



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview 2/10/2017

Miranda, John ~ Oral History Interview

Laura Orleans

Miranda John. Interview by Laura Orleans. *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. Date of interview: 2/10/2017.

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

New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center
38 Bethel Street
P.O. Box 2052
New Bedford, MA 02741-2052

Background

Name of person interviewed: John Miranda [JM]

Facts about this person:

Age 55

Sex Male

Occupation Engine Mechanic (title not provided in interview)

Residence (Town where lives)

Ethnic background (if known) Portuguese

Interviewer: Laura Orleans [LO]

Transcriber: Aneshia Savino [AS]

Interview location: R.A. Mitchell

Date of interview: February 10, 2017

Key Words

Boston, engine, family, fuel injector, fishing industry, generator, John Deere, Portugal

Abstract

John Miranda describes family life in Portugal, his immigration to America in 1980 and his training in engineering in both Portugal and the U.S. He discusses working for R.A. Mitchell for three decades, engineering changes in the fishing industry over the last 3 decades and his hopes for the future of fishing in general.

Index

[00:00] Tape Intro: Born in Alvaro, Portugal into a fishing family, though he was discouraged from becoming a fisherman and attended a vocational trade school in Portugal

[5:06] Immigration to America in 1980, learning English, getting his G.E.D. and attending technical school in the U.S., starting at Mitchell in 1984, learning diesel engines and working without cell phones.

[11:11] Changes in tools from the 1980s until now, the use of AC vs DC on fishing vessels, access to electricity (emails, satellite TV, etc.) has increased on vessels requiring changes in the demands of engines and generators, bringing a laptop to jobsites

[15:12] Example of what happens on the job, explanation of fuel pressure process, description of a day on the job, traveling to upstate New York or the Caribbean for work, most common issues to fix on a fishing vessel, and remembering a challenging job

[22:20] Favorite and least favorite aspects of the job, John's hopes for the future of the fishing industry, and how it feels to have two young women be the bosses of the Mitchell family business

[27:20] End of Audio

[00:00]

Laura Orleans: Today is February 10th in the year 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 shoreside 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 of the Library of Congress. I am Laura Orleans and today I am speaking with...

John Miranda: John Miranda

LO: John Miranda at R.A. Mitchell Company in New Bedford. I actually don't know the time. I think it's about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

JM: Yeah, it's about...

LO: It's ok. (laughter)

JM: Three seventeen.

LO: Three seventeen. Ok. So I will have you sign something when you're done, but for the record do you give us permission to record you for this project?

JM: Yeah I do.

LO: So I know that you just said your name, but I'm going to ask you to just kind of introduce yourself.

JM: OK, my name is John Miranda. I've been with R.A. Mitchell since 1984. Been through a lot of ups and downs and we...projects change, and different manufacturers, and, for the fishing business to adjust to new technologies basically. That's about it.

LO: Great, and when and where were you born?

JM: I was born in February 13, 1961, in Portugal, a little town right next to the water. And I came to the United States in 1980, April 1980. I had a degree from vocational technical school, as a machinist, based on a little bit of mechanical work and electrical and when this opportunity showed up to work for Mitchell, I started working as part-time. I was working at a machine shop, full time, and then working part time at R.A. Mitchell. Then it got to the point where I know I definitely like this. That's when I decided to become a full-time employee.

LO: So what town were you born in in Portugal?

Interview with John Miranda, February 10, 2017

JM: In Alvaro. Its close by to Porto. It's about 58 kilometers south of Porto, right on, right on the water. Like I said, right on the Atlantic Ocean. On the other side of the river, like we say.

LO: And did you have family in the fishing industry in Portugal?

JM: Yeah, my father was a fisherman all of his life, anyway, basically, but he never really wanted his kids to follow his footsteps, cause he knew what he went through. That's when fishing was very rough. It's like all hard work, and we are a big family. He had nine kids, my oldest ones, I have two sisters and now I only have one. One passed away last year. Seven boys in a row. And I am the youngest one and they never really like to have any of his kids in the fishing industry. Let's put it that way. So that's why when I, he always try to force us to go to school. Even though he didn't know how to read or write, but he forced us to go to school. Try to get something else aside from the fishing industry basically. And that's what happened.

LO: And was he fishing as part of what they call the White Fleet on the Grand Banks, or was he more...

