

## Interview with Antonio Perreira

**Narrator:** Antonio Perreira

**Interviewer:** Mark Starr

**Location:** New Bedford, MA

**Date of Interview:** September 25, 2010

**Project Name:** The Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project

**Project Description:** This project documents the history and culture of the commercial fishing industry and other port trades. The project was begun in 2004 in conjunction with the Working Waterfront Festival, an annual, educational celebration of commercial fishing culture which takes place in New Bedford, MA. Interviewees have included a wide range of individuals connected to the commercial fishing industry and/or other aspects of the port through work or familial ties. While the majority of interviewees are from the port of New Bedford, the project has also documented numerous individuals from other ports around the country. Folklorist and Festival Director Laura Orleans and Community Scholar and Associate Director Kirsten Bendiksen are project leaders. The original recordings reside at the National Council for the Traditional Arts in Maryland with listening copies housed at the Festival's New Bedford office.

**Principal Investigator:** Laura Bendiksen, Laura Orleans

**Transcriber:** Laura Orleans

### Abstract

On September 25, 2010, Mark Starr interviewed Antonio Perreira for the *Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project*. Antonio Perreira also known as "Tony the Plumber," has worked as a full-time pipe fitter on the waterfront since 1976. Antonio discusses his childhood in Portugal before he immigrated to New Bedford at the age of 13. He chronicles how he started learning plumbing, and eventually started working on fishing vessels. Of working on the waterfront, he says "everybody welcomed me with open arms...They had something to give me other than money. And I had something to give them other than money." He reflects on his work and the various challenges he faced, including the increased amount of damage salt water does to pipes, and the changes he's noticed in the fishing industry since stricter regulations were introduced.

MS: I'm going to just ask you to state your name so that we hear how you say it, not how I say it. But it is Antonio Perreira?

AP: Correct. Antonio Perreira.

MS: Perreira. O.K. Alright so, I'm Mark Starr and we're at the New Bedford Waterfront Fishing Festival in 2010 to interview Mr. Antonio Perreira, also known as "Tony the Plumber." So, I'll start with you, can you please state your name and when and where you were born.

AP: My name is Antonio Perreira. I was born in Portugal. Estado da Estrela. A very high mountain. The highest mountain in Portugal continental. Yes – a winter resort, it's very good. I arrived in this country, 1956. Which to me is yesterday. Got married, and I find myself workin' in the waterfront, doin' what I really like to do, piping. That's what got me into the waterfront. In 19 – I would say, early 70s, no, no, no wait a minute, late 60s, maybe 1964 which is not late, that was my first experience workin' on a fish boat. Because where I was born in Portugal. Yes, we have trout, fresh water fishin', but no salt water. I saw the sea the first time I came to this country. When I first came to this country in Lisbon, which was stunning to me. I was very surprised, how come such a big thing, the ocean. But it's a learning experience, like everything else. I've been here since 1964. '76 was full-time, prior to that was part-time. I commissioned the boat, the first boat that I believe I worked on was the San Pedro, owned by Captain Joao Fregata and Engineer Mr. Jose Neto. They are good people, hard workin' people, like everybody else. Fishin' is very, very hard work. Would I wanna do it? No. I'm enjoying working the shore and that's great. It was a good, good experience. I have worked in many, many boats, quite a few that if you don't mind I could mention because I get it right. Is it ok if I read what I wrote? [3:05]

MS: Yes. Sure.

AP: Yeah, it was early 70s when I started workin' on boats. I think it was the F/V *San Pedro*, like I mentioned before owned by Captain Joao Fregata and Engineer Mr. Neto. Then there was F/V *Leroy*, a wood boat owned by Captain Mr. Antonio "Pintaneiro" Santos and Mr. Manuel "Necas" Cruz. This "Pintaneiro" and "Necas" it's nicknames, it's not their real names. The last name is their real name. That's how they were known, by Necas, by Pintaneiro, which is great. Did a lot of work on this boat which was Mr. Neca's boat, the FV *Genesis* with a wood carpenter from Olyano Algarve, Mr. Joao Grange. I learned a lot with these, with this gentleman. Am I missing number 2? [flipping pages] Would you look in that bag and see if I've got number 2? Oh number 2 there. Thank you. I need some guidance. Thank you. Cannot forget also, that I worked in the F/V *Ocean Spray*, a big steel boat, black boat, ugly thing, but the good people work on board and the Captain was Mr. [inaudible?]. That was his name; he used to travel between New Bedford and Newark, New Jersey to become a fisherman. And then it came 19 – September of 1976, when I returned from Portugal, visiting my home town with my son, and I started workin' full time in the fishin' boats. A nice experience. It was almost like being home when I worked on the F/V *Montego*...because it's named after a river that's birthplace is in my home area. So I was home workin' on the fish boat. There was a big difference of what I did like and still like to do, so maybe a sheep herder

