

Interview with Gunnar and Johan Gundersen

Narrators: Gunnar Gundersen, Johan Gundersen

Interviewer: Millie Rahn

Location: New Bedford, MA

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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 began 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

Transcribers: Millie Rahn, Erin Heacock

Abstract

On September 23, 2005, Millie Rahn interviewed Gunnar and John Gundersen as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Gunnar and Johan Gundersen, owners of Scandia Propellers and Supplies, share their experiences and insights regarding their business and the fishing industry. Gunnar describes his early years in Norway, his migration to the United States, and the establishment of Scandia Propellers and Supplies. Gunnar discusses the introduction of hydraulics technology in the New Bedford area and its significance for fishing boats. Johan Gundersen provides further details about his involvement in running the business and growing up in the waterfront community. He shares anecdotes about his grandfathers' experiences during World War II and their subsequent return to Norway. Johan highlights the changes in the hydraulics industry and the differences between east and west coast technologies in the United States. Throughout the interview, Gunnar and Johan touch on topics such as the Norwegian immigrant community in New Bedford, the role of women in socializing through the Lutheran church, and the involvement of different immigrant groups in the fishing industry. They also mention the challenges and advancements in hydraulics technology, the decline in fish stocks, and the future of their family business. Overall, the interview provides valuable insights into the history and operations of Scandia Propellers and Supplies, as well as the broader context of the fishing industry in New Bedford and the experiences of Norwegian immigrants in the United States.

Millie Rahn: What we're going to do is I'm going to start by saying my name is Millie Rahn, and today is Friday, September 23, 2005. We're here in New Bedford at the Harbormaster's House, and I am with the Gundersens. I'll let you introduce yourselves. Could you each—This is a father and son—Could you each give your full name and then tell me a little bit about yourselves, and what your connections to New Bedford and what we're gonna talk about it in this interview.

Gunnar Gundensen: My name Gunnar Gundersen and we came here from Norway in 1951. And I started working in the shipyard, Noratlantic Diesel, where I stayed for 10 years, and 8 years as foreman. And we bought Scandia Propeller service, it wasn't that name, but Thompson Propellers, in 1961. And have been there ever since.

MR: What made you decide to come to New Bedford?

GG: Ok, that's easy because myself, I had my father and mother here, and my wife also her father and mother here. So we came to family really. And things were kinda bad in Norway at the time, so we decided to try America.

MR: Were your parents that were here were they fishing? Or what were they doing?

GG: Yeah, they were fisherman, fishermen, [inaudible].

MR: Did you ever fish?

GG: No, I can't say I've fished. But I have been out there a couple of times trying it. It didn't agree with me so...

MR: So tell me a little bit more, please, how you got into the propeller business.

GG: Well we got into it, we bought Thompson's Propellers, they called themselves. It was two brothers who had it. They sold it to me and a partner. So we took it over, and we changed the name to Scandia Propeller Service and Suppliers. And as I said, it was in '61.

MR: Was this an outgrowth of work you were doing in the shipyard?

GG: Yeah, it was a little bit different. But besides propellers, we started to do hydraulics. We were probably the first ones to start, to do hydraulics in this harbor. Yeah.

MR: And what does that mean "to do hydraulics?"

GG: Ok. It means to do hydraulics for fishing boats, on winches, and hoists, and steering mechanisms. Hydraulics. We were representing a firm out in Seattle, called MARCO, and still are. And some in, from Vancouver, we got hydraulic steering systems and sold them. We also sold winches we got from Vancouver. [Inaudible side comments]. Oh yeah, I had some

perience in Norway. I worked for a hydraulic company in Norway. So maybe this should be mentioned.

MR: I was going to ask if you were trained.

GG: Yeah, I was trained in Norway.

MR: So what percentage of the New Bedford fleet would you say that you service or work with, support?

GG: Oh, that's hard to say.

Johan Gundersen: It is hard to say.

GG: It is really hard to say because we don't know. There's several others now that does hydraulics. But propellers. Is there anybody else now?

JG: There are a couple of other shops.

MR: But you're one of the major support companies?

GG: Yeah, we do business in Rhode Island and Cape Cod, and I guess we do...