JM: No, no, just local. All local. One of my brothers did, cause back in the old days, we had to go the military service by the age of 18, you had to enlist and then they gave him the option, either you go the military service or you can go fishing for seven years. He didn't make much, so my brother decided to go. He did. He went to the big factory boats, to Saint John's and all over. And once that was over he said, no more. He was a carpenter. So he decided to stay with the administrate? instead of. Of course back then you didn't make much as a fisherman, as you know. Even around here, I remember back in the 80's a lot people were struggling. But I guess now, we picked up a little especially the scallopers industry.

[05:06] LO: So the vocational training that you had, was that in Portugal?

JM: Yes.

LO: And then what brought your family to the United States?

JM: My oldest sister she was married with an American man that was actually Italian descendant, but he was born here already in the U.S. and he had a lot of family connections like in my little town and he says, I want to get married, but I want somebody from this town. And the people that he knew, they said, I think we know exactly the right person. So it was kind of like a...and then everything came out. And my sister started to bring some of my brothers. My parents were never here. I came to America when I was turning 20 and I didn't have my parents here or nothing and it was like, just, I was the last one to America basically in 1980. All the other ones some of them started to come in the 70's, early 70's.

LO: Did you speak English at that point?

JM: I had a, in school, even in technical school we need to take two languages, which was English and French, we had to take. So basically, I could read and write a little bit, but I couldn't understand it because the English is from England. That's with an England accent and I'm..but that helped. It helped a lot. As far as, a matter of fact that a few years after a few years that I was in U.S. I took my GED and of course I passed then I started to go to technical schools of course, because of the new technologies through Mitchell. Like for John Deere, Deutz, a German engine, and Atlanta. So it's a lot of interesting new, since we started all the way to now, as far as technologies go, what a change. And even in the fishing industry.

LO: How did you find out about the job here?

JM: A friend of mine that we used to hang around once in a while. He says, "John, they're looking for somebody at Mitchell." " I don't, I really don't know anything about diesels" I used to work with motorcycles even back in Portugal. And I said, "I know about gasoline engines and stuff like that but not about diesels." He says, "John, it's easier!" And back then, the old engines that we used to work with, the Listers, it's like you start up, you don't even need any electrical to start an engine, started by hand, that's what made Lister better, so famous around the fishing industry. Because they rely so much on charging the batteries, or pumping the water pumps and they needed something that in an emergency, they need to start up no matter what. And those things would. Start up by hand with hand crank. And I really liked that though. I really, really like it once I started to get involved in the project. I enjoyed it, and I love it. I love my job basically. That's what it is.

LO: So tell me little about, if you remember, what it was like to learn those first weeks that you came here.

JM: To Mitchell?

LO: Mmhm

JM: It's something totally different. I had no idea how the whole...I knew about a spark related engines. You got a coil that energizes spark and ignites and ignites the gasoline, ignites the fuel. I says, "what ignites the diesel?" So come to find out, I had to learn, diesels rely a lot on high compression and a lot of air, basically. Atomizing the fuel to the point where that it blends with the air going into the engine and it explodes like that with a high compression! How is that possible?! And so then, other things started to show up, and Bob decides to join me. Ready to get on the road. And my first job was like 6 months later, I'm in Boston, the Boston fish pier. Like and "Bob, I don't think I'm ready for this!" And right then there was no cell phones or nothing

Interview with John Miranda, February 10, 2017

that you could rely on, that you could call somebody and ask what information that's basically what it is. It was hard, it was interesting. And then a lot of learning like taking books, workshop manuals at home at night and going through all of them, and plus we had a really good man out in the back, the foreman, the shop foreman, back then, Xavier, he was unbelievable. He's still alive. He's 83, he's full of energy. He comes around and he is a really, really good teacher, as far as he... And plus, Bob is unbelievable. Bob is. He knows, even though, he used to get his hand dirty, back in the day. And he knows, so. I learned a lot with them. And then now, we kind of all have to work together and learn the new technologies, because that's the way it is.

[11:11] LO: Tell me about how you've seen some change over your 30- 32 years or so? What's changed here?

JM: At the company?

LO: At the company....

JM: At the company itself? At the fishing industry itself?

LO: All of the above.

