

Name of person interviewed: Jim Dwyer [JD] and Paul Swain [PS]

Facts about this person:

Age

Sex Males

Occupation

If a fisherman,

Home port,
and Hail Port

Residence (Town where lives)

Jim Dwyer: 176 Rounds St., New Bedford 02740

Paul Swain: 24 Acorn Rd., New Bedford 02740

Ethnic background (if known)

unknown

Interviewer: Millie Rahn [MR]

Transcriber: Azure Dee Westwood [ADW]

Place interview took place: HDC oral history station

Date and time of interview: Sept. 25, 2004

INDEX/KEYWORDS

KEYWORDS

Nicknames; superstitions; dogs; pigs; New Bedford; black diamond; Newfoundlanders; Norwegians; Portuguese; Latvians; scallopers; two-boat Irish; sinking; accidents/ injuries; men lost at sea; price of fish; 1938 and 1954 storms; fish give-away; taxes; Seafood Producers; negotiations for contracts; close knit community; auction; lumpers.

INDEX

- [00:00] Discussion of old nicknames used, pranks played on vessels, old characters at the docks. Why nicknames aren't used anymore.
- [03:02] Dogs on boats in the past; discussion of some superstitions on boats and how that has changed a bit now.
- [06:07] Change in make-up of the fleet from mostly Norwegian and Newfoundlanders to mostly Portuguese and why; Now a lot of Vietnamese, Mexicans, Guatemalans; Newfoundlanders settling in Boston; some of PS history.
- [09:01] Decline of Boston as a port; price of fish in '50's/'60's; dumping and giving away fish that were worth very little; offer guys incentives to get into fishing industry.
- [12:07] Change in ethnic make-up of the fleet over the years; scallopers making good money; postponing paying taxes gets fishermen into trouble; Rhode Island quahoggers used to use different names to avoid taxes.
- [15:00] If government catches tax evaders, they take checks; interviewees enjoy working in the fishing industry; sense of community in the industry; in the past the Wharfinger building used to do house all things related to industry; services/ negotiations provided by Seafood Producers.
- [18:12] Change in the way labor and contract negotiations are done; lobbying power in the past; more on interconnectedness of the fishing industry; accidents/ injuries in the industry.
- [21:11] Vessel incidents/ sinkings; 1938 and 1954 hurricane stories; PS friend dies in '54 hurricane which spurred PS involvement in Seamen's Bethel [?]; more discussion of vessels and men lost at sea.
- [24:08] Dangers at sea; Alaska fishing dangers; more men lost at sea; positive note ending on both men's love of their job and that it was a good living they wouldn't trade.
- [27:34]
- [End of Audio]

TRANSCRIPT

[Start of Audio]

[00:00]

[MR]: I was thinking of nicknames and I was thinking of some of the pranks, and especially the younger folks learning the job, are there kind of occupational pranks?

[JD]: I did one once, but I wasn't too happy after I realized what I did, being young and foolish. I recall it was on a fishing vessel, *Steven R*, and it was Norman Vierra, he was a cook there at that time, and his nickname was weasel. And it was a walk in ice box. He had one foot in washing it down and one foot out. And I was getting a mug up and I said to the other fellow I was with, "If he puts two feet in, sorry for weasel." Just as I said it, he put the two feet in, I put, not the lock, I just put the latch on. Just a second, as soon as he yelled, I lifted...I've seen so many hives in my life – he broke out with hives, I swore I would never play a trick like that again. It was a prank. But he turned white and he broke out with hives. Again, I was young and foolish, didn't know any better. But it was just that second, that's all that it takes. And I would have felt the same way if someone would have done it to me. But that stayed with me a lot of years. And I see him to this day. He's a retired fisherman.

[MR]: Do you call him weasel?

[JD]: I don't call him weasel; I don't like the name weasel.

[PS]: It's an awful name to get stuck with.

[JD]: I always call him – I address him – as Norman. I had a fellow in the Union for 30 years and his name was "PeeWee". I always addressed him as Richard. That's me. I didn't call him weasel or "PeeWee".

[PS]: I had a similar incident with him, same type of thing. It was Ernie the Wino. I used to see Ernie the Wino and say, "Hi Ernie the Wino!" Come on and I'll buy you a glass of wine. We'd go in there and he'd say, "You know Paul, I don't mind the name but I really don't like it anymore." I said, "No, why not?" He says, "How about if I call you Paul the Beer-o [?]" So I never called him Ernie the Wino.