MR: And what's—how do the propellers and the hydraulics relate?

GG: Well, they don't relate really. But since I had the experience with hydraulics, and I didn't get a chance to do much when I was at Noratlantic for 10 years. So I felt we should start with hydraulics because it was just in its infancy at the time. As far as hydraulics on fishing boats.

MR: So would you say that this was one of the first areas to really start using hydraulics.

GG: I would say Seattle was the first one maybe.

MR: But New Bedford would be among the first one—

GG: We were the first one in this area. We went up all the way up to Maine places, and Rhode Island.

[08:23] [Interruption in the interview as someone knocks on the door and enters Harbormaster House. Tape stops]. [08:54]

MR: So you were saying that New Bedford, and Maine, and Rhode Island were among the first, certainly in this area, to start with hydraulics.

MR: And how has that whole business of hydraulics on boats changed from when you started out to now?

GG: Well maybe my son can tell more about that. It's changed in as much as a lot of other people started doing it.

MR: What would you say are some of the changes you've seen generally since you've been in the shore support, the changes in the fishery, here or in general?

GG: Change in the fisheries? Well I have been retired for almost 20 years now, so there's a lot of changes since then. I would say that there's a lot of improvement in boats—fishing boats—than what we had in the 1960s, as far as size and safety is concerned. They're much better today.

MR: Do you think, in terms of the fish stocks, do you think it's better or worse?

GG: Well as far as fish stocks, I think it's worse. I know only what I see in the paper. Yeah. But I think they still doing okay.

MR: And you kind of work with all size boats for different kinds of fisheries?

GG: We did work with all kinds of boats, you could say. We dealt with large and smaller boats. We also dealt with passenger vessels and pleasure boats. We do a lot of propellers for pleasure boats too.

MR: And is that just in this area, or kind of all up and down the coast?

GG: Pleasure boats? What do you think?

JG: It's mostly in this area.

GG: Mostly in this area.

MR: Mostly this area. And has move from more wooden boats to steel and maybe even fiberglass if you're talking about pleasure boats, has that affected what you do?

GG: No, not really. We did work on wooden boats, we did steel boats, and plastic boats too; pleasure boats.

MR: Are there other things you wanted to add that I haven't asked?

GG: I can't think of anything, but my son, Johan here, he's the one who's been running it for almost twenty years now so he probably can be more up-to-date.

MR: Ok. Should we go to the next generation?

GG: Yeah. [13:20] Microphone is transferred from Gunnar to Johan. [13:47]

MR: So do you want to start off your story as well, your name?

JG: My name is Johan Gundersen.

MR: And you've been running the business now for 20 years?

JG: For about 20 years, yes.

MR: And did you grow up in the shop?

JG: I grew up as a wharf rat. Most of the kids who are still around on the waterfront. I was five when we came to America. One thing that my father didn't mention about the fact that both of my grandfathers were in the United States fishing during World War II. My grandmothers and everyone else were still in Norway, so they were separated for those five years of the German invasion of Norway. And, as my father said, when the war ended the economy in Norway was not that strong. For most people, it took a few years before they could afford to emigrate to the United States, those who had family here. Both of my grandfathers retired in 1964 or '65 and they both moved back to Norway.

MR: Did you go back and forth?

JG: My parents go back virtually every year. My wife and I and our kids have gone back a few times with them.

MR: Now where, I'd didn't ask, where is your company located?

JG: We're in Fairhaven, on the corners of Union and Water streets; a block off the waterfront.

MR: Ok I know where that is. It's near Reidar's?

JG: Yes, it's diagonally across from Reidar's—

MR: The Norwegian community's little niche!

JG: Yes, [inaudible comment from Gunnar].

MR: So is there anything you wanted to add about the hydraulics, propellers, how the business has changed?

JG: Well, the introduction of hydraulics, that was something that they started using on fishing boats in Norway probably in the late, probably in the late 30s I believe. Winches and steering systems, virtually everything on the boats at that time, both in Norway and here, was mechanically driven. In Norway, there were actually steam-driven winches off the steam engines, run off the steam engines. But in the late '30s, when diesel engines became more common, they had to look for a different way of transferring power from the engine to the winches to retrieve the fishing gear, and they came up with the concept of using oil. So in Norway, at that time, they built every component. They built the hydraulic pumps and motors and valves.

