



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview February 10, 2017

Pelicas, John ~ Oral History Interview

Laura Orleans

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Background

Name of person interviewed: John Pelicas [JP]

Facts about this person:

Age 49
Sex Male
Occupation Mechanic
Residence New Bedford, MA
Ethnic background Portuguese

Interviewer: Laura Orleans [LO]

Transcriber: Aneshia Savino [AS]

Interview location: R.A. Mitchell

Date of interview: February 10, 2017

Key Words: Mechanic, Portuguese, fisherman, family, John Deere, generator, regulations, community, New Bedford

Abstract

John Pelicas describes in detail his work and life as a marine mechanic at R.A. Mitchell, where he has worked for 31 years. An immigrant from Portugal, he comes from a fishing family and has always been a part of the community on the waterfront. He discusses dangers of the job, fishing regulations, various engine fabrications, his deep commitment to the job, difficulties with computerized engines and what he sees as a bright future for the fishing industry.

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[00:00] Intro, Pelicas is born in Portugal, immigrates by the time he is 8 and grows up along the waterfront. Went fishing at age 11 with his dad, but it was too hard. He still wanted to work in the fishing industry and decided to become a mechanic after graduating high school

[5:00] Discussion of how knowledge is passed down at R.A. Mitchell in the past and currently, adjusting to computerized engines. Pelicas describes a typical day, his commitment to his job, generator fabrication, being bilingual

[10:15] Pelicas describes his toolkit, being prepared for any job, including surprises, most common jobs, how regulation changes affect his part of the fishing industry

[15:21] Dangers of the job, scalloping, community of dock workers even when working alone, and losing parts over board, Pelicas' favorite parts of the job.

[19:47] – Continued discussion of Pelicas' favorite parts of the job include fabrications, drafting with soapstone on the floor, constructing an 850 KW generator for the city of New Bedford, work clothes ranging from suits to oil-stained garments washed at work, safety equipment

[24:49] Discussion of terminology, how much Pelicas loves his job, his advice to the next generation of mechanics, being thanked for his work in lobsters and scallops, having women as his bosses, and the importance of family business and better regulations to ensure the bright future he anticipates

[31:22] End of Audio

[00:00]

Laura Orleans: Today is February 10, in the year 2017 and this is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center funded by an Archie Green Fellowship by 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 am Laura Orleans and today I am speaking with...

John Pelicas: John Pelicas.

LO: John Pelicas at R.A. Mitchell Company here in New Bedford and the time is approximately 2:30 in the afternoon. So I will ask you to sign a formal release

JP: Sure thing.

LO: But for the record, do you give us permission to record you?

JP: Absolutely

LO: Excellent. All right, so I know we just said your name, but for the tape, would you just introduce yourself.

JP: Okay, I am John Pelicas. I'm 49 years old. I've been working at the R.A. Mitchell Company for 31 years. I started when I was 18 years old. Been doing this for a long time now.

LO: Excellent. And when and where were you born?

JP: I was born in Portugal. Came to the United States when I was 7, 8. And I've been, went to school here and I finished high school and started working at R. A. Mitchell. Had a couple of part time jobs, but nothing like this. What I do now.

LO: So Portugal, mainland Portugal?

JP: Yes. Alvide. I was born there with my parents. They immigrated here and made a living and they raised me up in New Bedford, Mass., with the fishing industry. My dad was a fisherman, so that's how I got stuck.

LO: And that actually was going to be my next question. So you're Portuguese and you come from a fishing family.

JP: Absolutely.

LO: So your dad was fishing during the time that you were growing up?

JP: Absolutely he was.

LO: Did you spend anytime down on the waterfront and a young...

JP: I've always spent all my time at the waterfront. Since I came to the United States, and I spent

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all my time at the waterfront and wanted to be a fisherman like my dad. And I went fishing when I was 10 and 11, back in the early 80's and I got sick and I said there must be a better living than being a fisherman, so I decided to become a mechanic because I was handy with my hands and that's where I've been.

LO: I bet your mom was probably happy to have you on shore.

JP: She was. And she didn't even know I had gone fishing. She was at work and she came home one day and asked, "Where's John? Oh, dad took him out fishing." That's where I wanted to go, and I did, so it was quite the thing.

LO: And so, when you were in school, were you in a regular high school or did you end up in a trade school?

JP: Nope. A regular high school. But I did not want... I'm not very good with books, and stuff like that. So my mom said, as soon as you're done with high school, you can go in the working world. And that's what you want to do and that's what I did. And here I am.

LO: How did you come to this company? Was this your very first job?