to assist in boats as far as a pipefitter. [6:05] But it's enjoyable, I enjoy it too, learning experience. I'd do it over again if I was 19 years old. I can add on to this it was also a good experience remembering that a boat from Portugal came to Fall River and bought fish off of these boats. That was a good learning experience. Ok, this fishing vessel was owned by – the *Montego* was owned by Captain Mr. Domingos Mano, a good friend, and he named it after Montego, because it also has its – meets its ocean estuary in Figueira da Foz which is where he comes from and the river passes by, Coimbra which is the biggest university in Portugal, one of the oldest universities in Europe where the students are dressed in black. They play the guitars and play love songs to the ladies that sell the fish, which I call [prica nas?]. Him and his wife, Senora Olivia, were so proud of that. It made me feel good. Then continuing with Mr. Mano this was a fish, a wood boat. Then he had another boat built which he named it *Montego the Second*. He was in love with the word Montego as much as I was. I never talked to him about this. This is what I experienced, these feelings, and now I bring them out. He has passed on, him and his wife. This boat had another captain from Figueira da Foz, Mr. Manuel Vinagre, a well-know captain in the waterfront, owned, part owner of a few boats. [9:00] He also used to travel between Gloucester and New Bedford to go fishin' which is very hard, cause I know that feeling, because I worked construction in my early years prior to this and I had to leave the family to go work in New York and Connecticut and it was not a very good experience. But again it's a learning experience. But the Montegos kept going. Mr. Mano wanted the Montego name alive, and he had a scallop, a boat built down south, a steel boat which was named *Montego the Second* and then there's now, the *Elizabeth Nicky* which is a scalloper. *Elizabeth Nicky* owned by Mr. Emilio Ramos' son-in-law, his daughter, Zubi Mano and partners with Senor Zuo Matos the captain. Captain Zua Matos and his wife, Livania Martos worked in a few scallopers. Worked even on the fish vessels they were known as the whiskey fleet.

MS: Why were they known as the whiskey fleet?

AP: Yes, they were known as the whiskey fleet, but they had, they're names after a whiskey name, right now I cannot remember. But they were owned by, as I was told, was it, former senator, Mr. Biff MacClean. I even worked on the marine vessel, Edgartown, which was a city boat, a watch boat. That's what we used to call it, which was managed by Captain Marty Manley. I cannot forget at this point, Mr. Paul Saunders, a good Irish man that helped me a lot in getting customers. He even got me to work on a coast guard boat at Woods Hole. Good man. Also, I have to mention Larry the harbormaster, a man that loved my son, Antonio Perreira Jr., and always willing to help. Did a lot of work also on the old F/V *Maryanne*. I saw it had berthed down in Louisiana and Captain Marty Manley had me fly down so I could help the pipe fitter at the boatyard called Moody's to install the rough piping for the hydraulic and heating systems. Then I would do the finish work here, in New Bedford on Pier 3. I did work on the F/V *Bua Nova* for Captain Antonio Nao Saltal. I also worked on the F/V *Melissa*. I had an incident. At night I broke my head, had about 14 stitches, drove my big truck...put a rag over my head to tie it down and went to St. Lukes. They stitched it up and then I went home. Good experience. My family happened to be in Portugal at that time, I was home all by myself and with a lump. Thank God! And I'm still around after 40 years. I work on the F/V *Atlantic Star* for Mr. Captain Jose Rato. Then the son-in-law Captain Peter and Captain Antonio Oliveira. Worked on the F/V *Brenda Louise* for Captain Harry, good man. F/V *California* for Captain Carl Robs and these good people. Did a lot of work on the F/V *Hope II*

