



# NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview June 8, 2017

## Sanabria, Jenifer ~ Oral History Interview

Corinn Williams

---

Sanabria, Jenifer. Interview by Corinn Williams *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. June 8, 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:** Jenifer Sanabria

### **Facts about this person:**

Sex	Female
Occupation	Fish packer
Residence (Town where lives)	New Bedford
Ethnic background (if known)	Honduras

**Interviewer:** Corinn Williams

**Transcriber:** Joselyn Feliciano

**Interview location:** Community Economic Development Center, New Bedford

**Date of interview:** June 8, 2017

**Key Words:** Cod, haddock, redfish, fillet, packing, inspection, pallet, New Bedford, Denver, Houston, Honduras, temporary staffing agency

## **Abstract**

**Abstract:** Jenifer Sanabria emigrated from Honduras to New Bedford, MA nine years ago and currently works in a packing line at a seafood factory. The company works with a variety of fish including filleted codfish, the process starts from when the boats arrive with the product, and they are processed, filleted and packaged for distribution across New England. She has a family back home that she has committed to providing to for the rest of her life.

## Index

[2:06] Traveled from Honduras to Texas, relocated to Colorado, then to New Bedford, MA for better work opportunities. Works in a seafood factory packing products almost a decade. Works so her children in Honduras can get an education.

[5:00] Children are adults, domestic abuse, alcoholism, economic difficulties, loyalty, contrast between Denver, Colorado and New Bedford, MA. Economic relief, work is diverse with many different races, Latino business opening all around city.

[10:21] Employee schedule, routine for packaging codfish, quantity and time sensitivity in one shift, standards of quality for product, variety of different fish, company growth, expansion

[15:15] Deteriorating health from work, contrasting benefits offered to employees and agency

[20:45] Company owns vessels for fishing, standards of quality for product, safety measures, uniform, strict policies

[24:45] Training methods, techniques for filleting a variety of fish, product consistency, fluctuating schedule,

[29:46] Racial diversity at job site, trilingual workplace, women are not permitted to work as a cutter, safety standards, packaging salmon, temperature and weather conditions.

[35:27] Equality above all and stay humble and respect each other

[40:38] End Interview

## Light Transcription

(2:06) I am from Honduras. I have been here for 9 years and working in this fish company, packing and cleaning.

I am from Honduras, I lived in Houston, Texas and I cleaned houses there for three years then I went to Denver, Colorado and worked 6 years in a restaurant packing burgers, frying food, it was a fast food. I would clean at night and open the store in the morning I worked hard, a double shift like 15-17 hours a day 7 am to 5 pm 5 pm to 2 am straight I worked heavy duty. But my friend told me to come here (New Bedford) to work so I did. I began working in the fish industry. So now I have been working here in this company for two years.

My friend still lives here, she convinced me to come (New Bedford) and in the beginning, I didn't like it because I was used to uniforms and here we have to use our own boots. Also, I didn't like the cold. Over there (Colorado) I worked in a restaurant and here we are working with ice and water and it is very cold.

In Honduras I was married with four children and when I left home they were very small and I am alone here. I have been trying to work hard for them so that they can get an education.

(5:00) My kids are adults now. The oldest is 31, the other is 29 the other 27 and the young girl is 21. I left my daughter at two years old and now she is 21. She stayed with their father. I left him because he mistreated me he hurt me and beat me. That is why I came here. The life was very hard with him. I try to talk to my kids to see if they remember, they only remember that he used to hit me. And that was why I decided to leave because of his mistreatment.

He lived in the town, he was a man who liked to go around drunk so I began to work making tortillas for sale. I tried to earn money so my children could eat. He never brought food home he would drink his money away. I know my children missed me but I am able to make sure they eat by sending them money. I have always sent them money since I first arrived. They are adults and I continue to send them money because I want to show them that I care for them. They have all married already.

When I arrived, I didn't like it here. Denver, Colorado is a huge city and I missed it, but soon after (I arrived) in 2 weeks I found a job that paid weekly which was better than biweekly like in Denver. The job paid little and I am fortunate that they just gave me a raise. I was earning nine dollars for ten years and there were many more people that worked less than me and earning more but because the law changed I got a raise.

My brother lives here with his son. We came together from Denver, Colorado. I brought them here from Honduras. Just the two of them, there are a lot of Hondurans here in New Bedford. People come from all over, there are a lot of Guatemalans and El Salvadorans and Mexicans.

There are many businesses from Central America. It is a beautiful thing for Latinos. Our Mexican friends just opened the restaurant called Dulce.

(10:21) I start work at 5 AM and I pack codfish, depending on amount we have that day. If there are 20,000 lbs. then we have to pack 14 pallets, if there are 30,000 lbs. then we do 21 pallets and

if there are 40,000 we fill 30 pallets and there are only 9 people working in our crew. We have to move our hands because the manager will tell us “it is slow today.” So, he needs us we have the practice and experience, they have 2 inspectors. They take our ID number checking to make sure our work is excellent. If there is an error we may have ruined an entire pallet so our work must be perfect.

