing boat - you're gonna do the chairs, the captains' chairs, the galley. What other parts of the fishing boat are you doing the cushions for?

JB: Whatever they want me to do. A lot of times, they want me to do the hold seats. And those hold seats a lot of times from being used so much and they get soaked and wet and it soaks it in, the padding and the sponge fades away. And it takes the shape of the chair and they uncomfortable - very uncomfortable. Because a lot of them they even put pillows behind their backs. Because that's how the padding really wears out - because of the weather. Because of the whatchamacallit - of the sea. Because that's what eats a lot.

CW: So what kind of material do you use usually?

JB: Uh. The kind of material I use - it's a special material. It's made for boats. It's vinyl.

CW: Yup.

JB: But it's better than leather. Way better than leather. Much stronger. No cracks. No nothing. And it's much stronger. It's a little bit a more work because it's a thick material to bend, to stitch. A lot of them - they need stitching. A lot of them, you can just fold it over. It depends how the design they want on a chair. Because if I make the design the way they want it, that's customized. That I can work on my way. If they want it the way the seat looks, I have to do it that way so everything's gotta be on stitch. I gotta put on top of another piece of leather. I have to trace everything out. I gotta mark every corner so when you stitch they'll all match every touch of the cuts. Because if they don't match, it's not... soon as you flip it over, it's not gonna match right on the edges of the thing. The stitchin' might be in or might be over. And that's not good. It's gotta become completely perfect around the armrests and all. That's the only problem - you have to do a lot of patching after that.

[10:40] CW: So do you have to - are you working on this right on the boat or you take some of that back to your shop?

JB: A lot of times I bring it back to my shop. Definitely. It's certain things I don't have to bring it. I can do it right over there. Little stuff. But the big stuff it can't be done there. I have to bring it home 'cause all my tools are home. I can't bring my tools over there and do that. I do everything at home.

CW: And what kind of tools are you using?

JB: Oh my friend, I have crazy tools. I tell yas' - all different kinda tools. It's weird, you know? To tell you the truth, I don't even know the name of these tools. That's...you know...that's how nuts these tools are. These things I work with, it's weird. Sometimes I use a pliers at the...to bend the corners. And a lot of times I don't need a pliers, you know. I depends what kind of shape and design that I'm making. But it's all different kind of tools for different things that you do.

CW: Right. And you've been used to doing this for so many years.

JB: Yes. I'm so used to it.

CW: So, what about stitching. You were talking about you're stapling things, but do you stitch?

JB: Yeah - stitching? You have to be very good on stitching. You can't just stitch once. You have to double stitch.

CW: Oh. Ok.

JB: Because if you don't double-stitch, the way...and the thread that we use is thread for the boats. That thing is so strong, you can't break that thread. You will cut your fingers.

CW: Wow.

JB: And you will never bust that string. That's the truth. That is the best string - I mean the best thread you can get. And the needles are thicker. We change the needles for different threads. For different kinda works that they use. Now if they use it down the bottom or with the heat and stuff, that doesn't take any threads around because they usually do cushions. I don't do cushions. I do customized everything all the way around with plywood. And I design everything there and they can lift it up, take it out anytime they want. Backs and bottoms. And that's perfect and they all happy with it because they can't - they says, "You can't touch that." He says, "This is the best we ever had." He says, "It's very good. It's - we never hit the bottom of the two-by-fours - I mean of the plywood. We're right high on the cushioning. You know - it's perfect. We don't feel nothing. You know - it's very good.

CW: So you have ...what kind of sewing machine do you have?

JB: I have a Singer.

CW: A Singer? Yeah, yeah.

JB: Yes.

CW: And is it specially for upholstery work?

JB: It's, it's specially for upholstery work. But lately, it broke on me.

CW: Oh no.

JB: Yeah. It broke on me.

CW: Oh wow.

