



# NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: 4/13/2024

Name of Narrator: LaVerne Gomes

Name of Interviewer: Colleen Pina-Garron

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Gomes, LaVerne. Interview by Colleen Pina-Garron. *Casting a Wider Net*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. 4/13/2024:

This oral history was produced in 2024 as part of the *Casting a Wider Net Oral History Project* conducted by New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center.

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**Background Information:**

- **Name of person interviewed:** LaVerne Gomes (LG)
- **Age:** 70
- **Gender:** Female
- **Occupation:** Former cold fish handler
- **Ethnicity:** Cape Verdean

**Interviewer:** Colleen Pina-Garron (CPG)

**Translator:** N/A

**Observer(s):** N/A

**Transcriber:** Ellen Huggins

**Interview location:** 11 Maplevue Terrace, New Bedford, MA

**Date of interview:** April 13, 2024

**Language(s) the interview was conducted in:** English

**Key Words:** Cape Verdean, Wareham, Cape Cod, fibromyalgia, Frionor, fish, North End, Bay Village, Portuguese, union, fish sticks, filets, conveyer, fish house, cold fish, wet fish, arthritis, God, illness, injuries, McDonald's, home ownership, mortgage, ammonia.

**Abstract:** In this interview, LaVerne Gomes begins by speaking about growing up in Wareham, MA, before moving to New Bedford where she was raised by a single mother in a large Cape Verdean family. After dropping out of school at the age of 16, she pursued work in the Frionor Kitchen in New Bedford, where she worked in the cold fish house for 27 years, preparing frozen fish as it came off the conveyor belt. LaVerne speaks about the unionization that she helped to organize while at Frionor, the friendships that she made with her fellow co-workers, and how she reconnected with her Christian faith while on the job. She describes the long lasting effects of fibromyalgia that she sustained after 27 years at Frionor, as well as the arthritis that has afflicted many of her female friends and relatives who have also worked in the fishing industry. She concludes the interview by speaking about her goal of paying off the mortgage on her home, in order to pass ownership of the house to her daughter and granddaughter in the future.

## **Index**

[0:00-5:00] LaVerne describes her childhood growing up on the Cape in Wareham, Massachusetts, before moving to New Bedford. Her grandmother grew fruit on a four and a half acre farm, where LaVerne and her two siblings would sell strawberries on the road. Her mother raised her and her siblings alone, as her father was a professional boxer in Boston. After leaving school at 16 years old, she worked in babysitting before starting at Frionor Kitchen when she was 18, in 1972.

[5:00-10:00] LaVerne describes her morning routine while working at the Frionor, packing various forms of frozen fish off the conveyor belt. She speaks about the cold conditions of her job, and the many layers she needed to stay warm while she worked. LaVerne speaks about the differences in conditions between the cold fish house that she worked in, versus the more cutting and preparing of 'wet fish' that her mother's generation of Cape Verdean women had done. She then recounts some of the friends she made at Frionor, and how arthritis and fibromyalgia has afflicted them all since working there.

[10:00-15:00] LaVerne goes more in depth on her fibromyalgia, which she believes developed while she was working in the cold fish house, and how the severity of the disease led to her retirement after 27 years at Frionor. LaVerne then remembers helping to organize for the unionization of her workplace at Frionor, and she mentions how working conditions began to improve after a strike. She also speaks about how finding Christian faith allowed her to connect with Portuguese women working at the fish house, and that she continues to be inspired by their hard work and resilience.

[15:00-20:00] LaVerne elaborates on how she discovered her Christian faith in the workplace, including a particular story of seeing scripture while she was with her friend Joyce. She then describes the lingering workplace injuries that Joyce still has from her time in the fish house. LaVerne speaks about how the effects of arthritis are shared amongst the women in her family who worked in the fishing industry, because of the difficulty of their jobs and how hard they worked.

[20:00-23:39] LaVerne speaks more about the unsafe conditions of the fish house, including the spreading of ammonia due to malfunctioning machines, which many of the women working there would inhale because of their determination to keep working. She concludes the interview by speaking about her goal of paying off the mortgage to her house before she passes, so that the house can be passed down to her daughter and grandchildren and they can make it to the milestones that she wasn't able to, such as graduating from high school.