for Captain Joaquim Lorenzo and then for both his sons, Captain Jack and Captain John. The F/V *Cheryl Ann* for Captain Arnold Mello, F/V *Galaxy* for Captain Jose Estrella and the Engineer Olverino. F/V *Jackie and Maria*, Captain Luis Francisco [inaudible] II, like others it was good. Then it was sad when the [inaudible?] came around, people that I worked for and had a good relationship, especially with the engineers and then they were not there anymore. But I thank God that I am able to say that it was, that it has been a learning experience. I would, I would do it again. I had to say, I have to say, fishin' is very hard work. [15:00] It is very hard to be away from the family, because I know, I went through it when I worked construction in New York and Connecticut and had to stay weeks away from home. Did a lot of work on the F/V *Neves* for Mr. Captain Manuel Perreira, Neves, on the F/V *Neves*. Then on the Scalloper *Paul Michelle* [inaudible] for his son Captain Jose Neves. I cannot forget to mention, F/V *Kathleen Mary*, Captain Joao "Fireman" Botelho, a good person and F/V *Private*, Captain Rodney Avila and his two good sons Captain Rodney Jr. and Engineer Mike. F/V *Libby*, Captain Phil Morin and Captain Mike MacDonald always smiling and joking. F/V *Venture I*, Captain Hermando Estrella always in good disposition and with a smile on his face. Some have gone past, some have gone to Portugal, some have gone to other lives, but I still enjoy knowing them. I have a good time talking, and being here and enjoying mentioning these names, because they did contribute to the waterfront, through hard work, to the waterfront of New Bedford. Thank you.

MS: Now if we could uh back up and start back in Portugal and what year were you born?

AP: In Portugal? What year I was born? I was born May 22, 1942, wartime.

MS: Did your family, what did your father and family do for a living?

AP: Well, my father, I don't mind to say this, I was born out of wedlock. My father was a well businessman in the time of what they call the black gold in my area. There was some kind of mineral that they would collect from the mountains and would be good for ammunition. My father was with the, working for the allies and his brother, Jose, he was workin' for the Nazi's [laughs] It was I find this out later in my years in life. That's how I find my family, was after I knew – like ten years ago I found out I had brothers and sisters and it was a great experience. [18:00] So, but my family were mostly on my grandmother's side, were farmers and shepherders, like something that I still have in my blood, that I would still like to do. I did it with my grandson, a little bit. We did it with my grandson, he's here, as a witness. We went over there to herd goats up to the mountains with the shepherd and drink water in the fountain, running water, beautiful river. It was a great experience having him back way high. As a child of his age, went with my grandmother work in the mountains in the farm valleys, and the land was beautiful. So that's what I did in Portugal until I came to this country at the age of 14 or 13 years old.

MS: And did you come here alone? Or did your mother come?

AP: My mother came first, about a year and a half before me and then she sent for me, sent the ticket money and my mother, again, I have to say my mother, but it's my grandmother, she's the one that raised me. She put me in a plane in Lisbon to go to America. It's great experience. It was good. I'm living those moments every day in my life. It was a beautiful

experience, yes.

MS: Did you come to New Bedford? Or where did you...?

AP: Right to New Bedford. North End, where I presently live, always lived in the North End of New Bedford.

MS: Then did you go to school in New Bedford?

AP: I went to school, because I was only 13. I could not go to work. I worked in farming. I worked in the chicken store as a chicken plucker. And I went to school. When it came summer it was very hot, playing soccer down on McCauley Field was really tough because when we had, when there was a fish shop or whatever you call it, fabrica d'pesca, that's what we used to call them, it was a processing facility and it would...and then when we'd get low tide it would really stink. Finally one day I went home and told my mother, I wanna go back home. The water, the tap water, the water you drink from the fountain is not bad, it's not good like what I was brought up with, running water 24 hours a day, not in the house, but in the main square, one little corner of the country, the town or up the mountain there's runnin' water and you drink water and it's almost like havin' a meal. [21:00]

Then of course you go, it stinks because low tide and up on Coggeshall Street and very hot, very humid and I want to go back home. Ma said no, no, we're gonna stay here, because you gotta go to school, learn the language, cause I did not understand the language. That was my first big surprise. So I wanted to go back. But ma said, "No, you go to school, you're goin' to learn the language. The water will be alright, you'll live through it. You've got plenty of milk to drink." Which was great. And plenty food, which I did not have back where I came from. So I was, I had to give in, not to give in, I had to obey orders from ma. You go to school, learn the language, then 16 years old you go work in the mill. I worked in a sweatshop and this developed into a good relationship with America which I love today very, very much.