[JD]: Ernie the Wino also had a dog and the dog's name was "Tippy". And we used to be in a public auction room, with the dog and "Tippy" was there along with Ernie. And he talked to the dog, the dog would sit up and the dog would have some wine also.

[PS]: The same group of guys were down here – it was an open field – and they had, a lounge chair, a lamp there and everything else, and tourists would come by and say, "What are you doing here?" and he says, "We're retired now." "Why?" "I used to be a harpooner and they took my job away from me, from a whale boat" [laughs].

[03:02]

[MR]: Do many people work with animals out on the boats? Dogs?

[JD]: Sully Mahe [?], he was lost, what 5 years ago, Paul?

[PS]: Oh, more than that.

[JD]: More than that. And it was he, his son, and the dog, all three of them.

[PS]: There used to be dogs on some boats because I remember as a kid being down there.

[JD]: *Intrepid*. Olie.

[PS]: You don't hear too much about them any more, having dogs like they used to. In fact I have a picture at home of an older fishing vessel with a dog on it. That's one of the

animals I know they used to have, was a dog. Because they wouldn't dare bring, a Newfoundlander wouldn't bring, a pig out because they don't say the word "pig" on a fishing boat.

[MR]: That was my next question was superstitions.

[JD]: Oh yeah, we have them.

[MR]: Tell me some.

[JD]: I recall one time I believe it was the *Robert Joseph*, Mike McDonald's father, Johnny Mac, and being young at the time, didn't know any better, a had to go down to the fish hold and I flipped the cover upside-down. A young fellow, I'll never do that again. That was the first of it. I never did it again. I realized, and from that day on, I knew you don't flip the hatch cover upside-down. I wore a yellow...

[MR]: Is that sort of turning your luck?

[JD]: On them it was like, he said he wouldn't go fishing that day. I remember yellow slickers during that time too. If you came aboard during that time, it was rare that... most people had the Black Diamond in those days, everyone had a Black Diamond in those days.

[PS]: A sou'wester.

[JD]: Always, and that's history. And today they are yellow, they're orange, it doesn't matter, green.

[PS]: But then the other incident was a guy flipped the hatch, skipper saw it, turned the boat right around and went back to the dock. He said, "I'm not going out today."

[MR]: And what's the pig?

[PS]: I don't know, they don't like the wet pig aboard a boat so they call it – Newfoundlanders - used to call it "queer chain" [?] That's the way they talked anyhow.

[MR]: I heard that you never say that. Different colors and things like that?

[PS]: They'd only turn a certain way too, when they were towing. They would only turn to the starboard side, they wouldn't go... something to do with the sun, against the sun. A lot of superstitions.

[MR]: Is that still true?

[PS]: I don't know because we've lost... one time the fleet was mostly Norwegian and Newfoundlanders when I was growing up, but now it's mostly Portuguese. We don't know their superstitions or get exposed to them like we did going way back to being a kid.

[06:07]

[MR]: Why did they change?

[PS]: Well I think...there is always immigrants that end up fishing. All of a sudden the Newfoundlanders have their kids educated, they didn't go fishing. The Norwegians got their kids educated; they didn't go fishing. So all of a sudden you start cutting down on the fleet that way. Then the Portuguese come in and they started small and all of a sudden they are all immigrants, or most of them and they've taken over the fleet.

[MR]: Who do you think the next will be?

[PS]: I don't know. We do have an influx in scalloping, especially Vietnamese, we have Mexicans, Guatemalans... we have everything now. Some of the scallopers are nothing but Vietnamese except the mate and skipper probably.

[MR]: Do you speak other languages?

[PS]: No, I wish I had. One of the first trips – I didn't make many trips scalloping, but I did enough of them to understand the whole thing and that's how I got the government job

because of my experience. I went out on a Norwegian boat for ten days. The skipper came down about the third day and said, "When the young swain boy comes down to eat, you speak English." Because they were very clannish just like everyone else, so I was very lucky in that sense. I remember as a kid, I would bring someone to the house, and my father would say something to me and they would turn to me and say, "What did your father say?" Because he talked so fast. Unbelievable.

[MR]: I know there used to be a lot of Newfoundlanders down here. Also I've been told...

[PS]: You know what they call a Newfoundlander? Two-boat Irish. You ever heard that one? That's what they know as a two-boat Irish. One trip from Ireland to Newfoundland and the second one to United States. Some ended up in Boston and some ended up in New York. My father came into Boston but he migrated down this way in the '30's. We were all born in New Bedford. My brother, my oldest brother was 29 so he'd be ahead a year, 25 or so.

[MR]: A lot came into Gloucester but a lot came into Boston to work construction.