MR: Were they the first, the Norwegians?

JG: Probably. That was, I believe, that was—

GG: [inaudible] low-pressure hydraulics.

JG: Yes. And in Norway at that time, they used what is called low-pressure hydraulics, where they may pump 400 gallons a minute, but at 400 psi—pounds per square inch that is. As opposed to in the United States, military surplus equipment became available after World War II, and that was what we would call medium-pressure hydraulics, where it was probably 30 gallons a minute and 1500 to 2000 psi systems. Both will do the same amount of work, but it's just a little different concept. The advantage to a hydraulic system over a strictly mechanical transfer of power is that the hydraulic winches could be put anywhere on a boat where it's convenient to do the work. The first example that comes to mind is the tuna net retrieving power blocks that they used on the West Coast, where they actually hung the winch on the boom.

MR: Wow! It's interesting. This is the now the fourth interview I've done this afternoon, and I did all the interviews last year as well. We've had several that have talked about the East Coast, West Coast, the differences in the fisheries. I don't know if it's because of the people I've talked to or not. When we've talked about New Bedford, we've only talked about New Bedford or you know this part of the country, from here up to Nova Scotia, Newfoundland. But now we're looking at, it just happens that we're talking about comparisons in mechanics, in regulations, and things like that. It's interesting to me.

JG: Historically, the West Coast was a little bit ahead of the East Coast technically. Technologically. There were immigrants there. Yugoslavian immigrants for the power block, for example, and also many Norwegian immigrants. My father made some good arrangements with people from the West Coast to bring that technology to the East Coast. Steering systems and winches.

MR: So you're being very modest about talking about some of these achievements and getting them here and—

GG: Well it so happened, we took a chance and it happened.

MR: But somebody has to do it.

GG: Yes, yes.

MR: One of the things I'm certainly interested in, in all of these interviews, and you just alluded to it, is the make-up, is the immigrant make-up of the fleets and even the shore-support companies and things like that, and you've probably seen a lot of changes over time. Could you talk a bit about that? [Movement of the microphone.] One of the things we're doing with these interviews is, kinda getting the stories for the ages, we really documenting now an industry as it's changing very rapidly, as Massachusetts is changing very rapidly. And it's so interesting to

be able to talk to some of the old-timers and who they were working with, and now who you're seeing coming into your shops and things.

GG: One thing that's changed a lot is the people that came from Norway here. There was a lot of Norwegians when we came, in '51. There was a lot of Norwegians that came. Just left their wives and came here and went fishing. They went home for Christmas and came back in the spring. I would say for on the island of Karmoy, where we came from, probably you could hardly find a house where there wasn't a man that had left for America. That's not too much of an exaggeration.

MR: And that's certainly true. There were so many people from that same island here in New Bedford, right?

GG: Yeah. Later on that changed a little bit. Between that and the Portuguese. Of course, there were quite a few Newfoundlanders when we came here. And a few Portuguese. There came so many of them that they are now probably the biggest, aren't they Johan? The biggest fleet owners in the city.

MR: Well I'm certainly interested in the Newfoundlanders because I lived up there. I lived in Newfoundland when I was in graduate school as a folklorist, but there was...The Newfoundland and Norway exchanges, you know, the boat building techniques are similar, a lot of Norwegians would come over and I think felt at home in many ways in Newfoundland.

JG: I think the original Portuguese immigrants who were here were mostly from the Azorean Islands, the Azores. Then in the 70s, when Portugal lost [inaudible] Angola, a lot of the fishermen from those areas came to the United States. Came to New Bedford specifically. Most of them were from the mainland. A lot of them from north of Portugal, not Portugal, north of Lisbon.

MR: There are also some of the Cape Verdeans although they've not been so much involved in the fishery, but they've been—they're in this area.