JM: The back of the, when we used to work in the fishing boat back then. If you don't have a good flashlight to work with, you're in trouble. Cause most of the time if they're down, with what they call the auxiliary engines, the engines that they depend on to charge batteries, for the lighting system, back in the old days, they did not have AC, it was all DC. All battery-operated light, motors, everything. And most of the times when you go work on one of those units that's because they're down. They're dead in the water basically, and that's what work with a flashlight on the engine, looking for let's say, fuel mixed in the oil. It's like, it's so hard to see it already as it is, the fuel blend in with the oil, never mind now when it's that dark. Now it's like we got the luxury of even shut the engines down and work in a really nice light area with shore power. That, the huge change with all of those changes that we've seen along the years. Which is for the better anyway. It's for the best. Even for the fishermen, now they can depend on the computer system. They depend on emails they have to keep on going back and forth with the Federal, because of the rules and they do need the AC, the luxury. Now they got AC on boats...

LO: Sat TVs!

JM: Exactly. So it's a long period of time, it's a short period of time and a lot changes for the best, of course anyway.

LO: So you mentioned the flashlight, but what other tools do you bring with you on a job?

JM: Basically, back in the old days the toolbox, we knew exactly what sizes we need for the job that we were doing. Small toolbox, some of the fisherman used to make fun of me. Like, "What are you gonna do with your lunch box?" It's like, I says, "Don't worry about it. If I can't fix it with this lunchbox, you're in trouble." And that was sometimes it was funny because some them didn't take it a little serious about it, like, "I don't think you're ready to work on my engine with just that amount of tools." I says, "Don't worry about it, I'll figure something out." And it really depended of course. Most of it was just standard sizes. S.A.E. sizes. Now we gotta carry a variety of tools. Like a lot metric, a lot of special tools that we keep, that are designed just for specific engines. The new engines, you gotta carry a laptop to plug in. Because without that, we can't read the codes. The codes, yeah they don't mean much if you don't have the right tool to find out what that code means and what you can do to solve that problem. That's why a lot of the fishermen are still scared about that technology, because if that happens when I'm out fishing what's gonna happen? Am I going to be without a generator? And some of the boats only have one generator set. We still have a few out there that only have one generator set.

[15:12] LO: So what happens in that case? When they're out at sea? They call?

JM: Yeah, most of them, sometimes they call. They ask for the basic what they can look for. Sometimes it's something as simple code meaning that they have low fuel pressure, let's say. Low fuel pressure is a start by changing your filters. Most of the times if you don't have enough fuel pressure on the primary system the higher pressure is not gonna to develop. It's only common sense. But, most, sometimes that's what it is. Sometimes they get a little bit of water in the fuel tank and engines don't like water, at all! Especially any engine don't like water, but a diesel they can blow up a tip of an injection, especially now. Back in the old days, the old injector used to fire at 3200 PSI or something. And now they open at like at sometimes at 26000 PSI. That's a huge difference. That's the only way to control the emissions basically anyway. So that's a lot of changes as far as the tools that we have to carry. Of course, we can't bring everything at once to the boat. We gotta go over there and trouble shoot it, keep it in the truck and then go back and try to solve the problem.

LO: I was going to ask you if you can describe. I don't know if there's a typical day? But how does your day start? What time do you get here? And what's the first thing that you do?

JM: I usually get up like quarter of six. and start at 7:30. I like to take my time. I have my coffee at home. And start at 7:30 most of the...sometimes we don't have a time to start. Sometimes there's an emergency. You're on the role there are two, three o'clock in the morning. Yeah, cause we get a lot of jobs in the New York, New Jersey area on the barges. Upstate New York, even down south sometimes we have emergency calls. Not because we are better than anybody else, but they feel more comfortable with us. Some jobs in the Caribbean too. I've been in Anguilla, an island right next to St. Martin a couple of times.

LO: That sounds nice.

JM: It was in the winter. Nice weather. Temperature is perfect. And that's about it. Work never ends usually it's 7:30 to 4 o'clock, but no exactly.

LO: Is there a job that is sort of most common? What's the most common thing that goes wrong on a boat?

JM: Believe it or not, most of the time it's fuel related. Even knowing that they lack of maintenance sometimes, filters, or sometimes water that gets in a fuel tank through a crack, a vent pipe, anything that could cause that situation. And that's what you got to check first, is your basics. It's like, do you have, what do you got for fuel? Or what do you got for air system? And basically that's the most common problem believe it or not with the fishing industry.

LO: So can you think of a time, maybe a really challenging job that you worked on where you know, you figured it out? Anything that stands out?