[PS]: Yeah, that's what happened to a lot of them, they found out it was a lot better in construction; I had cousins that ended up in there. One thing about Boston, they loved the education, Newfoundlanders did, to get everybody educated. And you had more schools in Boston that you could commute to, you didn't have to... if you lived in Dorchester, you could just take a subway into school, it was beautiful.

[09:01]:

[MR]: In the old days, a lot of guys would bring down a load of fish to Boston and then work under the table with cousins and such in construction. I was going to ask: What do people in New Bedford think about Boston?

[PS]: It's kind of died now, it's actually died.

[JD]: Boston, like Paul said, has died. I think on commercial vessels alone, I believe if they have a dozen, that's maxed out right now.

[PS]: When some of the New Bedford boats had big trips, they would go to Boston.

[JD]: They could gain \$0.15 for the groundfish for the haddock and cod.

[PS]: If you saw some of the prices we had here in the '50's and '60's, you wouldn't believe what they paid for codfish and haddock back then: \$0.06 for scrod and \$0.10 for haddock and \$0.10 across the board for all the cod. And they made money, imagine that.

[MR]: And what is it now?

[PS]: About \$1.50 right now.

[JD]: I remember days when yellowtail were half a cent and they used to dump them.

[PS]: One, *Hispanol* got mad one day and he dumped them. He had 33,000 pound and said if you won't give me a decent price...he took the fish back out and dumped them overboard. Another guy caused one of the biggest traffic jams in New Bedford. He told, got on the radio and said, "They won't give me anything for my fish so I'm giving it away." So he had everybody show up. He had a big line he had everybody come down to get fish off of him.

[JD]: That was, the guy from the *Paula Caroline*? The Spanish... Juan and Spanish.... What happened there, his fish was actually frozen, *Covered Wagon*, name of the vessel, *Covered Wagon*, Juan Garcia. Quite a bit of the product was frozen.

[PS]: We didn't know how to regulate the hose, he just got the boat.

[MR]: What's next for New Bedford? From the industry point of view – I know you're working hard to get that young blood, that next generation into all of these aspects of industry – what's next?

[JD]: I think what we have to do throughout the whole industry perhaps on the labor end, across, looking at organized labor perhaps, you have to offer these guys something. You have to give them an incentive to come here. You have to give them some kind of a pension, you have to give them some kind of perks. Maybe that might be the attraction also.

[MR]: While you were out we were talking about the progression of different groups, Newfoundlanders, now it's Portuguese and there's also Vietnamese, Mexicans, in scalloping....

[12:07]

[JD]: We've seen it over the years. When Paul and I started it was the Norwegians, the Newfoundlanders. You had some Latvians. That was the three groups – Latvians, Newfoundlanders, and Norwegians.

[PS]: Speaking of nicknames, there was "Whiskey" and "Water", two brothers.

[JD]: Then in the '80's the Portuguese came and it became... actually what happened there, you had Vietnam during the time, a lot of the guys, they went home or they went into the Service. Most of the Newfoundlanders, like Paul would say, they went on to education, they got educated and they didn't want no part of the business.

[PS]: And it's not for the lack of money because they are making very good money right now, very good money. On a scalloper, on a good size trip you can make anywhere from \$10-20,000 per trip and that's for a 14-16 day trip. Big money. But that's the other thing that Jimmy may get around to saying, they have to pay their own taxes so a lot of these guys are going to be in trouble. You get a check for \$18,000; "Ah, I'm going to get another one next trip, I'll pay the government then."

[JD]: You don't find that most of them would put it into escrow. I don't think, I hope they are, but I don't think so. Whereas before it was mandated, you're Federal and State social security was paid for.

[PS]: And the Settlement Office took care of all that too. That was the good thing about it. Having somebody take it out for you. They don't do that now. You go in and you made \$17,000, you got a check for \$17,000. They call it self-employed.

[MR]: And it's harder to track that too. I grew up in Maryland – I didn't grow up right on the water, but when I first started working... very creative accounting!

[PS]: Oh yeah, part of my job, went over in Rhode Island I used to pick up the slips, individual quahoggers and I mean they were pretty rugged guys and they went out day to day and I had to pick up the slips. When I started looking at some of the names, Jesus Christ, Mini Law... they had any kind of a name they wanted. I guess the state of Rhode Island finally got smart and gave them a credit card, they had to turn that in if they wanted to sell their product. I'm over there with all these... I couldn't believe the names.

[MR]: Like everything you were saying about the electronics, the taxman keeps the record, it's computerized now, its hard for you to slip things through.

