

Narrator: Frank Cona

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

Location: Freeport, New York

Date of Interview: June 7, 1987

Project Name: Long Island Traditions

Project Description: Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders and other maritime tradition bearers.

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Abstract: Frank Cona, a fifth-generation fisherman, shares his rich family history rooted in Licata, Sicily, a town known for its fishing and farming. Learning the trade from his father and eventually taking over the family boat at a young age, Cona describes his early years working on fishing boats, starting with small tasks at age six and progressing to full responsibilities by eleven. Cona discusses the traditional fishing methods in Sicily, including using sails instead of engines and employing purse seines for sardines and anchovies. He highlights the skill and care his family took in maintaining fishing gear, a crucial element in their success. In 1949, at eighteen, Cona emigrated to the United States, landing in New York. He details his initial years in South America, where he introduced set lining in Venezuela, and his subsequent decision to settle in New York despite opportunities in Kansas City. Cona's narrative includes his attempts to innovate fishing techniques in the U.S., such as using powerful lights for mackerel fishing. The interview also touches on the art of net-making, a skill passed down from his grandmother and mother, who crafted nets by hand using cotton thread. Cona's experiences underscore the blend of tradition and innovation in his fishing career, reflecting both his heritage and adaptability in new environments.

Nancy Solomon: Frank Cona is captain of the *Apache II* on Woodcleft Avenue. It is June 7th, 1987. [Recording paused.] [laughter] Okay. How did you get started in all this? How did you get started fishing?

Frank Cona: How I got started?

NS: Yeah. Was your father a fisherman?

FC: I [inaudible] from fifth generation.

NS: Fifth generation. So, your great-great-grandfather in Italy.

FC: Right.

NS: Where in Italy?

FC: Sicily.

NS: Whereabouts in Sicily?

FC: Southern Sicily.

NS: Were there a lot of fishermen down there?

FC: Yes. Small town. 35,000 people. Most are fishermen and farmers.

NS: What was the name of the town?

FC: Licata.

NS: Licata. Who taught you the most about fishing?

FC: My father.

NS: Your father.

FC: My father had three boats.

NS: What kind of boats?

FC: They were dragging. Most of the time, they used to use a sail instead of the engine.

NS: Oh, really?

FC: Go by sail, dragging. Two boats pull one net.

NS: Wow.

FC: Each boat had eleven-man crew.

NS: How big were these boats?

FC: About fifty feet.

NS: It must have been crowded. So, who were the different people who worked on the boat? Were they family people?

FC: No.

NS: You just hired whoever was –

FC: One of the boats, there was my father. The other boat was with my big brother. I started working on a boat when I used to go [inaudible] quarter of a share. When they came in, I used to clean the boat and bring the water.

NS: How old were you?

FC: About six. Then, when I grew up, I was about eleven years old. They gave me a fish share.

NS: What was your job?

FC: The boat as soon as it come from fishing, I was to do the cleaning. Bring the water to the boat.

NS: So, you did that for a long time?

FC: Yeah. Then, when I graduated from high school, they gave me a full share.

NS: Then what did you do when you got the full share?

FC: Then my father had a stroke. My big brother left the town, and I took over the boat.

NS: Wow.

FC: I was the captain.

NS: Did you have to learn a lot, or had you already learned?

FC: Already knew. Because it's all it does in my little town: fishing and fishing.

NS: Did you go clamming and the stuff they do around here?

FC: No.

NS: So, it was always the draggers.

FC: Yeah, dragging across sand. In the summer, we used to go for sardines, anchovies.

NS: How did you fish for those?

FC: We fish with the lights. We have a small boat with big lights, about ten thousand candlelights. Then, when the sardines come up to the light, they call the big boat – the purse seine.

NS: Is there anything like that here or only in Italy?

FC: I tried to invent over here many, many years ago, around 1950. I brought a tremendous, powerful light from Italy, and I want to try for mackerel. But after about four days, we had a southwest blow, the water changed to milky. I had no chance to try that light over here in this country.

NS: How old are you, Frank?

FC: I came in 1949 in this country, and I was eighteen years old.

NS: So, you're now?

FC: Fifty-eight.

NS: One of the things that a lot of people have said is that you know how to make your own nets.

FC: Right.

NS: How did you learn to do that?

FC: How?

NS: Yes.

FC: My grandmother and my mother.

NS: Yes. They made the nets?

FC: They used to buy the cotton.

NS: So, these were cotton nets.

FC: Many years ago. They used to make it their own thread. They used to make it.

NS: Would they hand sew that, or is it on a machine?

FC: No. Everything by hand. So, my grandmother, my mother, and my sisters used to make nets by hand.

NS: Wow. Did you learn from them?

FC: Yes.

NS: Did most men learn how to make nets, or was it mostly women who made nets?

FC: The women work during the day because their husbands go fishing during the night. They make it all kind of [inaudible] by hand. They used to make it their own thread, too, with the cotton.

NS: Yes. The tread is the edge of the net?

FC: Right. They used to make the thread with cotton.

NS: Was that very difficult to learn?

FC: [inaudible]?

NS: To make the tread in the net?