MS: So what type of mill was it, what were you making at the mill?

AP: Well they make shirts, the mill was, the factory was called Massachusetts Shirt, Mass Shirt.

MS: Was that in New Bedford?

AP: In New Bedford, yeah, up in the North End again. Yes, I was a pinner. I started to learn how to be a cutter, because I always wanted to learn something different every day if possible.

MS: And when did you start getting into plumbing?

AP: Well as I worked construction, out of town, out of state as far as Long Island, I decided it was no such thing for me to do for the rest of my life. I moved and worked back here in New Bedford, working at UMASS it's called now, UMASS. I always kept my eye on the carpenters or on the plumber as labor I was and a few times I got caught by the foreman who said, "Look you come here to work with a shovel and with a hammer, not to learn plumbing or carpentry."

I said well, okay, so I just kept quiet and go on. Finally one day in the year, the plumbers are doin' this and I watch them pouring the lead and I thought boy that's great, something I'd like to do. And the boss of the masons told me, "Tony, why don't you go into plumbin'?" That was the kick in the butt to go. I went and ask. At this point I had bought a house, I needed some plumbin' done, Mr. Bill Alphonse, William, William Alphonse from Fairhaven came to my house, did the job. I went to his house, paid the bill, and I asked him if he would give me a chance. He took me in. It was hard. I was a greenhorn at it. They laughed at me. But they were happy that I was there. It came to the point that he said, "Tony, you do have a very hard time understanding what plumbin' is, but I like you as a brother and I'm gonna make a plumber out of you. I'm gonna make a pipe fitter out of you, and you're gonna be ok." That went on for ten years, ended up in a good relationship. I miss him. He's passed on. There is still a good relationship, friendship with the family. He did something for me that I asked when he went into Portugal with his family, with his brother and the family, to go visit my grandmother. They took a picture which I still have today in my heart and I can see it every day if I want to. Mr. William Alphonse is my master plumber. My grandmother and my cousin and all they is Portugal which is very rewarding to me. That's how I went and learned and then in 1976 and I went on [phone rings]

MS: Sorry!

AP: That's ok, it's ok.

MS: So in 1976, you...

AP: When I visited Portugal with my son, Antonio Perreira Jr., I decided to come and work in the waterfront. I have to say about mister, the captain, Mr. Manuel Cruz "Necas" he was the pusher. He said "Tony, you come here, we need you here." You can work here night and day. Me, I wanna work too, raisin' the family, needed to work and he was the big pusher of me to come work in the waterfront, Mr Manuel "Necas" Cruz. Then everybody welcomed me with open arms and because I was there not only to make money, because I spoke the language and some boat people, which I love to be with, they not only ask to pay me, but I was there, when they had problems, I had the experience and that's what they wanted. They had something to give me other than money. And I had something to give them other than money. It was not just money. And whether it's now, then or future. [27:00]

MS: Now how was the plumbing, or what type of plumbing were you doing on the vessels?

AP: Well most of it was piping. Most of it was piping. Hydraulics, water to pump the boat, piping on pumps to pump the boat in case of emergencies, to wash the fish, to pump out the bilge and of course then there was bathrooms that had to be done and I did have the experience and I did it. We did carpentry also, again with Mr. Granger. Then we worked, sometimes we worked until midnight. One night, we were through at, we got the boat ready so to go out next morning, 9:00. So it was 3:00 in the morning and Mr. Granger is makin' eggs and bacon on the boat, and we had supper and breakfast and ok in the boat. 9:00, was ready for the Captain. This happened on the *Jackie and Maria*. And Mr. Luis Franciso thanked us very much because the boat was ready for the crew, him and his crew to go fishin'. They appreciated that the boats were done; the job was done for the boat to go out on its day.

MS: Where did you get your hydraulic training?

AP: Well, I, again I had very good teachers. The people that operated Scandia Hydraulics. I had the people, Mitchell, the father which right now, I'm so nervous I can hardly think of his...