JG: There are many Cape Verdeans in New Bedford too. It's interesting, in the fishing fleet, there are also handfuls of Polish immigrants, who followed after the Latvians. There were a few Latvians who escaped from Latvia during World War II, through Sweden. Some of them wound up working on the waterfront. There are Vietnamese fishermen in New Bedford, and now we're seeing more South Americans, Mexicans, and Guatemalans. New Bedford, excuse me, New Bedford is such a huge fishing port with a variety, such a variety of fishing. The groundfishing is now mostly Portuguese fishing boats. The scalloping is mixed between some Portuguese, still some Norwegians—Lobstering are all Americans. The swordfishing fleet, which is a transient fleet that works out of New Bedford just a few months out of the year, they have brought up many Caribbean crew members. So it's a very interesting mix of people.

MR: Yeah, no one's talked too much about swordfishing here.

JG: Swordfishing is on a down cycle now, but at one point it was a very successful fishery in this area. Those boats would travel. As I said, they're itinerants. They would travel from Venezuela up through Newfoundland, depending on where the swordfish were.

MR: What do you see as the future for hydraulics? Is it changing, the technology changing—

JG: Hydraulics is a technology that requires a certain amount of expertise to operate and to maintain. We in the fishing fleet still are trying to keep it as simple as possible because of the environment. The environment that the equipment works in is probably the worst possible type of environment for hydraulic equipment. In reading the magazines and keeping up with the modern technologies, we're really very simple here.

MR: Did you ever fish?

JG: No, I've never fished.

GG: [Inaudible] Can I go back to a little bit of the Norwegian? The Norwegian population in New Bedford or Fairhaven had changed in those 50 years so much because in the late 60s or early 70s, a lot of people moved to Seattle or to Alaska from here. Took their boats with them and started fishing there. That was only Norwegians, I think, that did that. Then things in Norway picked up to be so much better and a lot of these younger people that were fishing here, they went back to Norway, because now they could have so much better jobs over there. They could—they didn't make quite as much, but they could make almost as much over there. So we lost a lot. We lost a lot. A lot of people decided to go back again. Many of them had their wives in Norway anyway, so that's changed. So we are not that many left.

MR: Is anyone coming over these days?

GG: As far as I know there's nobody to immigrate to America anymore. From our island anyway. But there's a lot of people coming here for visiting because things are so good over there that they can afford to travel. Yeah. Every summer they come.

MR: Are there a lot of, been a lot of tourists come here to New Bedford to see the— Norwegian tourists coming to New Bedford?

GG: Yeah, especially the people who have relatives here. Come to visit relatives and bring other ones with them too. You want to mention about the [inaudible]?

JG: Yeah. You asked about the future. We trust that there will be a viable fishing fleet for the immediate future. Both my son and my daughter, and my wife, work at the shop now with us. So this will be the third generation.

MR: Well we folklorists like to see that, whatever the family tradition is, keeping it going.

JG: My son and Reidar's sons are friends. They get together. On the waterfront, there are many businesses that the children are involved in. Kelly's Shipyard. David's son, Andrew, is there.

R.A. Mitchell, the diesel engine people, has, Bob has two of his daughters working with him. That was another business that Bob's father started. So that's their third generation there. So there are many family businesses on the waterfront.

MR: I had actually had [inaudible name] up at the Lowell festival a couple years ago, making nets. And, what amazed me, he's, what, 23 or so, but he talks like an oldtimer cause he spent so much time with them. And here's this kid who's, Oh I remember hearing about him. It's amazing. It's a whole other piece, it's people's family stories, their occupations, being on the water—It's not a nine to five job for anybody, so everybody's there or on call all the time, so I can see why it works out that way.

JG: One thing also that we neglected to mention is the support for the fishing fleet. Mass Maritime Academy, for one, is highly supportive of the commercial waterfront. They're a training academy. My father and I have taught a fisheries extension program there, on call, Saturdays on occasion, for what? Twenty years now, maybe? Maybe longer than that. Maybe 25 years. One or two Saturdays a year. I think they're involved in the Working Waterfront Festival. I know they're at the Fish Expo too. So there are a lot of professional and educational organizations that work hand in hand with the commercial fishermen. The University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth has also done some great things with the fishing fleet. They arranged with the scallopers to go out and film, you'd best talk to a scalloper about this, but to film how many scallops were in the closed areas. Our government was saying that there were no scallops out there, and working with the university and the scallopers together, they found out that there were enough out there to actually create the boom that's going on right now in scalloping.

