

Transcript for Oral History with Rick Waters
Alex Zweig Spring 2020

Alex: Where'd you grow up?

Rick: I grew up in MA, inland but my family had a house in Warham, a summer house and I loved it there. I was just always taken to the water.

Alex: Is that why you wanted to start being on the water, working on the water?

Rick: Yes, yup. I was just always drawn to the water, fishing, sailing.

Alex: What did you do in the photo lab when you were up in..

Rick: I took a summer internship when I graduated from high school, in the photo lab at the Marine Biological Labs in Woods Hole. And the professors who were there teaching for the summer would give lectures and they'd need slides for graphs or pictures of what they're doing or publishing articles. And so we were preparing graphs and photographs for publications or for lectures. And at the end of the summer I didn't know what to do so I walked across the street to Woods Hole Oceanographic Research Lab and a month later I was in Africa.

Alex: How was that, being on the boat for..

Rick: Oh it was wonderful. I was pretty young and pretty green, but I learned a lot. And it was a 20 month cruise around the world. And so when I got back I bought a VW bus and I drove out West and got a job with the University of Washington Research Ship

Alex: What did you do on their research..

Rick: Well when I started with Woods Hole, I was in the mess hall and by the time I got, left Woods Hole, I was on the deck with the deck crew. So I worked with the deck crew with the University of Washington. And that work was all in the North Pacific and in the Sea of Cortez. And with Woods Hole we were all over the place. I wanted to go into oceanography but I realized I was much better suited to the wheel hose than the lab, and it just wasn't quite my thing. So I was happy to be just driving them around. It's always fascinating because it's a different mission every month. Old (crew) would go off and new people would go on and what they were doing was interesting and they were interesting people and I was fascinated with the projects & I used to get a lot of grief from the crews because I spent a lot of time in the labs. And so it's kind of neat now to be working on the Connecticut because it's going back to what I started out with. I got into a wooden boat building and I had a whole business building wooden boats and I had a crew and everything for years. And that business didn't survive the crash of 2009. Every other boom and bust I had work. I didn't have more work in the good times and I didn't have less work in the bad times, I just always had enough work to keep the crew going. In 2008, it was a different story, everything stopped and I didn't realize. I thought I'd just cruise through this one too and everything stopped. It's tough to realize my business of 30 years is going down the drain. You get in the hole fast.

Alex: What made you want to start wooden boat building?

Rick: Boy. I lost a contest, I don't know. I was fascinated by it, my father always liked wooden boats although he wasn't a huge influence on me. I think I was just really drawn to it.

Alex: On the research vessel, did you like being in the lab or...

Rick: I'm on the dock crew on the boat so I run the boat and run the crane so I launch and retrieve the equipment, but I'm always fascinated with what they're doing and it's such a small boat that you get to know everybody but everybody does everything. It's only a crew of 4. Captain, Cheifmate, and two deck hands. And the captain and the chefmate have been there for a long time, so I'm one of the deck hands and everybody does everything. I mean there's a cook and a marine tech on board that are also part of the crew but the people driving the boat there's only 4. So we work a 6 on and 6 off, and that's kind of interesting too.

Alex: How many hours is it constantly working on..

Rick: Well we can't work more than 12 hours a day. And that's what we do 2-6 hour shifts a day and the coast guard says you're not supposed to work more than that anyway and that's when we're at sea. When the boats tied well maybe work an 8 hour day at the dock or something.

Alex: how long does it take to make one of the boats like this?

Rick: Well obviously it depends on the size and complexity. I mean ive built some big boats and I did a lot of restoration of older boats too. It all depends on how bad the condition is and what has to be replaced so it's a tough question to answer because there's no one answer to it.

Curtis: what was the oldest boat you've ever worked on

Rick: The oldest boat was a bark in Galveston Texas named the Alyssa. She was built in 1877. She was raw iron hulled. She was 3 masted bark. She was a cargo ship and she actually called galveston twice. She was discovered in a shipyard in Greece about to be broken up somebody recognized that she was actually a boat with historic value and put word out that this boat was available and gaveston was one of several cities that bid on it and got it. It was kind of interesting because nobody realized what they were getting

Curtis: what were some of the resources they were doing on their boats and such?

Rick: On the resource vessels?

Curtis: yes.

Rick:we went down the west coast of africa, around the horn and up to the red sea at that time it was 1970 and the suez canal was closed. If the suez canal was open we probably would have gone through the mederterain and there the suez canal but what the main focus of that trip was, was to study what are called deeps in the red sea. The red sea is a rift zone, its splitting apart so there are these holes at the bottom of the red sea called deeps that are so deep that the water at the bottom of them are heated by the mantle of the earth so the water will rise and cool and you'll get these convection currents inside the deep and that's very unusual. And that's the main reason for the crews and they find other things to do along the way we went to australia and thailand and all through the south pacific and through the canal and back.

Alex: You did a commission for a Nobel prize winner?

Rick: Yes

Alex: How was that?

Rick: it was very interesting henry kendall was quite a character. He was a nuclear physicist at M.I.T. and he was the founder and president of the union of concerned scientists. And when they

were breaking up whale ships in New Bedford his mother hired men in trucks to get everything off the whaling ships and they started what is called the Kendall Whaling Museum in Sharon Mass. One of the artifacts they took off was a whale boat that was on the whaling ship that ran aground at Cuttyhunk. So he was using that as his personal yacht and that's what he liked for a yacht was an open 28 foot whale boat but it had been glassed on the outside because it leaked and he didn't think he should continue to sail this original artifact so he gave me the boat and I duplicated it. So he could sail a new one.