JM: Yeah, we had a few, sometimes. When you think that you know it all and the symptoms are the same, the problem is always different. They ... sometimes the basic, one of them that I remember was a brand-new installation and they, a small lobster boat, fiberglass, fiber glass tanks, fuel tanks. It was local around here, Mattapoisett. They installed the engines on the yard, the shipyard where they build the boat and they started the engine. Started to run the boat and the boat had no power. The engine had no power. It was like choking, choking. And so I think the boat was built in Canada. They tried to bring the boat by the water, but they couldn't and they put it on the trailer. Somebody got involved in it changed the injection pump. And finally they says, "Why don't you, can you please send somebody over?" It was a John Deere engine. So I did, I went over and started to look at it. And it's like, "Wow, I really can't find anything wrong with it." Brand new unit, nothing wrong with the application, fuel lines were the right size, and then I said, "There's gotta be something wrong on a fuel system." So I took the fuel system apart. What they call the rake, or the fuel water separator. And you know what I found? All the fibers that got washed from inside the fuel tank launched in a valve that controls the system to separate the water from the fuel and that was it. That was as simple as that, but it's challenging sometimes. One time I had one boat in Sandwich still, with a fuel line, the return line it looked perfect on the outside and the fuel got into the rubber, it started to bubble up. Almost created like a balloon and was restricting and closed and the owner, the boat's name was the Terry Anne, it's still around. And he says John, "How did you figure that out? How did you get to that point?" I says, "You gotta start with the basics, with the common sense. You don't just start to throw parts at it then all the sudden it's like, "You didn't check that first?" So most of the time you got to take a little bit longer to troubleshoot a problem rather than jump into a conclusion and starting to throw parts at a unit basically.

[22:20] LO: So you clearly said you love your job, and it shows. What do you enjoy the most?

JM: The friendship in this company is, we all get along, which that helps and the challenge too. I love the challenge. When you think that you have all the problems solved, something else shows up.

LO: Alright, tough question with the boss standing right here. What's your least favorite part of the job.

JM: (Laughing) Going to work on a certain boat! I won't say the name. That's right, it's not around it's gone. There's one more but I don't want to say it.

Bob: As soon as you can, wrap up.

LO: Yes, we will do that...Ok, Well I think we've actually covered a fair amount of ground. Is there anything in particular that, you know, I didn't cover that you wanted to add?

JM: Not really, as far as my job goes as related to the fishing industry. We're not just strictly with the fishing industry. We do a lot of construction equipment. Sand and gravel crushers, screeners, concrete pumps, like you name it any kind, it's like just worked on one that was putting up a building, a fifty-footer, in Boston, and they were experiencing a problem. Of course that's the only time that we get a call is a problem. But as far as the fishing industry, I would like to see these guys having some more days of fishing, basically. Not just, some of them to make a living, the fishermen itself and the owners too. They have to pick up, they have to pay for those expenses, especially if you, the small business guy that will try to get into the fishing industry is not going to be able to afford it basically, especially at the prices, let's say a license. That's something that I would like to see. Cause back in the 80's you could see like every single boat had a different owner. Now you got like 30 boats with the same owner. It's like that's the only difference that I would like to see. A little bit more spread. I think it would work out a lot better. Would give somebody an opportunity to get into the business. And the way it is, if you don't have the right amount of money to get into the business, you can't.

LO: I think the waterfront is a pretty special community in some ways.

JM: Yeah we spend half of our lives around that waterfront basically. And yeah you see a lot of changes. That's why you don't see a lot of the new people getting into the business. First of all, especially on the draggers, there's no money to be made. Most of the people decide they better go into construction or something than becoming a fisherman.

LO: Well it sounds like Bob needs his office back.

JM: No actually he wants to go over...He needs me and the other John to go over a few major units.

LO: Let me ask you one last question. So it's a family business, and Bob's daughters are taking the running. What's it like to have two young women as your bosses?

JM: I don't mind at all. They learn the business. They're very good. They're very sharp and they know that they can rely on us for a lot of technical stuff. When they don't know, they know what to ask and when to ask. And that's the good thing about it. It not like they strictly office people. They worked together with everybody.

LO: How many people work here? I was...

JM: I think there's like 24, at one point it was 25. I think now it's a little bit less. Probably somewhere around 18 to...yeah.

LO: And thank you very much. I appreciate you taking some time away.

JM: No problem.

LO: I'm sure you've got lots of work.

JM: No problem. Anytime.

LO: Excellent.

JM: Alright.

LO: Thank you.

JM: Thanks, my pleasure.

[27:20] End of Audio