MR: Well I certainly have a bias because I'm a folklorist and I've worked around fishermen a lot. And they know what's there, and what isn't there. And they know how the weather will affect changes. And the government folks go out on, pick a day the same day every year, well it might be a good year, it might not be a good year. This is part of the lore of fishing families, they know how these things go in cycles.

JG: My father tells the story of a Norwegian crewman who had been sleeping. The boat stopped and they started fishing in an area. This crewman walked out on deck and looked around and obviously saw no landmarks or anything. Landmarks? What could he see? He just shook his head and said we've never caught anything in this area.

MR: It's in the blood.

GG: Yeah, he just came out of the foc'sle, up on deck and looked around. Wide horizon, says we've never caught anything—

MR: It's the smell, the taste, the wind, it's something. Well, is anything that either of you would like to add? Or your mother, your wife? Sigrid? Would you like to add anything? Ok.

GG: She's been giving us ideas.

MR: I know! She's been feeding you ideas, of course.

JG: While you ask about the Norwegian women. With so many of the Norwegian men being fishermen here, the women are all strong, and the men are good looking, and the children are all above average. And the church was very important as a socialization tool. The Lutheran church was originally a Norwegian church. The women were –That was a place where they met people, met friends from Norway and it helped them adapt to the American culture.

MR: Yeah. I know I've talked to Kirsten about, well even before she and Reidar were married, about being engaged to a fisherman and married to a fisherman, and that anxiety of every trip out. You just never know what's gonna happen.

GG: Yeah you never know. On Karmoy, where we come from, the island, they have a fisherman's memorial over there they put up a few years back, about who was lost at sea in New Bedford and in Alaska. And they have, I don't remember how many names, there must be over 50 anyway, that has lost their life.

JG: Similar to the cenotaphs at the whaling museum, and at the church.

GG: At the church up there, they have it too.

MR: Well we've been talking to one of your Norwegian pals formerly of New Bedford, we were talking about—He was saying there was no memorial here, and maybe that something the Festival will get into next year is really starting a fundraising campaign.

GG: That would be a good thing.

JG: The man who was the driving force for that memorial is a Norwegian folk singer, who wrote many songs about Norwegian immigrants throughout the United States. He's had a few recordings, and he's actually performed here at the Whaling Museum, was on GBH radio one time when he was here. Alexander Hauge is his name. So it would be very interesting I think to get him involved in this festival, and also in fundraising. I'm sure Alexander wouldn't mind coming back to New Bedford to—

GG: No I don't think so.

MR: That's great. And he's from your island you say?

JG: He's from Karmoy. He's been to New Bedford and the west coast a number of times.

GG: It would be a great idea to have him for next year's festival. I think it would be very nice. I think he would like to come too.

MR: Well, Kaare Ness was talking about the memorial in Norway—

GG: Yeah he did. You have an interview with Kaare?

MR: Well he did an interview this morning, or earlier today, well earlier this afternoon.

GG: Oh yea! Very good! Because he was gonna leave on Saturday?

MR: Yes! Well, I'm finding that the Norwegian community has a, literally, has a radar system. Somebody saw him walking down the street, called her, she immediately got him signed up to do an interview.

GG: Good. He came to our house the other night. Spent a few hours together.

JG: Kaare is one of the Norwegians who brought his fishing boat from New Bedford to Alaska in the seventies.

GG: Ah, yeah, one of the few.

MR: Yes, and he was talking about. And actually he was the first one who talked about the west coast/east coast thing. And then somebody else brought it up in another interview.

GG: That was good that you caught him! That was good.

MR: He had several very good ideas about adding, this is only the second year, but adding some more children's events to bring up the next generation. At least if they're not fishing, having an appreciation for the industry, for the food, for the life, the culture, the whole thing.

GG: Can you think of anything else?

MR: Well if that's the case, I will say thank you very much.

-----End of Interview-----

Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 12/11/2024