[15:00]

[PS]: Well if a guy doesn't pay his taxes and the government can located him, when he goes to pick up his check sometime and they finally located him, that whole check is gone, the government took it. Then they have a barter system; how are you going to pay this, we'll

give you so much back if you promise to pay so much. Of course some of the guys, they must owe some money now. It's a shame that they get that far in debt.

[MR]: Is there anything else that you want to say that you haven't said on the big stage, here or...?

[PS]: All we can say is we've made a living off of it and it's been fun.

[JD]: A real good living and it has been fun.

[PS]: My wife always says to me, "Why do you always want to go to work?" There was always a change in scene everyday. That auction room, you could meet from a doctor to a criminal in this little tiny room. A banker - it was just unbelievable. We had this guy named Spider Gomes, he represented the bank down there, gave all the mortgages for the vessels, and he was just one of the characters there - they were all over the place.

[JD]: During that time with Spider Gomes, I don't think anyone that was involved with Spider, whether you needed a commercial loan or a personal loan, even myself, I don't think I walked into Merchants Bank for at least eight years, whenever I wanted a personal loan, I went to Spider. My payment was in the Wharfinger Building with Mr. Gomes. The Sheriff used to come in looking for non-support. He could monitor the border, he knew what boat so and so was on. He could monitor the Sheriff even - he knew exactly what boats were public and what vessel he was on. Everything was done there - it was just a centralized place. It was a ... the Settlement House's they could monitor who was in and out. The Ice Company knew what was coming as far as the inventory for the next day as far as putting up orders. The ship yard, they knew exactly who was in. That was the whole... between that there and the Seafood Producers, that was the foundation of the industry. You had a strong voice up in Washington with the Seafood Producers. Paul could tell you a little bit about Watermen's United [?] I believe.

[PS]: That was one of the groups, but the best on was Seafood Producers, they were quite powerful. And they needed to be because going back to the Second World War, was it the OPA ceiling [?] prices, they thought they had them on a charge there?

[JD]: That's right there too.

[PS]: You need a group to lead you, you know?

[JD]: And that system was in place... when you had Seafood Producers, they negotiated the contracts. They negotiated the contracts for the commercial fishermen and for the lumpers. So when you negotiated you went in with the General Manager and the Attorneys. Management Attorney and also the Labor Attorney.

[18:12]

[JD]: And you sat with that one person. Today to get to get a collective bargaining contract from my end, with the lumpers, I have to go one on one. I don't have one spokesman for the boats. And what happens here, in most cases, I have to try and get the majority of the individual skippers - I should say the owners - agree to it. And before, like I said, the General Manager of the strong boat owners group, you did it at the table back and forth. And that's what kept this industry alive. Everything was organized labor and it was their foundation, the Seafood Producers, at that time. They were a very strong voice in Washington, to lobby the 200 mile limit. Half the time we could go and negotiate something. We sat at the round table. You have the Newfoundlanders at one table, the Norwegians at one table, and the Latvian at the other table. We could negotiate in minutes sometimes before we got back to the table, we could resolve our problems right there. It was a good outfit.

[MR]: That's the way one thing that's really different, anything that has to do with fishing, the retired guys still go hang out because their buddies are their, their history is there, their life is there.

[PS]: Well if you did that for your whole life, you don't know nothing else.

[MR]: It's also your families are intertwined, and it's not true for other industries.

[PS]: Well, it's such a hard business, and there have been some hard accidents that brings them a lot closer. I had an uncle that was mangled pretty bad on the boat, back in the late '40's and he had the same name as my father, and people were calling the house saying, because they'd heard it on the radio that this fisherman Robert Swain had got hurt, but his name was Robert Swain but we called him Bob and my father's name was Robert, but that's the only way you get it – it's scary but they stay together. They used to live in sections of the town here – the Newfoundlanders used to live over here. Not anymore though. They are all spread out now.

[JD]: Talking about injuries, I can recall over here at Lynus Eldredge [?] taking out a scalloper, it was the New Year and this man's name was Violin Gus [?], that's because he could play the violin. He was taking out scallops, he was running the winch and he lost his arm in the winch. They amputated his arm, it was right there, instantly he lost his arm.

[MR]: That and the boats going down, every family has some story.