JP: No. I worked in a machine shop that involved the fishing industry, but that was like a part-time job. I knew I didn't want to go to college, and I wanted a part time job that was around the fishing industry. And that was it because it was close to my parents' house. Then I graduated and I wanted to become a mechanic and go on with my life and my dad is like, "hey, there's a great company down near the waterfront. It's the R.A. Mitchell. They're nice. Do you want to see if you can get a job there?" And he knew Bob, so one Saturday I came down, did my application and he goes, "Did you finish high school?" I said, "Yeah." he goes, "Okay then. Then you're all good." And started the following Monday and haven't left.

LO: So it's interesting. This is a story that I've heard many times, that people often know somebody. It's either family or a friend that they know. So do you think, the waterfront is very tight knit, that way, it seems.

JP: Oh, very. I still have great friends. I know people in the waterfront. And as I was growing up, same thing, I had uncles, friends that were fishermen and kids my age were going out. And I'm like, I don't want that type of life. It's too rough for me. But I wanted to be around the waterfront. And that's how I became a mechanic. And that's all I did.

LO: So tell me, you had the machine shop experience, a little. But then when you came here, how did you learn the job?

[5:00]

JP: Believe it or not, I had, Bob gave me an opportunity that most bosses wouldn't give, and knowledge, I took it in high school, you know little odds and ends, you know the basics. But I learned it all here, as growing up and having the right people teach you. You know, I did learn a little bit in school, but nothing hands on and working here, with my boss, Bob Mitchell's knowledge. His other workers, all the gentlemen that worked in here, they just passed it down to

us. I'm getting there too. I'm 50 now! I'm going to be 50!

LO: So kind of on the job...

JP: Training. Absolutely. We have a couple younger gentlemen that work with us. And that's what I'm trying to do, is pass that on to them, so they can become... We had a couple that went to school, you know, it's great with all the new electronic stuff that's out, and computers. But the basics and the hands on, it's great that people like myself, and other mechanics that we have teach them.

LO: So, do you have a particular approach when you are trying to teach a new person some skills?

JP: Oh, just, it's like, assembling engines, it's all, you know how we do it and keeping everything together. Kind of hard, they teach you that in school, but not the way it's done in a work environment. It's a little different.

LO: So maybe that's a good place to start. Maybe take me, I don't know if there is a typical day here at R. A. Mitchell Company? But for you, what time does your day start and what happens?

JP: Well, I start at R.A. Mitchell at 7:30 and we, at 4 o'clock we go home. But I take my job home all the time. I'm always thinking of what I'm doing the following day or what's going on in the shop as far as we fabricate a lot of new generator sets, so it's not just putting engines together or going down to a fishing boat. I mean, we sell generator sets all over the world. In Antarctica, Ibiza, put out product, we're everywhere. We're small, but at the same time, I'm proud to work in a company that we're able to do this and send our product out there to the world, and well-known.

LO: So you arrive at 7:30. How do you know what you're going to do on that particular day?

JP: Oh, my job, I could be in the shop assembling a generator, and then my boss could have a phone call and say there's a fishing boat down at one of our docks that needs to go out fishing and you need to go there and fix it. Or, you know, troubleshoot it see what's wrong. Or I could be going to New York or some, far away, doesn't matter. So, we don't have a specific job that we do every day and right now, that's why it's exciting, it's thrilling really that it's never the same thing twice. It's always something different. Or I could be going to somebody's home and troubleshoot their generator at the house or fix it or install it. You know, it's, and that's what it is.

LO: So, do you have a sense, of, do you enjoy the work on the boat more than the work on the shop, or it's all...

JP: It's all together. I love being on the boat. To me that's a big satisfaction, to help a coworker with their problem, because that's what we are. We're problem solvers, you know, they only call is when the engine is broken. It's, you know, they become good friends also. What we do, is we go down there and it could be something as simple as a loose wire, you know something electric, or total overhaul on an engine where you know you got to take heads like when you blow a head gasket on a car or something like that and that's bigger. It's always different, so I don't have steady job where I do the same thing. It's not an assembly line.

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LO: It's, I'm wondering about your Portuguese background. Do you speak Portuguese?

JP: Yes, I do.

LO: Is that useful?

JO: Oh, it's great. It's, there's still a lot down at the waterfront, Portuguese community. They were big and they still are, but the new generation all speak English. The only thing that's horrible is the captains and their children, they do other jobs don't want to stick to the fishing industry, so family, that's kind of going away. People that I knew, but the new ones are coming in and they are great to work for too. It's just hard. The fishing industry is dying a little.

[10:15]

LO: So tell me about...Do you have a tool bag or, if you set out to go fix something, what do you bring with you?