Transcription:

**[0:00]** Colleen Pina-Garron: My name is Colleen Pina-Garron. The date is 4-13-2024, sometime after 11 a.m. We are at the interviewer's home at 11 Maplevue Terrace, New Bedford. Today, I will be conducting an oral history for the Casting a Wider Net project, a community oral history in conjunction with the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. My narrator today is LaVerne Gomes, and she will be sharing the stories of her work on the waterfront as a fish house worker. Okay? This audio recording, LaVerne, and the transcript, will become a part of the Center's archive and it may be used in the future to develop future programs—they may call you back—[and] publications and exhibits. For the record, do you give us permission to record you for this interview?

LaVerne Gomes: Yes.

CPG: Alright.

Unclear: She owns the copyright?

CPG: You do own the copyright for this. Okay?

LG: Mm-hmm. Okay.

CPG: Okay, let's start. This is an easy one. Tell me about yourself and your family, like, what was your childhood like, where you were born, where you were brought up, that kind of thing.

LG: I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, of course, and I lived in Wareham. We lived there for a while until my mother could get a job in New Bedford and, um, bring us back here so we could live out here. That's where we lived, we were always on the Cape. So, many, many years out there. I went to school out there, worked on a farm. My grandmother had, like, four and a half acres of land and there was everything on there. I mean, from strawberries, raspberries, whatever—watermelon, potatoes, chickens, the whole nine yards (laughs). So, we all worked on selling the strawberries way down the road.

CPG: And then you—?

LG: And then—and we used to be there—we were there for a long time, the family used to come there every Sunday to meet and have dinner. Then they would go back, and we would chase the car all the way to the road, with the dust hitting us in the face, saying, 'Bye, bye, bye,' right? 'So long.' That's the word we would use, 'So long,' we don't use goodbye. And then we finally got to New Bedford, my mother raised us by herself, um, with my brother, my sister, and me. (Pause). She raised us by herself. My father was a professional boxer, and so, she worked very hard, she kept the family together, and it was like a family where we lived in the Bay Village. We used to—it was like, every time you meet with different people, and family, her doors were in and out. She accepted all these people that were out there, didn't eat, didn't— I'm going to have to tell this story

(laughs). There's enough food for everybody,' you know? So, that's how our house was, the door was always in and out with different people, we knew a lot of people because the family was big. Um, so, that's where I started. Okay, so as I'm growing up, getting older, because I was—I had some problems in my life too, I totally stopped learning, like—I don't even know how it started, but I know I quit school at sixteen. I had a lot of problems and then I started babysitting because I used to want to— because, 'I came from the Cape, I'm going to work!' Saved all my money up, every time I babysat, saved all my money up. I went to the Cape at that time, say, Hyannis [or] Onset [beach in Wareham, MA]. I heard about the fishing place, the Frionor Kitchen, near the water. And I said, 'I want to go there,' right? But I hadn't got a job yet, but I wanted to go there. So I went, and I got hired. Was I eighteen? I don't know, I started in 1972. Frionor was the place that, um, if you could make it and you were strong enough, you would make it there.

**[5:00]** Because I couldn't—I was like, 'Un-uh.' I just couldn't.

CPG: Why?

LG: It was six Cape Verdeans in there, in the daytime, and all the rest was Portuguese [people]. I went there to work for my daughter, to keep her food in the house, my car running, pay the bills—and that's how I always was, pay the bills no matter what. And as you can see on my check, I think I took out 165 dollars a week.

CPG: Why don't you—take me through a day. Like, what time did you get up in the morning to have to get to this job, what did you have to do to get prepared?

LG: Okay, so. I had to be there at 6 o'clock in the morning so I was up at, gee, 5:30 to get Jala dressed up to go to the babysitting and everything, so that was a lot for me. I go to work at six, I punch in at six, I already was dressed at home anyway, I had my long johns, like I said, those hot stockings, boots, um, a nice warm top, with a hoodie zippered up, hood over the head. And ski pants! I bought my own stuff, I bought my own ski pants, the whole nine yards (laughs).

CPG: I'm sure it was cold—

LG: It was freezing! Because the cold would come from the bottom of the conveyer, you know?

CPG: And what were you packing at the time? Fish sticks?

LG: Fish sticks, the filets, the, um, all those— but those were already frozen, but it was cold and you had to pack them like that. You had to get them and throw them in there, and then the bad ones, they would pick out at the end of the conveyor. Then the lady would send the boxes through. So, and—oh, and we started getting smarter, we started putting liners in our gloves, so we could—we had rubber gloves on. The rubber gloves was cold.

CPG: They get cold, yeah.

LG: So, we had to put the liners in, and where the—the liners so we could pack the fish, and it would be eight hours, you know what I mean? And we only got so many breaks, you know? So, um—what was I going to say?