[21:11]

[PS]: Oh yeah. My brother in law had a funny – I call it funny now because he's alive and everything else – but he was on a boat called the *Newfoundland*, and they were sinking and they had no way to signal the next boat so they brought the mattresses up on deck and set them on fire. So they saw the smoke and finally a boat came over and Louis Deucette said, "No." The other guy says on the boat, they set the dory down and the dory went [sinking sound] so the dory was no good to them. So they were saved by another boat. They were lucky; they came home. My brother in law went out on the boat that saved them called the *Hilagasterd* [?] and when he went out the second time, they were coming home from the trip and they ripped the bottom out of it coming up through the sound. So they went down and they woke up my brother in law and they said, "Hey Billy, you gotta get out of here, the boat's sinking." He said, "Boy, are you a hot shit, you're full of fun." He said, "No we're serious!" He had two trips, two sinking and he still went at it. But it's funny, he said, "Oh, you're a hot duck there telling me that!"

[MR]: Well and several people have talked about the '54 hurricane. Is that still the worst?

[JD]: '38 was worse, Paul.

[PS]: '38 was worse, but the fishing fleet suffered bad in the '54. I lost a very good friend in the '54 hurricane. I was in the Service at the time and I came home that weekend and they told me the vessel called *Red Star* [?] went down.

[JD]: Was that Teddy Bowen?

[PS]: My friend Teddy Bowen, he was only 21 years old when it went down. He was on The Shoals – it got its name because it was shallow water, the shoals – they claimed that somehow the boat went up and when it came down, it hit the bottom because it was so shallow. And it ruined the whole boat too. That's how I got involved with the Seamen's Bethel [?]. I've been a member of the Bethel [?] for years because my good friend was there and I like to remember him on the Memorial Day, they have a service on the waterfront. But we lost 11 men on that boat. That's the sad thing, when the scalloper boat

used to go it was always 11 men. There was another one, *Navigator*, in '78 where 11 men were lost.

[JD]: There Norman [?] up here, he was skipper at that time.

[PS]: That was *Midnight Sun* went down, 11 men.

[JD]: '62.

[PS]: Over the years there's been... pretty tragic. Like the one he was telling about, *Solama* [?] earlier, it was a guy and his son and his dog went. And he was a second and a third generation lost at sea. His father was lost at sea.

[JD]: That's right, second and third.

[PS]: My memory is going bad, I'm trying to think of his name. Hokie.

[JD]: Hokie. Hokeson. His nickname was "Hokie" for short. That was Hokeson [?]. He had character, he had character.

[PS]: He did.

[24:08]

[MR]: Well you know it seems to me anyway that a lot of occupations that are very dangerous, you have to have the black humor and you know, a way of dealing with it. Because you could go out any day and lose your arm. Break your back, depending on what you're doing.

[PS]: Oh yeah, when that dredge is swinging and the conditions are terrible – I don't know if you've ever seen any movies on scalloping or even off of Alaska and stuff like that, it's really hazardous. When you get up in Alaska they something half the size of that table there coming at you – crab pot coming at you. You ain't going to stop that because it's made of steel. Same with those huge dredges, they say, one time it was dropped on a guy and he was paralyzed for like, and stuff like that.

[JD]: We lost "Five Ox Manny" – the nickname Fighting Manny. He was on the *Massachusetts*, we had a dumping deck where we used to throw the debris and throw it into the ocean. The chain parted and he was underneath it.

[MR]: Our time is getting short. How would you like to end this on a cheerier note?

[PS]: I wouldn't trade the job I had for anything in the world. I really enjoyed it.

[JD]: By the same token, I feel the same way Paul does. I started young. I brought up a wonderful wife, two beautiful children, my son is in the business – it's been great, it's been awesome for us. You just have to apply yourself, it works.

[PS]: I have two daughters so they are nowhere near it.

[MR]: And did they marry fishermen?

[PS]: No they didn't. One is married to a doctor now and the other is married to a tech guy, high-fluting computer business. Got away from it that way, but I'm still on the waterfront, still doing my thing. My brother and I – he's retired now four years – we paint the same boat that he was on, I've been painting it for ten years. Can never get enough paint on that boat. It's not the rustiest boat in the fleet, I guarantee you that!

[JD]: Talking about that, I see his car at Bruce's.

[PS]: Oh yeah, the new one?

[JD]: Yeah, he's working on that.

[PS]: You meet people that you... know them for a long time; you just don't forget them.

[MR]: I will say thank you and turn this off.

[26:55]

[End of interview with JD and PS but tape keeps rolling into the next interview]

[26:58]

[MR]: Ok, let's see if this is working. Ok, we're going to start the next interview. I'm going to ask if you can tell me your name and where you live, how you came to work with fish in New Bedford and then we'll go from there.

[EF]: Alright, my name is Eddie Footes and I'm a junior because my father was Eddie Foote – they called him "Sugar".

[27:34]

[End of Audio]