JB: I don't know how it broke on me. But it blew up because it was a brand new motor I put on there and it blew up. Because it started smoking. It started smelling and I says, "Oh boy! What's going on here?" So I check it out. The motor was gone. So now when I need to do something, I do all my trace, all my cuts, and I bring it to my friend which is that teached me how to do the shop, that teached me how to work there - well he's dead already but is one of his friends that took over. I usually give it to him and he'll stitch it for me but I have to pay him.

CW: Right. Right.

JB: To stitch. If you do just one piece - two armrests, that's a hundred bucks he'll charge you right there. That's fifty dollars an arm.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JB: You know they're very expensive. Is one thing about upholstery, it's very, a really very expensive work. I mean it's a lot of work and they pay for that. It's work on that. There's money

on that kinda job. Upholstery - is a lotta money in upholstery. 'Cause you can do anything. What I usually do, they can't do. They even say so: I don't have patience. I don't have the strength. I don't have the movements like you have. You are good on this. I'm only good to take seats out, take 'em all apart, trace 'em up, stitch 'em and put 'em back on again. You? You can do a whole piece all different ways.

[15:12] CW: And you use foam inside?

JB: I use foam. I use padding and it's a different kind of a foam - it's very smooth - that goes over the sponge so it doesn't show all those grooves on those waves. Instead it be all nice and smooth. And you have to make a hole on the bottom on the two-by-four - on the plywood.

CW: Uh huh. How come?

JB: Because of the air. Because if you don't, the air it keeps pushing to the sides and the corners and that causes damage.

CW: You have to have some release.

JB: Yeah because of the pressure of the people sitting on, so you need a few holes on the bottom of the plywood so the padding will breathe to the plywood.

CW: Right, right.

JB: It will go right through. The air will go right through that because if you don't, it's no good.

CW: Right.

JB: You will loosen that up 'cause you're stretching it with your heat of your body sitting on there. It stretches and stretches and it comes to a point - it's like material. It's all loose, you know? And that's how things go.

CW: So for a fishing boat, how often do you think they have to change their upholstery?

JB: Tell you the God honest truth, when I do one - I done one for about five years. And it's still in excellent shape.

CW: Oh good.

JB: I did more than one. I did about three of them. I did one fisherman and two scallopers.

CW: Uh huh.

JB: And there's one thing, this is: the material is very expensive. You buy a roll - there's about fourteen to fifteen hundred dollars.

CW: Wow.

JB: For a roll of that material. Of that material.

CW: And how much do you use of it?

JB: Most of the whole roll.

CW: Really. Wow.

JB: And that roll only comes about sixty yards.

CW: Really?

JB: That's how they go is by the yard. They usually go thirty-nine. Some of them go forty. Some will go twenty-seven. It depends what you want to buy. You want the best, you gonna pay forty-seven. That's the best you can get.

CW: But it lasts long.

JB: It lasts a lot long. It beats leather. It does beat leather.

CW: Really?

JB: Believe me. It does beat leather and that can take a beating with the weather. Water can go on top of there. It won't sink in. It won't suck it right inside. It doesn't do nothing. Because there's no stitching. There's no nothing in there. You double - you fold everything underneath. Then you buy a special staples that's made for stainless steel. Because that goes on the water with regular staples, they gonna rot. They gonna rot out.

CW: Right. You have to have it special...

JB: Yes. Yes. It's made so they don't rust out. Then that takes a special glue - like a silicone but it's glue. Right over when you're done with the work, then it takes a padding on the bottom of it so it will protect the bottom of the cushion.

CW: So it can withstand the cold weather and not fall apart.

JB: Exactly. Exactly. It's weird

CW: Wow, wow. It sounds like a lot of work.

JB: It is a lot of work. You know, when you look at it - eh, that's nothing. But when you take it apart you say, "Oh boy. This wood is no good. I gotta get new wood here. I can't add a piece in here because it's not...you gotta do everything over again. You gotta do it all over again." And when you usually ask the owner, the first thing I ask is, "Excuse me you've got a quarter of an

inch here. You need a half inch. It's a little bit more heavy because you're food is underneath of these bottoms here.