CPG: What were your—did you have any friends at the fish house? Did you, like, have a group of people that you hung with? I know you gave me a picture with your aunts and cousins and stuff, and that kind of camaraderie. Um, and you also had people in your family that were in the same industry.

LG: Right. Before me. And they did the wet fish.

CPG: Explain that please, because I don't think a lot of people know what that process is.

LG: The wet fish—because I worked there one day.

CPG: Yeah. Couldn't do it?

LG: It was really bad. It was—I mean, I don't know how anybody—gee, I don't know how she made it. Her hands were swollen, swollen, used to come home—arthritis, we have arthritis too, but they got it really, really. That was, um—you would walk, and the floors was wet, the floors was wet. They did have drains, but that was—still, it was wet. They would have to wear warm clothes, they would have to wear the aprons, right, around them to keep them—and it was nothing but wet fish. When I say wet fish, [I mean] fish that you take out of the water, you cut it up, and you clean it. Yeah, it was bad. And then the first day I went there, the speed I went, 'Uh-uh, I'm scared of this, I'm out of here.' (Everyone laughs). I was out of there.

CPG: So, you were saying it wasn't, like, your generation that worked in the fish house that did that wet fish work, it was older Cape Verdean women that did it?

LG: Older, yes. My mother and all of them.

CPG: Your mother?

LG: My mother never worked there though, my mother worked in a nursing home.

CPG: Okay.

LG: She was good with that, with people and stuff, so.

CPG: But you had your own group of friends where you worked?

LG: Okay, so it was Joyce, it was Molly, her daughter Robin, um—I forgot her name. Pinto.

CPG: Cynthia—

LG: Cynthia Pinto. Uh, and I'm forgetting—oh, Joyce—no, Marie, um, Marie de Cruz. Mary de Cruz. She died.

CPG: And you guys kind of hung out with each other.

LG: Yeah, not—yeah, I hung out mostly with Joyce, yeah.

CPG: Joyce was your buddy.

LG: 'I could trust Joyce,' yeah, at that time. You know what I mean? So, all those girls got out, and they're all sick, they all have something. I have the fibromyalgia, they have, um, arthritis, their hands are all crooked and everything. It's like, really, it was bad.

CPG: Do you think that's all a result of working with the fish?

LG: Yep, I believe, even though a lot of people have fibromyalgia, I believe that I got that from there, I don't why.

**[10:00]** What happened was, one day I was home, [it was] the weekend. And all of the sudden I couldn't move, I started screaming. The pain was so bad, and they called the ambulance, they came after me and they're putting the straps on and I'm screaming like, 'Ow, that hurts!' And I was just a mess. So, from that day on, I could not go back to work. I was out.

CPG: Mm-hmm. How long did you work at the fish house for?

LG: 27 years.

CPG: And you were eighteen when you started?

LG: When I started, I believe. If you look at the severance—

CPG: And you only left because, you—?

LG: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Just because I wouldn't—I probably would have still stood there, because I had to live! I had no education and there was nothing that was going to work for me, you know what I mean? Um, but I did everything that I had to do, that my mother taught me in life, to make it through the next day, you know what I mean? And yeah, that's—I'm thinking to think—

CPG: Did you have any benefits after the strike, did you get better benefits?

LG: That's where I was going. Because I go all over the place, if you notice, right?

CPG: That's okay.

LG: Okay, yeah, they're going to— what happened was, when the union came in, we were the ones that were the—because we came from the old place, remember how I told you, that they started in the old place, the first place? And then when they started there, they moved us to the new building, because the new building was bigger and it was better, you know, the way the fish rotated inside the conveyer and everything, so that's— they moved us over, so we were the old girls. We were the ones who brought in the union. So, when that came, it was like God heard our prayer. Because we were like, 'We can go in any line we want, we can pick and choose now. We don't have to go there because they tell us, you understand? We know every day we're coming, where we're going, and we were going to be at that. Yeah. (Laughs).

CPG: So, it got better? It got better.

LG: Oh yeah, it got better when the union came in.

CPG: And how many years do you think that the union was there before you left?

LG: Oh, my goodness, I don't even know.

CPG: Was it a long time?

LG: I can't even remember.

CPG: Because—was the union ever busted there? That you know of?

LG: Did they what?

CPG: Did they bust the union; did they get rid of the union after?