JP: Well, I have a little box, it's like a magical box. We have combination wrenches, screwdrivers hammers, and it's like our little magic box. We have it all with sockets. We have um, well my tool box weighs close to 80 pounds, so it's not a little box, but you can't... When your car breaks down, you bring it to the shop. We're the opposite. We go to the broken engines, so we got to have everything, so that's what I try to teach the young mechanics and stuff. Before you go on the job, you have to do that job in your head and make sure that you have all the gaskets, all the material, all your tools, special tools that you might need. And when a customer calls, sometimes, they say it's one thing and you get there and it's totally opposite. So it's nice, it's exciting, it keeps you on your tippy toes.

LO: Is there, I know that there's not a typical day. But is there a common job? Like what's the most common thing that you end up...

JP: The most common thing that we do here is rebuild engines. We have a, it's a little air cooled engine that we rebuild and they run, construction equipment, it's a screener. And, loam and stuff, it takes all the rocks and separates the rocks from the dirt and there's a bazillion of them out there. So we just overhaul them. So a customer will bring his old engine that's all beat up and time for a overhaul. And we just give him an overhaul, one that looks brand new. So we go through his, he doesn't have to stop working. He keeps on going, and that's like a fill-in between going out on a job. That's pretty much what we consist. I build generators. So my job I come to work and my boss, Bob or Karen Mitchell, they give me, okay we sold a John Deere with a 65 KWN and takes this you know a bunch of filters and whatever else, and I have to make frames and radiators and that's what I do. I do a lot of fabricating and I leave the overhauls to the other mechanics. I do the fabricating end of it.

LO: So you've been here 31 years, what kind of changes have you seen with the equipment or in the industry? It's a big question.

JP: Okay! It sure is, but equipment. The most is the electronic end on some of the engines. I thought there would be no way I would ever need a computer to go out on a job and fix a diesel engine. You know they're supposed to be bulletproof and you know, pretty much they are except

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that little broken wire that came loose, the engine is not normal functioning, and you need a computer to plug in to tell you what it is. So that's the most common, and the most strange thing. But it's here and I got to work with it. And that took a little time for me to get adjusted to, which I'm still working at. And it's good though

LO: And you kind of mentioned that the industry's gone down a little bit. Talk to me about changes you see in the fishing industry.

JP: Oh boy. It's all the regulations that's coming down to the fishing industry. I mean. I'm always down at the waterfront, so I know a lot captains, a lot of people. And you know, when you hear a tragedy or something, I take it to heart, because I've been around so long. But the worst thing is all the regulations that they're coming down on these fishermen. They're making it so hard for them to make a living. It's bad enough they have to fight with the weather and not catching it, and the different equipment, different nets and all this different stuff, but them cutting the days. I remember back in the days, I used to go work on a boat, and the poor engine needed the overhaul, and you used to go, okay you fixed it, they used to go out fishing, come back and go out and see my boss and pay him for it. Now, I need money up front, because you never know if they're going to have a good trip or bad, you now. And they have more bad ones than good ones. They're really struggling hard. And I feel bad because they're still a lot of working people there that need all these jobs. And it's tough.

[15:21]

LO: So, I think people understand the dangers of being out at sea, is your job dangerous at all?

JP: Oh, I think so, I mean, when I'm going on a boat now, and as I'm getting a little older, it's like when I go on a boat, I got to carry a tool box that weighs 80 pounds and I got to carry maybe another 100 pounds worth of parts to put on an engine, and it's like three, four boats out, and you got to climb and jump and go over all that, and as I'm getting a little older, my body doesn't take it as good. To me personally, getting to the inside of the engine room is the hardest. And once I get there and you're working, it's not too bad, but getting there sometimes is the worst because you got to pick everything from the truck, put it on one boat, bring it from one boat to the next, you've been there, so you know how that goes. It's not fun.

LO: And especially, it's one thing in August or September, but in January, February...

JP: Oh yeah, I shore engineer for a few of my friends that own scallop boats, and they're doing good, those guys are doing real good. They're making a living and that's why our fishing industry is still floating, and doing good. But they're doing well, so they have homes in Florida and other, so they go out for the winter months, and they say, "John, will you take care of my boat" and I say, yeah. And like yesterday we had that big Northeastern, with all that snow, and me climbing inside of the boat to make sure the boat was okay, and my generators. You get nervous. You're calling the wife and say "Honey, I'm about to jump on a boat" and she's like, "okay be careful!" and you go you do your thing and then you come back and you go "okay I made it" You know, so that way we know it's good. Usually if there's somebody on the dock I'm always looking or waiting for each other to go. We keep an eye out for one another. Because I know all those

people. So it's like... Last year, me and this gentlemen, it was like perfect timing. We would wait for one another it worked out great

LO: So are you usually working alone?