CW: The benches?

JB: Yeah. The benches to lift it up. But I tell you, if I'm gonna do...if I put this right over there, this is not gonna last you long. Because you gonna go right through it.

CW: Yeah. Yeah.

JB: So I show 'em and I tell 'em what's going on and they want it done, I do it. If they want it the same as they got, I'll put the same thing as they have. And that's what I usually do. I always ask them for their opinion first because they're paying, not me. You know, they are the boss. They giving me a job. I see- something ain't right and they don't know because when we take a captain's seat out, a captain's seat - it went through hell. Because the way those people sit. The way those people get up. The way they jump on top of there. Everything is all tear apart. The springs, the padding, it's got lines in the bottom - steel lines. Like little wires on the bottom of the padding that holds the padding down. It's all broken. It's all busted. You gotta do everything all new again.

[20:06] CW: Wow.

JB: You can't put the old ones on there because it won't last. It'll go right through the seat.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JB: So it's the springs.

CW: You gotta have a really strong and sturdy chair.

JB: Yes, yes exactly. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work.

CW: Yeah.

JB: It's not the work. It's patience. You know. You've got patience. You can do anything. You can learn. You can learn.

CW: So, over time - have you seen that there's changes going on in the fishing industry? Have you gotten more jobs doing this kind of stuff or less jobs because they talk about...

JB: Yes, I have more. I'm just waiting for some of the boats because they usually go out every three days. I can't do a boat in three days. I have to do a boat at least a week to two weeks. If they want it a decent job, a perfect job. Not decent. Perfect because my job is how to look good. I don't like to do guinea rigging. I like a nice job. If I see it don't look nice, I rip it again or start all over again. But the thing is people they come in for three days to four days and they back out. It's not even enough there to do two stools or two bottoms of the seats. It's not enough time.

CW: Yeah, yeah. So when do you do it? I mean when do you usually work on this type of stuff?

JB: When they usually take a boat out to be fixed, and while that time is being fixed - a month and a half - it needs welding, it needs a few thing or it needs a motor, you know? That's the time they call me and then I can grab what I can and bring it home and dress it up and bring it back.

CW: Uh huh. It gives you a little more time.

JB: Yeah. It gives me more time. I don't have to rush. I can take my time and that's how they usually do it because they not going out there without table stools and no chairs. They gotta have that. So that's what takes longer.

CW: Now would you...you said that you did both the scallopers and the draggers? Are there any differences?

JB: Yes. It is a differences. A fish boat is different than a scallop boat. A fish boat - it's hard to explain. They're more dirty. They're more sloppy. Yes, they very, very dirty. Even the seats even stink. They even falling apart. Everything's all rotted out fast because I don't know? Is it because of the fish? Or the way they drag it in? The way they work? They get soaked and they go sit on those benches and those chairs and they get like that deck would be too. You know what I mean? But scallop is different. A scalloper is more clean. They're much cleaner than a fish boat.

CW: Hmm. I wonder why? I wonder why they're different?

JB: That's what I mean because a scalloper is just scallops. They open the shells, put it inside of the bag. It goes right down the cooler there where all the ice is right on the bottom of the boat. Fish - they gotta open them here, they gotta throw shit here, they gotta throw all kinda crap over there. All the guts they throw out. Some of the fish they can't come with the heads. They gotta chop the heads like the monkfish and stuff like that. They always chop the heads off. And they take the insides out.

CW: Yeah. So there's more to it.

JB: Yes. They all dirty and they touch all that kind of material like. After a while that material lets go. It lets go. I don't know why. It's very nasty. Very terrible.

CW: Well the trips are different.

JB: It is. It's very different on a fish to a scalloper.

CW: Right. Right.

JB: A fish boat don't make as much as a scallop. What a scallop boat does on four days, a fish boat won't even make that on six days, on six weeks. They won't. 'Cause all the money is on the scallop.

CW: Right, right. Now it is.