LG: When we left, they got rid of the union. They made sure—because yeah, those people would pack fish standing on their head if they had to. They didn't care, they had to—that's what they did, they came to this country, okay? They lived with each other—

CPG: You're talking about the Portuguese women that you eventually developed a relationship with.

LG: Yes, a lot of them—oh, I didn't tell you that part about—I got to tell you when I was leaving the door that's there. They used to tell me their stories because I wanted to hear their stories when I became really chummy with them, because they saw something different in me when I got to know the Lord. And they told me they saw me in the back, and they said, 'How come you changed, you changed what's the matter, what's the matter?' And I was like, 'Yeah,' I said, 'I have Christ in my life, now I don't have to worry about youse guys no more!' (Everyone laughs). Right?

CPG: And your friendship got better?



LG: Exactly. And now, I see them in the street, when I tell you, it's like, 'Hey, what'd you do, you look younger!' And I look at them and I go, 'Oh my God, look at them.' The age on them, that it's—you know what I mean? Because they're hard-working people, though, they're hard-working people. So, they used to tell me this story that they used to come out here, get one house, live in it. Because they don't turn their back on their people, listen to this. They worked hard, all of them. They ate fish, every time I talked to them, they were eating fish every day. That's how they lived. They would do this so they could get what they want to get in America, to go where they have to go. They were—once their house was out, they paid the mortgage—once their house was all paid, they would leave their house, they would go, the rest of them—one would stay there, that probably did more, they would go to the next house, and too—they all had their own home. Let me tell you, they all did it. Okay? And they all ate fish still, and they loved it, and nothing—they didn't complain about it though! You know what I mean? That's how they lived, so.

CPG: So would you say that your experience as a fish industry worker gave you insight into what you were going to do with the rest of your life, like, I know that you've done so much in your life since then.

LG: Mm-hmm.

CPG: And, uh, do you think that that experience, watching these hard-working women and having to work as hard as you did, had anything to do with influencing your life going forward?

LG: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Because I'd seen how they're living and I was like, 'What?'

**[15:00]** But like I said, I was leaving the building one day, and I was changing my clothes and putting my boots and tying everything up, my shoes. And I saw a scripture that was on—because already I was coming to know the Lord, you know, that time being serious about it, anyway. Because I couldn't stand what was going on, I don't know if I—I did tell you. That I was so mad, we used to have—let me get to this part, because I'm going to get back to this one again at the end of it, but we used to be called to the office all of the time. The Cape Verdean girls, because we took our days off. They called us 'calendar girls,' because there was three days—two days out [of] the month we could stay out. (Everyone laughs). But if we took a third day, you were in for it, you were done. So, no matter what happened, I tried to be very careful. So, one day, we took—Joyce took her days, and I said, 'Did you take your days?' We're talking in the morning, 'Did you take your days?' 'Yep.' So, I had a car, but my car was a little buggy, like, and it wouldn't go in the snow. There was a big, big storm, right? So, we couldn't take the, um, car, we couldn't take the cab, because the cab was—they were stuck, our cab was stuck. So, me and Joyce said, 'Yeah, we can't stay home, we got to go,' so I said, 'Okay!' And she lived in the [Bay] Village too, so, we start on, head to the job off of Route 18, right? And we're walking—oh, see I'm trying to show you now. We're walking, we had our hood on and everything, we're walking backwards all the way through the whole time, we were laughing so bad, but we were sad at the same time that they would have work. I said, 'I can't believe this,' right? So, we walked all the way, we were freezing, we got into the

plant, we said, 'Where's the people?' They said, 'Nobody's here!' (Everyone laughs). 'Nobody came, it's a storm!' They said, 'Now youse gotta work!' We had to work that day, isn't that awful? They put us to work. So, I'm telling Joyce it's a piece of work, but anyway, so I was getting back to the place where I saw that scripture. It was a scripture that took me through my life, and that's what made me—

CPG: And this was at your job, that you found this scripture?

LG: Yep. On the—right on the seat. And when I'm tying my shoe— and Joyce must have thought I was crazy, but I didn't care, because I knew God, I knew the Lord anyway. Jesus Christ, let me put it that way. And I said to Joyce, 'Joyce, you ain't gonna believe this! This was for me; this was for me! I needed to find this; I'm telling you!' She said, 'What, LaVerne?' And I said, 'For God does not give us the spirit of fear— Second Timothy, 1, 7— for God does not give us the spirit of fear, but of love, and of power, and of a sound mind.' She said, 'Oh, okay.' I said, 'Joyce, I'm telling you, listen!' But she was okay for her, but for me, it was real. Okay? I went home— every single day, my witness— every single day, I got that scripture, I ate it, drank it, lived it, did everything I had to do to make it to the next day, because—I didn't tell you this part here—because of what had happened to me in my lifetime, when I was younger.