MS: Bob?

AP: Not Bob, the father.

MS: Oh

AP: No, I go back a few years. He came to me, explained it to me. I had a lot of experience on piping heating systems, that's what they – the main thing was the heating system because the winter was fairly – it is very tough. I knew how to do them, and I did practically did all the Portuguese fishin' vessels. I just didn't stick to the Portuguese fishin'...I did *Omega I* and *Omega II* and *Omega III* and those people. I did a lot of hydraulic systems. I did a lot of hydraulic systems for piping, not the valves, not the pumps and all that – I didn't do. But somebody that knew more about it, they would install the pumps and I would put the feed and the return and the relief and all that. Yeah. But Mr. Bob Mitchell's father, which now I can not remember his first name, he came over to me, he taught me how to do the lobster tanks. [30:00] Because they would need the fresh water circulating all the time. He came to me. It was very, very good. Told me this way you do it, this way. And success on that. I look back and see something that's what they wanted, what they needed, that was my biggest reward. Somebody was happy with what I did.

MS: Does a salt water environment pose different challenges than a house?

AP: Oh yes, yes, yes! Salt water is very rich. It gives us lot of protein from the fish and all that, but it can, it's very destructive also. A lot of wear and tear, especially, I found out there's more wear and tear on steel boats, salt water will chew away steel much easier than wood. But of course wood has other problems.

MS: And do you have much vibration problems on boats with plumbing?

AP: Yes, yeah. [End of tape]

AP: But there is connections appropriated for that.

MS: So you try and insulate the...from the vibrations?

AP: Correct. Yes, yes. Especially on exhausts, like engine exhausts. You need to have some connections for vibration that will absorb the vibration.

MS: How much, uh, [distracted by something] I'm sorry, a vessel coming back typically, are they requiring a lot of plumbing work after every trip or is it – how far spaced out would it be?

AP: Well, not as much as repairs. There's always gonna be repairs. There was and always will be. But there was, what I really enjoy is that they go out there and they come back and say "Tony, if we piped this this way, it would be better for us out there." Certainly. Because you tell me what you want, and I'll do it. I don't guarantee it's gonna work for you. Cause I don't go out there and experience it. But you tell me it works, it works. You tell me we need to improvise it, we'll improvise it. Then maybe I can give you an idea after that, how much better it can be. Yes I had, the sense I have I still have them today that we did something, it worked 60% and after I questioned on the return trip. This is, I'm talking about experience that I happened in the last three weeks on the F/V *Sea Siren*. We did something, I cautioned him about it, this might, we're maybe going to find it's going to, you're going to miss water there, but there's ways to do it, but when you go there and come back you tell me. They were good enough to tell me that they had to do something else so they can have the same water, but now there's a plan [what I did to improvise what I did?] so it'll serve both demands. That's on the F/V *Sea Siren* which is owned by Mr. Captain Manuel Vinagre and it's captain now is Mr. Jose and right now I can't remember his last name, but it's ok.

MS: What year did you get married?

AP: I got married in 1963.

MS: How did you meet your wife?

AP: Here, right across the street from me.

MS: And you have at least one son or more? [3:00]

AP: Well I have a son and a daughter and I have three lovely granddaughters, they all returned, they all come back, they all went to Portugal more than once. I have my son, I already have my grandson here alongside of me, Alex.

MS: Now did your sons go into the trade?

AP: Well he was in trade. He went to Voke. He worked with me for a few years and then he found out that he had to do something else and that's ok. He went into something else. Yes, yes, yes.

MS: What's he doing?

AP: Well he's, right now he's working for Lowes. Yes, he's a very smart man, he's a very smart man, he could do things that I was not able to mentally do, but he would come up, he would surprise me sometimes. "Daddy, if you do it this way, I think you're gonna eliminate some problems." God Bless you. We did, and those things still exist today.

MS: How about your daughters? What are they doing?

AP: Well, my daughter, she works at Stop and Shop now. She's a clerk. Yeah.



MS: So are they all in the same area?

AP: Yes. They all live, well my son lives up in Middleboro, Mass. My daughter lives here in New Bedford, yes, yes sir.

MS: Do you do any plumbing outside of vessels now? Any homes?