JP: We go on jobs a lot, yes a lot alone. Only 90 percent it's alone but. I had my back done a couple of times, it fused and stuff, so my boss he gives me a helper all the time, so I thank him for that. And I'm able to go and still do what I do because of it. So it's super.

LO: Have you ever had any close call out there, going from boat to boat?

JP: Yeah, you have where you slip and you hold on and jumping from one boat to another and you drop that \$300 head in the water or more, and you're like oops! Or your tool box, which happens, but as long as its tools and materials, that's okay. I haven't done it. I've seen it happen, yes, you know like accidents and people fall in, but it hasn't happened to me thank God.

LO: You know that's something I think most people don't appreciate, they don't know that part.

JP: Yes.

LO: So let's see, we talked about tools. What do you enjoy most about the work?

JP: Who me? At R.A. Mitchell? Believe it or not, is fabricating it's like, I take, this is a small company and we build customized generators customized equipment and some people have ideas and it involves a generator engine to drive whatever they have in their brain or what the piece of equipment they want to build. So they come and talk to my boss, and he calls me, and take it from each other and read each other's minds and 99.9 we always succeed. So that's my favorite thing is putting stuff together and building equipment. That's my satisfaction.

LO: Do you draw it out first?

[19:47]

JP: Believe it or not we still old school, we grab some soap stone which is like a chalk and we used to draw it on the floor. And we had, that's how I learned from an older gentleman that worked here. And Bob, my boss, and we usually sketch it out on the floor, on our working table and we go from there and then eventually the blueprints will come out, but 90 percent of the time, it's all in our heads and little piece of paper and we go from there. And that's how it works.

LO: Can you think of any job that you've done that you are maybe a challenge that you overcame, or a job that you're especially proud of?

JP: That was a few years back, maybe two, three years ago, Bob he sold a generator set for the city of New Bedford, a big 850KW. Its massive, it's a huge engine and it involved cutting a 40 foot container and making it into a 30-footer and putting it on top of a 20 foot container that had the fuel tank on the bottom. You would need to see pictures of it. And it's, that was the most amazing thing I've done so far in the company because it was like, taking it from his ideas and my idea and making this whole project work. And that's how we go.

LO: That's neat. And you mentioned before we turned the tape on, we were sort of joking that

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this was going to sort of go be preserved, you said something you actually do talk about this at the dinner table with the kids.

JP: Oh we do, all the time. You know my kids always came to our Christmas parties and all our functions that we've had, summer parties and cookouts and so they know Bob very well and they come by and Bob's daughter's the new future, and so we're always talking about jobs that I'm doing, and stuff that I do and houses that I go to. People, you know, yachts...

LO: There's a sense of community...

JP: Oh absolutely. It is. And it's like one day I might be working on a mega yacht, you know, worth millions, and then the next day I'll be on a poor little lobsterman guy that's just trying to make an honest living, struggling day by day. So yeah, that's the difference of the job that I do. One day I'll be wearing the almost like a suit to go work. The next day I got my scrubs.

LO: Actually, that's a good question. Are there any special clothes that you wear?

JP: We just have regular uniforms that we wear because of all the oil and grime. You don't want to throw that stuff in the washers at home.

LO: Do you have gloves or anything like that?

JP: We have gloves, safety equipment...all that.

LO: Goggles?

JP: Goggles, hard hats, vests that we, boots, steel-toe boots, which I had my feet broken because I had a big steel frame fall on them,

LO: Oh, so it didn't work?

JP: No, thank god. I don't know it would have. I think it would have crushed them. It was so heavy, it just fractured all my toes. But I'm still here and going!

LO: Wow! Okay, I asked about the thing you like the most. Is there a part of the job you, like, uh, "I got to do this!"

JP: The worst, the worst is that bloody computer and plugging it in! And it's because it's like, I'm not that, I love the computers, I love the way the engines perform and everything, but they're so touchy nowadays, because of the computer systems. People's lives depend on this, and for this engine to be out there on a boat and malfunction or stop, in the average, you got to remember fishermen, they don't have the knowledge, they don't go to college, they don't have it. So for them to day, troubleshoot it, you need to plug in or scroll down through the board and find the problem, so I can...They don't know how. And you're out there, you don't want to, that's the least they want to do. 90 percent of the time it's a little silly wire or sensor that goes bad, and their lives depend on that, so it's not like old school where, you know, "oh your engine isn't running?" they would grab a hammer and hit the damn thing and buckle in and make it home. Now, those days are over. But you got to go! Do it. That's it.