FC: No. If you grow up in a family that do that for many, many, many years, I'm pretty sure you'll learn.

NS: But for you it was easy to learn? Do you remember how old you were when you made your first net?

FC: When I was the youngest then, I used to make little boats. By hand, little boats like that.

NS: Like model boats?

FC: Yes. We used to race them in three feet of water. All the kids used to race our boats.

NS: Like in a pond?

FC: Yes. Then we used to make our own little nets, that big.

NS: [laughter] Oh, wow.

FC: We used to put one net behind the little boats with the sail on, and you go with the wind,

with the little nets on the bottom. We used to do that.

NS: How old were you when you did that? You were like six or seven?

FC: I was about seven years old.

NS: [laughter] So, most of your friends were also fishermen, and everybody learned how to do these things. Was your father considered one of the really good fishermen?

FC: One of the best.

NS: One of the best. How come? I mean, what made him so good?

FC: What made him so good? I don't know.

NS: He catch more fish than anybody else?

FC: Yes. Because he was very particular on his gear. Keep the gear nice and straight all the time. That's what make us good fishermen. When you go out and you work with twenty, thirty boats and you compete with them, you got to have the best of gear. You can't just get a piece of shit. Excuse the expression. You got to have everything right.

NS: Do you feel, since you worked in a place where it was really important that here in Freeport, did they know how to get the good gear?

FC: Sure. Everybody knows [inaudible].

NS: What about the other boats here? Have they –?

FC: Everybody knows, from Maine –

NS: From you.

FC: From Maine to Cape May, they know my name.

NS: How come you came here to the United States and to Freeport?

FC: I left my mother when I was fifteen years old. I went to South America.

NS: How come?

FC: Because I wanted to see the world.

NS: You are restless.

FC: So, I get there. [laughter] I went to Venezuela. So, I went there and I worked on the streets.

We used to build one-family American houses. [laughter] Because the Americans or whatever, they have a lot of oil to get out of there. I used to get fifteen bolívars a day. As soon as I accumulated a few dollars, I bought a twenty-two-foot boat, and I invented the set line.

NS: Oh really?

FC: Venezuela.

NS: They did not know set lining before?

FC: The first day I went out, I came in with three thousand pounds of redfish –grouper.

NS: These set lines. How long were they?

FC: I met one that was about three hundred hooks.

NS: Wow. [laughter]

FC: It covered about –

NS: About ten miles?

FC: No. Less than a mile.

NS: Less than a mile.

FC: Less than a mile.

NS: Was that something that your father had taught you? Set lining? What other kinds of fishing did he teach you?

FC: All kinds. Anything that swim, we had the gear for.

NS: Like gill nets and –

FC: Everything.

NS: – the seine lines.

FC: Purse seines.

NS: Purse seines.

FC: Dragger. Even we used to purse seines a dolphin offshore during the summertime. You know the dolphin – not a dolphin.

NS: Yes. I know the kind you are talking about. Yes.

FC: We used to purse seine those. We used to put our buoys offshore, nine hundred feet of water.

NS: You were making nets for all these different kinds?

FC: Yes. My father used to make the purse seines, covers about a quarter of a mile of nets.

NS: Yes. Is that the kind that they wrap around the poles?

FC: No poles.

NS: No.

FC: No.

NS: The pound nets. That's what I am thinking of.

FC: No.

NS: Okay.

FC: It's like, do you ever see on television when they purse seine the tuna? They [inaudible] big nets, like that.

M: They have a little boat.

FC: Then they close from the bottom with the rings.

NS: Yes.

FC: I had one over here. We used to go for pogies.

M: How'd that work? Work good?

NS: So, you were in Venezuela for how long?

FC: Two and a half years.

NS: Two and a half years. Then where did you go?

FC: Then I got tired with people or whatever because as soon as they make a few dollars, I can't find no crew. So, I left everything, and I got a job on a ship.

NS: Whose ship?

FC: It was a Venezuelan ship.

NS: Was this a cruise ship? What kind of ship was it?

FC: It was a commercial marine ship. The first trip that I made to the United States, I dropped the ship.

NS: [laughter] How come?

FC: Because I wanted to stay in this country.

NS: So, when did you come to the United States?

FC: 1949. May 5th, 1949.

NS: You came from that ship?

FC: As I said, [inaudible]. [laughter] With all the information, you can make a book out of it. How much you want is there? I give you all my secret in two seconds. [laughter] Then I met a beautiful lady.

NS: Yes. She your wife now?

FC: I got married.

NS: Where did you come to first?

FC: New York.

NS: New York?

FC: With dock P31, alongside the Fulton Fish Market.

NS: Did you sign up with a boat? When you got to New York, who did you go to work for?

FC: I went to see my uncle.

NS: You had an uncle here?

FC: Yes. I had five uncles.

NS: In New York?

FC: No. Five in Kansas City. One over here was my mother's brother. The one in Kansas City was owner of nightclub with people. They had all nightclubs. So, they want me over there to open up a restaurant, and I don't want to go. Says I want to go fishing. So, I stayed here.

NS: So, you had an uncle who was a fisherman here?

FC: Yes.

NS: What was his name?

FC: Louie.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/8/2024