AP: No, I used to do some heating, some heating. I worked at some point, I worked with a gentleman, another master plumber, Mr. Charles Stenway. But that was limited. But my main thing was the waterfront.

MS: Has it changed quite a bit in terms of the amount of work in the vessels from the earlier...?

AP: Well, yes it has, it has, it has. Number one, because the fleet is smaller. It has grown in the point that, some people are taking care of their own. Some people are taking care of their own. I still have the *Elizabeth Nicky*, the *Sea Siren*, and other. But very limited, very limited. Because the wear and tear is not there because the fish vessel is not out at sea as, like it was before. It would make two trips a month, lucky if they make two every two months.

MS: Is that...? [6:00]

AP: Rules and regulations and all that. That I don't understand too much.

MS: Are these both the groundfish and the scallopers?

AP: Yeah, groundfish. Well the scallopers are still pretty active from what I know. The draggers are much, much less. It's much slower.

MS: Now when you say they're doing their own, do you mean, is it partially the economy that's making sound groundfishermen do their own plumbing work or...?

AP: Well now they have more time. That's number one. Because they used to come in, they used to stay 3, 4 days the most, and they would wanna go out. If there was better weather coming, they'd come in and go out same day. It has happened, I've seen it. All these years, I've seen it happen. Ok. It was against some rules or regulations, but they did it because then they would have to come 3 or 4 days and stay home for a week because of bad weather they couldn't go out so they would balance it out.

MS: Have the materials that you're using changed much since you started?

AP: Yes, yes. The materials have. As a matter of fact, there's a lot of plastic now, which I don't agree too much with because I have a feeling that with a rotten piece of pipe, you can still weld, but PVC you can't weld, once it breaks, it's...But this way, this, today I think most owners, the younger generation owners, they can take care of themselves because they already go prepared in case of an emergency. Years before, because the fishing was so hard...today we got all these mechanical things to eliminate manually. They catchin', I'm not gonna say they

catchin' the same amount of fish, and I think what's happened is they are catchin' less fish, but because the prices are a little higher, the amount of dollars in it, like the article in the Standard Times a few weeks back, we're still #1 port so, I think the dollar sign is still there. It's still there. The amount of fish is not. That's due to the rules and regulations. I believe so. From what I understand. From what I read in the Standard Times that's what I believe.

MS: And would you say that it's been a pretty good life doing the plumbing on the waterfront, is that...?

AP: Oh yes. Like I said before, if I was 19, I'd do it again. I hope, I'm 68 that's ok, I hope that when I'm doing the last piping system, that's when I pass on. That's good, because I'll pass on workin'! [9:06]

MS: Ok. One, maybe one last question, is there anything else that you'd like to say that I haven't covered or talked about?

AP: Well there's not too much left, like I say it has been a good experience. I am glad that in these last ten years, there's more people that have to do with the journalism and report and the political. I praise Mr. Barney Frank, in the sense that fishing is a very hard, very hard work. I wouldn't wanna do it. I did mention a captain's name, Mr. Antonio Pintineiro Santos. We talk very much, a good, good friend of mine, the whole family. One time we did have a very serious conversation. Fishermen should be allowed to retire after so many years of fishing, not an age, because it takes a lot out of you, fishing. Working on land is one thing, the danger's still there. The danger point is still there because things can happen. A lot of people die digging; a lot of explosions had nothing to do with the ocean. Fishing is very courageous because even though we have a lot of science today, they can tell you that the winds are gonna be 30 knots and all of a sudden it can turn to 60 knots because nature is still greater than man, smarter. So it's very courageous for a man to decide to go make a life out of fishing. Because it's very much involved your body position, because of the way the boats wave and all that. It takes a lot physically and mentally power to control. So your body can only rest so long and once you exhaust it then there's things you can never put back. So I believe very much on Mr. Santos' theory that after so many years, they should be allowed to retire and collect social security and this goes back 30 years or more we talked about it, because he had experience and he explained to me and I had talked with other people about it because I'm interested too and being involved and he was right when he mentioned that to me, as far as I'm concerned. [12:00]

MS: Great. Well thank you very much.

AP: You're very welcome.

MS: We appreciate it.

AP: I appreciate –

-----End of Interview-----  
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 11/6/2024