CPG: Now, Joyce is your friend from the fish house and she has, um, lingering illness and stuff, from the fish house?

LG: Yup. Exactly, yeah.

CPG: And she did the same kind of work—

LG: Same kind of work. Yeah.

CPG: And can you share, did she have arthritis in her hands and those kind of—?

LG: Yep, she has arthritis, she has something wrong with her jaw that she had to have fixed, I think, I don't know what—

CPG: And you think a lot of these injuries are from the fish house?

LG: Yeah, I don't know if that jaw was from the fish house, but I know her body and everything like that—and Joyce, I'm telling you, she never recovered from a lot of stuff, you know, and then her son died and it was a lot, a lot of stuff.

CPG: How about your family members, that you remember, the older women who worked in the fish house. Did they have injuries, did they have long lasting arthritis, or anything like that?

LG: I—they have arthritis, I can tell you that.

CPG: Yeah.

LG: Cause they worked hard, they were hard workers and stuff. Um, I don't know all of their stories, if they— I know they all ended up with arthritis. But they didn't work long enough at that job.

CPG: And Frionor was the only fish house that you worked at, right?

LG: The only one, yep.

CPG: Did you make the patties for McDonald's?

LG: Yes, we did. That's the one.

CPG: Okay, and did you do different jobs, you and Joyce? Did you do different jobs, or was that just the one job that you did the whole time you were there?

LG: I packed the whole time I was there. Um, and I never put labels on, cause they put labels on the package.

CPG: Oh, okay.

LG: And then it wraps up, and goes out. But no, we both did the same thing. 27 years—listen, our arms are bothering us now, like, the elbows

**[20:00]** and like I said, with the arthritis you can see, and every now and then I'll go, 'What the (unclear).' It's really—yeah, it's really cold, cold, cold, and it wasn't a good place to work at. And it was almost like there were slaves, because you had to do exactly—and then like I said, when the union came in, it was different, it was a whole different ball game. But we still suffered a lot and also, um, when the machine would act up, nothing but ammonia would come through the whole building. And guess who stood there? Not me, I'm going home! I went home, every time that happened. I suffer one day, and that could affect me now. One time I stood, because it was almost at the end of the day, and we got out at two o'clock, so, yeah, I stood. And that was bad, those ladies inhaled all that. They stood there through all that, that was bad. I mean, strong.

CPG: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you want to add to this? Any questions that you think are important to the story that I haven't asked? Because you have reinvented yourself a couple of times. But just talking and listening to you, it seems the foundation of that, besides your parents and your grandparents and everybody else, was working that really hard job.

LG: Mm-hmm.

CPG: To pay the bills. And I've always admired you, and I know where you came from, because I came from the same place. But it—I'm so proud of you.

LG: Thank you. And I'm proud of you, you know that, right? (Everyone laughs). Always.

So now my mission is for me to pay off my mortgage. I'm going to—that's no doubt, I'm going to—and people say, 'Oh, you're 70 years old now, you want to—?' Yeah, I do! Cause I want to get something accomplished here, this is my mission here, because then when I go, my grandchildren, my daughter, whatever, they can do whatever they want. They can even sell it, I don't care. But I have to do something that I believe in. And I never graduated, I never went to a Prom, I never went to a high school—never went to a high school, that's the part that really bothered me, not—I mean okay, not school, but high school? Those kids got to know—I went to a game, a football game, and Betty's one of my good friends, and I'm so innocent over there, and I said, 'Their wives are going to have a hard time cleaning their—' I'll never forget it—'cleaning their uniforms!' (Everyone laughs). Betty looked at me and said, 'LaVerne, you didn't!' I said, 'What?' She said, 'These are high school kids!' I said— (laughs). So, there you go, how innocent. It was just funny, and I think about the things—and I'll tell you what, I'm not ashamed to say it, cause I know that I know now, that I got something that the education person can never have. Because they don't want it. Because they want to be, 'Look at this—' Um, how they call it—it's a label. And God don't look at labels, he looks at the heart. And that's where I'm at, so.

CPG: Wow, I think this has been really, really good. And again, I am so proud of you. Especially cause you're one of the only people in the world who knew me when I was nice.

LG: Yup. (Everyone laughs).

CPG: Thank you so much.

(End of audio).