JB: Fish - nobody makes money on fish. I have my father-in-law...he's got a fishing boat. The workers make what? A thousand dollars? Twelve-hundred? Fourteen-hundred dollars? And they out there for eight days. And these guys go out there for four to five days. They come home - ten-thousand, thirteen-thousand dollars. See what I mean? But you have to be good on scallop. If you're not a good cutter, they don't want you in there because you just wasting time. They want people to move. The quicker you cutter, the more it's coming in. That's how they work. But it's a tough job.

CW: It is a tough job. Yeah.

JB: It is. That scallop is the toughest job.

CW: Right, right. It's not for everybody.

JB: Fish is the dirtiest job.

CW: (laughs) And it's a tough job too.

[24:59] JB: And it's a tough job but not as tough as scallop. Scallop is very tough.

CW: Yeah and the trips are a little shorter than the fish...

JB: There's a lot of scallop people lost their fingers, lost their hands. A lot of them.

CW: Yeah. Very dangerous.

JB: I got a lot of friends. They out of work. They lost their hands. Some of them lost four fingers. Some of them lost three fingers.

CW: Just through...

JB: Just going through them and the way they cut the scallop. They slip. Those knives are very sharp. They will shave your head. That's how sharp those knives are.

CW: Wow, wow.

JB: It's made for that kinda work, you know?

CW: So what kind of changes - you were saying you were working at a lot of different fish houses and you were filleting fish. You started on the floor. But what kind of changes are going on the fishing industry that you've seen over time?

JB: See, when I was unloading boats, I was making out better than I was working in the factory. Because boats were - would come in - we unloaded. And after we unloaded 'em, they always give us a like a pallet of fish - whatever kinda fish you want. I used to take it out, drop it to a few friends of mine that has restaurants and fresh fish. And they were cutters too. So I used to sell them the fish. I used to make out good. Then when I worked on the fish house as a floor boy taking care of seventeen cutters, I mean that's...it was good for me because it was building me up. Because oh I'm a short guy. The sinks where they work it's over my head so I had to pick that up. It's over a hundred-fifty pounds.

CW: Wow.

JB: So I got so used to it, it was like you know I was taking a bag of potatoes. It was nothin'. You know I got used to it. But after a while, I was really sore and hurt. But I tell you, I got built on that. That's why a lot of people asked me if I was liftin' weight. I says, "Yeah, I'm liftin' weight in the fish house."

CW: (laughs) Yeah lifting fish. Yeah.

JB: Yeah. And that was a tough job because people are so fast on gutting fish. You're not done giving a - whatchamacallit - a pallet of fish to one guy, he's already banging on the sink. He wants - I say, "Jesus. I just give him a pallet."

CW: (laughs)

JB: "Jeez, my God what is this guy doing? I mean this guy's fast." Here I go back. Give him another pallet because if you don't, the boss will be pissed at you. Because if he's banging and he wants fish, you gotta give him fish.

CW: Wow. Wow.

JB: And the other ones - he's asking for it. You're just going along loading everybody up. You gotta go over the sinks where they doing all the cutting and stuff.

CW: Well from when I was talking to people who were working in the fish houses now, there's some machines.

JB: Yeah. See the machines is to skin 'em. But to cut 'em, is the cutters.

CW: Yeah, yeah. Well they do both, I guess. The machines do both now?

JB: I don't know about that. On my days they didn't do...

CW: They didn't. Yeah. Now it's different.

JB: They didn't do both. Like the monkfish was no machine. They would take the monkfish skin out. It was by hand. And it was against the law to put that through the belt. They had to go in a box. Or in a bag. Because you couldn't throw that on the floor. Because anybody that walks through that, they will fall. You would fall because that is so slippery. It's unbelievable. You could peel rubber with a car, and that thing still be slippery. You'll never waste that skin.

CW: Mmm hmm. Yeah, I've talked to some people that...

JB: But that was good fish too. That's nice white fish. I love that. Monkey fish - it's very good. It's very good.

CW: Yeah, yeah. But it's a very tough one....