We clean and look over the fish before it is packed. During the night people work with the fish taking out the spine and they leave it for us to pack but we must look it over to make sure the fish meet the standards. After the codfish we pack haddock too. That is a different job, but we have to clean those with the spine and it is a lot, thousands and after that fish we do redfish. This is another fish that must be packed and inspected as well.

When there is a lot of work sometimes we work 9-11 hours and when there is little work we just work 5-6 hours. The table is prepped for 16 people. When there is a lot of work they pull people from other areas of the plant. They package other fish in the other areas, many other fish like flounder. I forget the other fish names. They also have another area that cooks the fish so that it is ready to warm in the oven. The company is big, over 300 employees.

Sometimes they add 2 other workers more but usually just us nine in our work group. A lot of women work here. The fish come in plastic tubs and there are two men that work with the tubs, they load it on the tables it and all the water ice comes out and wets us. We have to pack and stack the boxes.

(15:15) My back hurts a lot from doing the same routine every day. The company doesn't want us to rest. There was a lady who was very sweet, she told me I should rest because she saw me under stress. She told me I should take two weeks and all the time I was working there I never took time off. Only people that have been there for a long time get vacations but with the temp company I have been working with gives me 5 sick days, which equals out to 40 hours.

I am working with a temp staffing company at the plant. We all work like that but the company doesn't treat people differently whether you are from temp company or if you work for the company directly, except for at Christmas and they don't give bonus to the temp staffing company staff. There are bosses that work for the temp staffing company too who got upset. There was a woman who wanted to talk to the owner about the bonus and they said if they worked for more than 5 years, there with the temp staffing company or not, they got a bonus of extra pay of forty hours.

(20:45) The fish that they bring come from boats that they own, it is a fresh product and it is well inspected. You must wash your hands really well and wear hairnets and gloves, this is a very specific detail for food safety. They give us knives, the apron and gloves, sometimes the staff from the night don't take the spine out well, so we are prepared to take them out as well. There are people who can clean the fish out beautifully and others do it in a sloppy way that leaves bones in the fish. When we ask for time off they never give it to us although this is our right. I like my job and I am used to it. I have become experienced. Last time I called out sick I told my boss that I loved my job and I am good at it. I feel content where I am, but what I don't like is

when they give me a hard time for calling out sick. I only call out when I have to, like for a doctor's appointment.

(24:45) I was trained by a woman who is now a supervisor but when you first start the job you think it will be difficult because codfish is difficult and haddock is easier (to work with). One has to show these things to the new employees. You have to take the spine out from the middle and for the haddock is it a different cut. I tried to train a girl but she couldn't get the rhythm so initially it can be difficult. It was my job to train those to learn, when you began you have to watch and that is how training is. You can't just throw them in there (without training). I told my boss that you (have to) train and because that is how they showed me and the supervisor agreed with me. A Guatemalan girl picked it up it fairly quickly but another girl from Honduras couldn't. The Guatemalans are very, very fast (workers).

I liked to go to the river to fish, I always had luck, I don't fish anymore. Where I live in Honduras there is the ocean and we can fish there. There must be a lot of fish jobs out there too. Imagine if I go back to Honduras and they will hire me for the skills I have. When there is a lot of work it is usually in the summer. I am at work at 4:30 AM waiting for 5 AM so they can open the doors. I wake up at 3:45 so I can prepare my lunch.

(29:46) There are Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, Cape Verdeans, and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Americans working at the company. When I see someone who doesn't speak much Spanish I greet them in English. I am very sociable. The men cut the fish, when they finish their job they come and help the women, but the women cannot help the men cut the fish because the machinery is dangerous. A woman cut herself a few years ago, it can be dangerous. I was working in an area that was packing salmon. We cut the salmon, put stuffing in and prepared it for the oven. I worked there for 5 years. It is fast and easy work. Only three women worked there, we were a fast, hard working group. I remember one day we worked 4 AM to 9 PM that was a few years ago. They changed that area, now we do codfish. When they took us out of that area their productivity slowed down. Everyone buys the products, all our neighborhood markets and (we send product) all the way out to New Jersey.

I am use to working there sometimes the cold bothers me. Imagine, when we don't have a ride we have to walk in the snow and ice I have fallen multiple times. In Denver, there is always snow on the mountains.

(35:27) When someone is new you should treat him or her well because they don't know what they are doing. You should show them with patience and confidence. I am friendly with everyone but outside of work we go our separate ways. We have our separate families and all that. I am a person that respects everyone and I treat him or her well because we see each other every day. There are people from all over that come to work day and night and sometimes we are sick and keep on going. We have to keep going to show credibility for a reference. The fish are very clean, if it falls on the floor we must take it to a special cleaning area it is all a big process. We work really hard so people can enjoy their food.

(40:38) End of recording