[24:49]

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LO: Oh I know, I'm curious about the kinds of terms that you use, maybe to talk about the different types of jobs or different tools. You know, things that are unique to, you know like every job has its own language. And sometimes you have, like for example, when I was interviewing the guys down at Chris Electronics they were saying when the wires are all tangled up they call it Medusa's Hair. Or, uh, I can't remember...

JP: A rat's nest! That's what I call it! Actually I just finished doing a... I'm actually working on it, I haven't finished but I'm going to go next week. A boat. He bought a generator and sure enough all the electrical, all the AC wires are all tangled and that was part of my thing, I told the owner that I was going to straighten it out. And That's what I did. We ripped all the wires of, ran them nicely, put them all nice and neat. I mean there is no regulation, so anybody can do wiring and all that. There is no inspections the way it should be, but it looks a lot nicer now. You want it to be trouble free.

LO: But I can tell that you like what you do.

JP: I love it. I don't like it; I love it. That's why I'm still doing what I do. Not only is it a great company, the people that you work with they're great. And I get a great feeling every time I go home and I've accomplished something. Oh I helped somebody. That's my number one thing. When I go on a fishing boat, I always, and that's what I always try to tell the new generation is, people's lives depend on what you do. So don't cut any corners and if you're not sure, please ask. We have to be 110 percent all the time. You know like I'm going to go home, put my head down and feel comfortable that the job I did is 100 percent because if bad weather comes, the boat sinks, or something happens, it's like oh my gosh! Like I get all the fishermen that work down there, they all have my cell phone and my house number and they call me when they're out there and they're stuck and something breaks and I know their boats pretty good, so I'm able to guide them through problems and they come home and they're all excited. "Oh here, have some lobsters, have some scallops. That kind of stuff. Like, yeah, it's a great feeling to, knowing that you've helped somebody and you do it so that they can make a living too.

LO: And what's it like to have, you have Bob Mitchell as your boss, but as you said the future is Karen and Jen. What's it like to have two women heading this company up?

JP: You know something, in the beginning, like you know I've watched them grow up, so it's not like I didn't know, but they're the most wonderful people you could ever want working. My, Karen, she's a little spitfire, she's full of energy and so knowledgeable. She's going to be her dad in no time! And Jen, thank God for her! She gives me my paycheck every week! She's the book lady and she knows it too and she works in the parts and all that stuff, but she mostly concentrated on keeping the business floating the right way. Which is great. But they're nice and they're going to succeed very much.

LO: And what do you about, you know, it's kind of a family business, which is kind of common on the waterfront, but I wonder if that changes the way the business is? You know maybe it's more of a sense of family.

JP: Oh absolutely. That's what made this company, is being a family owned business. I mean you

call here and you get somebody here at the end of the phone. You don't get answering machine. And it doesn't matter what you're doing, if a customer walks in or somebody needs help, you stop and you help them and you deal with the rest of the stuff after. And that's why, it's like I said, it doesn't end at 4 o'clock. It goes on. If somebody's here that needs help, I stay or somebody calls, you help. Like if somebody's out on a boat and they call you, they call my boss, he doesn't have the answer, of course I'm going to help, you know. So that's how it goes [phone rings, JP whispers] That was the wife.

LO: All right, well I think we can pretty much wrap up, are there, is there anything else that I didn't cover that you want to share or talk about.

JP: No I just, you know the future for this we just need regulations down at the waterfront, so they can be better because it's not a mom and pop deal anymore. It's more companies that are run. It's easier for the government to regulate but it's making it harder for little companies like ourselves to keep going too because everybody's always looking for the great deal or you know, the great, you know... I don't know how to explain it. It's a little different you know, but it keeps them going.

LO: Do you think the future looks bright or...

JP: Oh I think so, I mean very bright. Were super busy and the people that are out there are very, they're business oriented so they're going to keep the fishing industry going and you know, it's good for all of us. It keeps all the mechanics and electricians and everybody else going

LO: Do you feel like with the younger people that are coming into this company, there is a good workforce of people coming along?

JP: Absolutely. We have a few bright guys, they're very smart, sharp. They're taking their jobs to heart too and that's what we want and we want them to feel that family-oriented thing because then the rest is smooth sailing.

LO: Well thank you so much

JP: No, thank you Laura. And nice talking to you and I hope this will be good for something

LO: Oh absolutely.

JP: Thanks, honey.

LO: Okay.

[31:22] End of Audio