JB: But now flounders, yellowtails, sand dabs, all that - they got machines that do all that up.

CW: Right, right. So back when - way back when - when you had seventeen cutters on the line...

JB: Yes. Yes. Seventeen cutters on the line. About seven or eight people on the belts putting the fish to... Some of them, you have to know how to put the fish flat down so it would take just the skin. Because if it takes a little bit of meat, let me tell you, at the end of the day, you know that's a lot of pounds of meat they are losing out of the skin. That's going into the skin of that. So they used to keep the eyes on that all the time. The boss was always back and forth and checkin' it out. Even the cutters, some of them were good on cod and some of them weren't. Because I had special people I had to give special fish. Yellowtails was a couple a guys. Flounders - it was special guys. Cod fish - it was only two guys that was good on it because they can skin that right to the bone. And some of them they leave too much meat behind and he sees that going on the belt into the...into the dumpster. He don't like that. He gets very upset.

[30:04] CW: Yeah. Yeah. Now how about women? Were there any women?

JB: Women are very good. Let me tell you. You think: women? (laughs) Let me tell you, women - a lot of women in there used to beat the man. Ok and these womens were good. They were good workers.

CW: Yeah, yeah. They were able to cut fast.

JB: They were very good. They were very good. They were good cutters. I had a women there was I think a Cape Verdean women. Oh, this woman was so fast. My God! I told her, "Slow down. Let me take care of these two here that's banging on the...on the bell over here. I'll come back to you." You betta' move a quick. So that's...But she was fast! And she was good.

CW: Wow, wow. Now, back when you were working there were a lot of people from...where did people come from that were working on the fish line?

JB: See. On my days, it was most Portuguese people. A lot of Portuguese people.

CW: Yeah, yeah. Like a lot from the Azores?

JB: Yeah. English - was a few of them there. Is like some are running the business. Some of them taking the orders.

CW: But not too many?

JB: Not too many English. The rest was all Portuguese. From top to bottom was all Portuguese. But now, it's all - what you call 'em?

CW: Guatemalans?

JB: Yes. That's all you see there.

CW: Yeah, yeah. Central Americans.

JB: You hardly see a Portuguese person there. All you see is those people there.

CW: Now how come there was a change from the Portuguese to Central Americans?

JB: Yes, well the problem is the Portuguese on that kinda job when you have experience, they supposed to give you at least fourteen, fifteen dollars an hour. All right. Even on the floor - working on the floor - at least fourteen dollars an hour. And they paying these - what you call these people?

CW: Guatemalans.

JB: They payin' them - what - six dollars, seven dollars an hour? So they put two people there workin' on the price of one. So that's why they hire them. A lot of women works over there. And they walked all the way from North End all the way to work over there. And that's a little far. Especially on the weather when it's snowing and stuff. I see these peoples. I say, "Oh my God." They using these people. They making pennies over here. They throw all the Portuguese out. And they put 'em all inside there. Because they cheap. And they work. They very...that's one thing about these people. They're small, but they can work. They can work. That's one thing about them. They can work. They very strong. Very strong at work. Especially the women. They just as strong as them. I'm like, "Jesus Christ! I don't know the difference between a woman and a guy already. Jesus, they tough!" But yeah, they small but they can work. Let me tell you. They're strong. Definitely strong.

CW: So would you say that's a similar history of like the Portuguese that came into the fish houses and now the Central Americans, are they going through the same kind of story that you lived through, or...?

JB: No, not really. Everybody's got their own business and they work for bigger guys that's got bigger money. They make better money. And they don't work as hard. You know, some of them work on the road. Some of the them work with electric, plumbers and stuff like that.

CW: Yep, yep. So people found jobs like the Portuguese found jobs - other kinds of jobs...

JB: Yeah, exactly. Better jobs. Other kind of jobs.

CW: ...trades and things like that.

JB: So all these guys took over. So, you hardly see a Portuguese person there.

CW: Yeah, yeah. I think there's still some old-timers, but you know?