Curtis: That's neat.

Rick: It was neat because if I needed details I could take it off the original vessel so I didn't need a set of plans. Another thing that was interesting about that was most whaling boats were made by the Beetle Company which makes Beetle Cats but nobody knew who built this one they knew it wasn't a Beetle but they weren't sure who exactly had built it. There was a sister to it another one that came off of the Wanderer which was the whale ship that ran aground in Cuttyhunk in the Mariners Museum in Newport News so a couple of people in the seaport went down to Newport News and took lines off of that whale boat and that's what I used to build the hull.

Curtis: Do you go boating a lot now?

Rick: Well that's the funny thing I just sold a boat that my wife's grandfather bought new in 1974 and we used it for years but I was always so busy that I sort of never used it was a fiberglass boat lap straight Chris Craft and I would say I guess I should go use the boat so it'll get some exercise so I'll know everything is still running.

Alex: Part of the USS Niagara, when were you commissioned to do that?

Rick: I'm going to say it was 1990. Somewhere in there. And that was a fun project because of what they were going to do to it. We laughed the whole time we were building it. It was if you cut a section out of the original vessel everything was full size so it was from the water line up. It was 20 feet long and 10 feet wide and weighed 6 and a half tons and it barely fit out this door, and then they took it to this firing range in Pennsylvania and shot cannon balls at it. They even cast cannons for this project because they had cannons but they weren't sure the cannons wouldn't explode when they touched them off so they cast new cannons for this. Then they put it in a museum in Erie Pennsylvania, the Erie Maritime Museum to show what happens to a war ship in battle. Because most people died from sepsis from the splinters. So when we shot at the thing the outside was just like a Wile Coyote hitting the canyon wall you know, just a circle where the cannon ball had gone through. But of course the inside was all exploded and they put in mannequins, cutouts of human shapes with styrofoam on the front of them to catch the splinters and it was pretty great. We were in charge of building this sound shell and it's all curved panels and it's sort of natural for a boat builder to do. So I got the contract not having any idea of what I was doing. There's about 35 elements on the back wall. There are 8x8 panels that are heavy and thick and mounted permanently to the wall and they reverberate base notes. Above that there are panels that are at an angle and they can be folded back up against the wall when they're not being used. And when they're being used they come down at a 45 degree angle. Ahead of that there are rods that go across the top of the stage that hold scenery and stuff like that, 3 of those

have 5 or 6 panels each that have a drop down to the stage, fit in so it's right at the proper angle and that reverberates sound out to the audience. And on the wings of the stage one of the problems with the orchestra was that the left side didn't know what the right side was playing. So there are these boxes that are 20in deep that curve back to them to hold the sound on the stage for the musicians. All of it had to be designed so that it could go up the aisle through the guard through the lobby into an elevator and get stored on the third floor. The boxes on the side had to be designed so they could break down and all fit into the elevator. So then I started a business doing acoustic stuff cause it was very interesting and pretty straight forward and I was trying to start a business I could sell because when you have a boat shop, when you're done you just shut the door, there's nothing to sell so I was trying to build up a business that I could sell. I came up with a design, an inexpensive way to improve the acoustics in a gymnasium or a cafeteria or an auditorium so a school system didn't have to build a whole new building. They could just put these panels up and improve the acoustics for a play. I applied for a patent for that, and you're always rejected the first round for a patten so you have to defend it, no one is given a patten the first time. When my rejection came my business was heading down the drain and the last thing I had was money to resurrect the patent, defend my patent so it just went along with everything else in those days.

Alex: Was it fun to build those?

Rick: It was. Because it was interesting we did one, the two big ones were for the guard and in Redding, PA. So that's kind of complicated because that's taking the show on the road. With my crew all the tools and all the panels. But that was fun, that was interesting stuff.

Curtis: What was your favorite thing, out of everything, what was your favorite thing to do?

Rick: Wow. That's a tough question. I like it all. I guess

Curtis: You were out on sea one time and you said I want to do this forever.

Rick: I guess I've said that about a bunch of different trades haven't I? I'm saying that now on the Connecticut, boy is it fun. Will I like having different things to do and I like it all so. I like moving.

Curtis: I know I've seen somewhere that they just heat up the panel is that...?

Rick: There is so much twist in such a short distance that I had to steam these and I've even had to shape some too. There is so much shape down here I didn't think a screw was going to hold it. So some of it is carved shape, some of it is steamed and bent shaped, of course if you carve it the plank will have to start out thicker. So these are really complicated planks here. And it's all in this distance. These the wood will take the bend you just. It'll get painted (once it's all done). Once I get it planked it's going back to the guy who started it to finish it. These planks are thicker because the backside has to get coved out so all these corners will go away and come back down to this thickness here. You have to end up with the right thickness.

Alex: How long were you at the school to learn boat building?

Rick: It was a 2 year program and in the middle of it, in the summer even in the spring you started in the winter so you got done in the spring and you would go work in a boatyard for

experience. I went to work for Jole Wiger in a boatyard up in Maine and I stayed there, I didn't go back for a second year because he was such an interesting guy