JB: Yeah but...they there but they not working now. They not working. They just there and just to mark everything, weigh it because they don't know how to do that. They can...you tell them, "Hey, get me a - put me five-hundred pounds over here. Get five buckets or five pallets. Put it over here." Then from there the boss works it out. Then he packs 'em all up. Puts a tag. And they take it and they put 'em in the cooler. That's what they do.

CW: Right, yeah. So would you say, you know, you've been working in the fishing industry - around the fishing industry for a long time?

JB: Quite a while. It was quite a while.

CW: Yeah, yeah. And you still know a lot of people in the...?

JB: Oh I still - I know a lot of them and I lost a lot of them on the fish boats. I lost a lot of friends on fish boats.

CW: Really? Wow.

JB: I lost a lot. Some on bikes. Accidents. Some overdose. You know, when they make money like that they don't - they blow their brains away, you know? Instead of saving their money, they're blowing their money. They're blowing their lives, that's what they doing is they're killing themselves. That's how they are. That's not for me.

CW: Yeah, yeah. But it's still an important part of New Bedford and an important part of the community, you know? And so you're doing your part working on the upholstery.

JB: Exactly. Yes, it's true. Oh so much I can do. Upholstery...mason.

CW: A little bit of everything.

JB: I do everything. Tiles. You know - I did your home.

[35:05] CW: Yeah, yeah. So you don't do other things inside the boats like painting or anything like that? Welding?

JB: No, that's one thing. I never did that. One thing I never learned was welding. I tried to learn 'cause my father-in-law has a welder. I made a customized bumper. I weld it. I put it on. I went down the street. I hit a bump. I heard something dragging. I looked back. It was my bumper.

CW: Oh my goodness.

JB: It wasn't even welded. I thought I had it welded. It was all falling apart.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JB: I said, "What a shitty welder." That's not for me.

CW: (laughs)

JB: So I says, "That's not for me." But besides that, I do everything else. The welding, I'm no go at. That's one thing. I'm not good at that. I don't want to get my mind into that because I can get blind on that kinda thing. Because one time my friend was welding over here, I was blind. I had two potatoes on my eyes. It looked like I had sand in the eyes. It was unbelievable. And I only looked for a little bit. And he was telling me, "You better get your eyes outta here. You gonna feel it later." "Meh...you're talking much. I feel nothing. Sure." I was shocked. I closed my eyes for a little while. I went to open 'em up, I couldn't open 'em up. Well, I was like, "Oh my God!" So Nancy, my wife, gave me - she cut two potatoes. I says, "What that thing gonna do?" I thought it was gonna do nothing. But it did. It did help.

CW: Wow. So you actually put potatoes on your eyes?

JB: I did. I put two potatoes. She cut it in half and I put 'em in my eyes and it did help. It helped!

CW: Wow. Wow.

JB: It did help. It was unbelievable. I thought she was joking, you know? I says, "OK. I'll try it on." Because her father was a welder. Oh he was. That's all his welding machines, you know? He was a boat builder you know. He used to build boats. Oh yeah. He's got the machines. I learned a little bit about wood with him. How to bend the wood. How to stain it. How to use the clamps and to make all the waves you wanted. He was very good on it. He was very good.

CW: Yeah, yeah. So it seems like in New Bedford there's a lot of connections to the fishing industry.

JB: Yes, it is.

CW: You know, maybe you know people who are fishermen....

JB: In New Bedford, on Fall River, on Tiverton (RI). Everywhere, you know? Even on Hyannis. I even worked on Hyannis once.

CW: Yeah, yeah. Remember when you did a job out in like, Rhode Island last year? Was that in Tiverton or, no Newport maybe?

JB: What did I do honey? I did so much work. I don't remember.

CW: Yeah, yeah. I think you had told me you had a job in Rhode Island too, so.

JB: Yeah, what did I do? Yes, yes. That's a boat! That was the boat I was doing.

CW: Yeah, yeah. So once the word-of-mouth gets around that you're a good upholsterer, you get other fishing...

JB: Yeah. I have a lot of people come to me and says, "Soon as I get my boat..." because some of them, they take the boat out for winter because it needs work. But it's not that bad. They just use it now 'til winter because they know winter, they not gonna make it. So they take it off...off the water. They put 'em in the sand and they workin' on it. They sand it all down. Then I'll go over there and strip it down. Then when I'm done, bring everything back and put it all back. That's what they usually do because these fishermens, they don't want to waste any time.

CW: Sure, sure.

JB: They out for three days. I mean if they have to go out on three days, they better be out there. Even if they have one man missing. They will go without a man. They don't care. They will go without, without a man. Because they're losing money. But a scallop is different. A scallop is very different. It can't go without a man. That's like a team work. It's like three sleeps. Three works. Every three to four hours, they change. They sleep three to four hours. They change. It's like shifts. They change. It can't be two against three. It's gotta be three against three. Because that's one thing about scallop. Now fishing is different. They can go without a guy. It doesn't bother them at all. It's more money for them.

CW: Right yeah. But you've got to work around the clock.

JB: Yeah. But they gonna work a little - just a little bit harder. Not as hard but like scallops do. That is a job.

CW: Yeah. Hard work, yeah.

JB: Very hard work. And they get hurt bad.

CW: Yeah. So that's why they need soft chairs and comfortable chairs and comfortable cushions because they're working really hard.

JB: Yes. Yeah, definitely.

CW: And then like in the beds, do you use...do they have upholstery?

[39:45] JB: Not on the beds upholstery. Upholstery is nothing there. They got mattress special mattress. I mean really nice. I mean they look like the height of a sponge, like three inches and a half to four inches and a half high. But you say, ah you lay on there and that thing's gonna go right to the board. It doesn't! Because I sit on top of there. I says, "Damn, that's not bad at all!" That's just as good as the kinda sponge. Because there's some different sponge that you buy, they're about four inches and a half, and soon as you sit on it, it go right down to the board. This other one that you buy - that's special. That's heavy-duty sponge. Soon as you sit, it just half way. You never, you can jump, but you will never reach the bottom of the plywood. Yeah, it's weird. It's nice.

CW: And it must be custom. Like it's a custom size.

JB: Exactly. I have one on my van.

CW: Oh really?

JB: Oh it's so comfortable. It's better than a bed. (laughs) It's nice.

CW: I think they do that at a company in Fairhaven. The Worley Beds, I think, makes a - mattresses for the fishing boats.

JB: Yes. I think so. I think so.

CW: Yeah. I think I heard about that too.

JB: Yes. They do make it. But it's expensive.

CW: Right.

JB: It's not cheap. It's expensive.

CW: Yeah. And I imagine it has to be the right measurements geared to that...

JB: Exactly. They have to cut it. They have to measure it. They gotta cut it. They gotta stitch it. They gotta do all. It's more work than doing upholstery. That's more design.

CW: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it all takes a lot of work that goes into a fishing boat to keep that on the sea, and like you said the wear and tear on the materials and everything. But, I think that's about all I have today for questions. I don't know if you have anything else you wanted to add to this interview to kind of give your two cents on the work you've been doing with upholstery?

JB: Well the thing I thought I wasn't proud of myself. I thought I wasn't good enough. But from what I hear from experienced people, people that's been on this before I was born, they even

says, “They can’t touch you. You’re very good at it. You’re very good at your work. You’re fussy. You’re picky. And that’s how you are because I see the things how you make your cars, how you dress up your vehicles, how you do all your things. I can see how perfect it is. Nobody could do better than that.” He says, “Not even me, and I’m a professional.”

CW: So you’re proud of what you do?

JB: So, I started getting prouder of myself because I thought, “Ah. It’s just a job.” No, it’s not just a job. You gotta know what you’re doing. It’s not just grab a tool and start taking staples out. ‘Cause it’s a lot of work. The thing is, it’s to strip it down. To strip the job down that is a problem. Like a couch. You gotta strip the whole couch down. And you gotta know where to start. And where to start? You always start by the bottom. Take that black padding out and you figure out which one was the last piece that was put on there first. That’s the piece you start taking it out. Then you follow that. It’s like a puzzle.

CW: Like a puzzle.

JB: Exactly. It’s like a puzzle. But it’s hard to take staples out. It’s a pain. Because I don’t like to leave staples there behind because I see a lot of people that does upholstery - they just cut the material right around. They take the pattern out. Put a new pattern on and staple right over...

CW: Where it was before?

JB: ...where it was before. It’s no good because it doesn’t stay flat. It stays more up. More open. You’ve got more of a crack - more of an edge. That’s not right. You know, that’s gotta be flat against the frame of the design of the chair or the seat, whatever you making. It’s gotta come out completely clean. You can’t go over the other ones. You can’t. You just can’t.

CW: Well good. Thank you for sharing a little bit about what you do. And it’s an important element, an important piece of the fishing industry. Making sure that those boats are - have the right kind of equipment.

JB: They very happy what I do.

CW: Good!

JB: They are very happy. I still have a friend of mine, and he’s a captain of a boat, and he says, “Let me tell you, John. I have a lot of people coming to this boat and sitting on these seats and they’re flipping out. They want this...they want this shit - this stuff done but they don’t know when. Because they...they go out for eleven days and come in. Three days they gotta go out again. So they can’t take...take time for that. But this boat took about two weeks and a half to three weeks. But the boat was off the water.

CW: When it was out of the water...yeah, yeah.

[44:57] JB: Yes. He says that's what he's gonna do. When his boat is ready to come off the water to be fixed in and out, then I'm gonna do the job for them. He says, "That's what's holding you up now. It's this. If it wasn't for that, you woulda working on the boats." Because I have a lot of boats.

CW: Well, that's good.

JB: If I had a good person just follow me and do what I do, he would make money.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JB: And he would learn.

CW: Yeah, yeah. To just learn.

JB: 'Cause I have the patience to teach a person, if he wants to learn. You wanna learn. I'll teach you.

CW: Mmm hmm. But you haven't found that person yet.

JB: If you don't...it's the same thing. If I wanna learn, look - I just - somebody just, Nancy's front end of her car? I have to take the whole front end right off. To put a whole bearing. But I needed everything in there. George charged me almost four hundred dollars. I did that all by myself. I just watched what he was doing. I watched. I paid attention. I had the same problem on the driver's side which I had on the passenger side. I did it myself with no problem!

CW: Wow. Wow. So that was when you learned what the....the....

JB: Exactly. Because I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn. Because if you want to learn, you pay attention. You ignore whatever these people are humming behind you. Your eyes is on which a he's doin'. Your concentration is right there. Because, you know, that's something. You know that's very important. For four hundred dollars for what? Three-quarters of an hour? Come on. The part only cost me ninety-eight, ninety-five dollars. You know, and pay four hundred and something dollars. That's five hundred something bucks I blow up over there.

CW: So it was great. You were able to learn from the guy...

JB: That's how I learned.

CW: ...learned from the guy who used to do the upholstery.

JB: Exactly. Tiles - anything. Bathrooms. The only thing I not good is welding and electric. That I do not play with.

CW: Right. Right. Yeah.

JB: That I do not touch. But if you want to change your light, yeah of course...the wires are right there - fine. But me making holes, going through here, through there, putting the boxes - that I don't know how to do. Even if I did, I don't think I would do it. I'm afraid of the electric.

CW: Yeah, yeah! I guess so.

JB: Ohhh. I got shocked a hundred and twenty watts.

CW: Yikes!

JB: I shaked.

CW: (laughs) OK! Well, thank you very much for sharing your story today and I know this will be of interest to the people who are listening to the interview.

JB: Good. Very good.

CW: Thanks so much!

JB: You're welcome.

CW: Yeah. Bye, bye.

JB: Bye.

[47:35.3] Interview ends.