

Interview with Howard Nickerson

Narrators: Howard Nickerson

Interviewer: Millie Rahn

Location: New Bedford, MA

Date of Interview: September 23, 2005

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.

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Abstract

On September 23, 2005, Millie Rahn interviewed Howard Nickerson as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Howard recounts his early life, his transition from vocational school to working in the fishery industry, and the challenges faced during the Great Depression. He discusses his work as an engineer on fishing vessels, primarily involved in sea scalloping, and his involvement with the fishermen's union and his role as a union representative. He played a pivotal role in organizing and strengthening New Bedford's fishermen's union, securing favorable contracts for its members, and made efforts to improve their working conditions and rights. In addition to his union work, Howard was engaged in the political and community life of New Bedford. He served on various committees and was appointed as a fisheries advisor and consultant by Congressman Hastings Keith. Nickerson shares details of his extensive knowledge of maritime and fisheries affairs, including labor, production, processing, and organizational structures at the local, state, and federal levels.

Millie Rahn: OK. My name is Millie Rahn and it's Friday, September 23, 2005 and we're doing another interview for the Working Waterfront Festival Oral History Project. Here at the home of Howard Nickerson and his wife on Second Street in New Bedford and we're actually up on the sixth floor in their apartment overlooking the pier. So it's quite an amazing place. Now let's start, if you could just give me a little bit of background... where you were born, your connection to New Bedford, some of the work you've done in the fishery with the Union, and we'll go from there.

Howard Nickerson: I was born in New Bedford in 1912, September 14.

MR: So you just had a Birthday!

HN: I'm in my 90's. I don't know what I can do to help you. Older people don't have a tendency to help younger people. Because you forget, you struggle, so I'll do the best I can to help you.

MR: Do you want me to ask you questions or do you just want to...?

HN: What?

MR: Do you want me to ask you questions then would that help you? You were born in 1912, was your family fishermen?

HN: No. What a disgrace. No, my father worked for an electric light company here in New Bedford. My mother passed away when I was quite young. But she worked all the time too. She worked for W.T. Grand Company [inaudible]. Actually most the time, if they ask me, I say I was born and brought up in Wareham. I didn't spend much time in Wareham as I should have. That's where my father was and all my relatives. My father worked in Wareham for the electric light company. My boss doesn't work. [laughs]. She watches over me.

MR: That's a job!

HN: I guess you're right.

MR: How did you get involved in the fishery in New Bedford?

HN: Yes?

MR: How did you get involved with New Bedford and fish?

HN: I needed a job; I came out of vocational, I used to go to vocational, I graduated from there. There weren't many jobs around and I had an opportunity... I was an engineer. I had a chance to...[speaking to someone in the room] sit on the stool dear...pull the stool up behind you... alright. Won't argue, when you say ok, ok! And I was... not knowing what I was going to do for a living, if anything, and they thought I would go back to Wareham, we had a couple of gas

stations there, and I would work there. I'd work with my father on occasion. Because he had a trucking business, but he himself actually worked for the electric light company, nights. I'm talking too fast for you.

MR: Nope, you're doing fine. So you came out of the vocational school, and what was your first job?

HN: Well I was an usher in the State theatre for quite a while, but my first job was, we have to look at the resume to tell you these things. I have a resume all drawn up for you.

MR: Wonderful! We'll keep it right with the interview tape.

HN: Huh?

MR: We'll keep it right with all the papers, the interview.

HN: OK. My first job here in New Bedford? I was at the State theatre when I got out of school. So I stayed there for awhile. But there was no money. That was a hard thing; there was no money here in New Bedford. I would have liked to have gone to Wareham to live, but... I had an Aunt who was very bossy, I could see we weren't going to get along well, so I looked for something else. That's why I got into... there was nothing else, so I had a chance to do this and I did it at the time. There weren't a lot of jobs in New Bedford at the time...

MR: That was probably about the late 1920's, yes? Right before the Depression, or during the Depression?

HN: Yes. Yes it was. In fact it was during the Depression. New Bedford, unfortunately, has always been kind of depressed for the working man. There was not that much you could do and if you worked you wouldn't get any money for it. I worked as... when I went to school I worked at the State theatre nights.

MR: Now, you did quite a lot with the Union as well, didn't you?

HN: I did quite a lot of what?

MR: With the Union?

HN: Yes, well that was...

MR: Can you tell me about that?

HN: That was the late...what time did I work in the Union, Joyce?

Joyce Nickerson: Oh, Heavens, that was... you were in the Union when I met you.

HN: Don't get too personal!

JN: That was in 1950... 1960 I would say.

MR: And how did you get from... from the Union, what did you do that got you into the Union?

HN: See, I was working in the State theatre while I went to school and when I came out of there, I stayed there for a little bit, but there was no money to be had there either. Money was very scarce in New Bedford for young people, and jobs were very scarce. So...

MR: But you did get a job?

HN: Yes.

MR: Do you remember what it was?

HN: I worked at the State theatre for a long time.

MR: But then you left the State theatre and what did you do?

JN: You went fishing, didn't you?

HN: You got my resume?

JN: You went fishing.

HN: Yes.

MR: Do you remember much about... where did you... what kind of fish...?

HN: We have everything on paper.

MR: Do you remember what kind of fishing you did?

HN: Mostly scalloping.

MR: Scalloping, Ok.

HN: Sea scalloping. That was the only thing that was available for young people. I was an engineer and that gave me one step ahead from people because I could get a job in the engine room. I'd run the engine on a fishing vessel, and that opened a lot of doors for me.

MR: And did you do all your shipping out of New Bedford...?

HN: Yes. I've done everything in New Bedford that I possibly could.

MR: Good.

HN: I like New Bedford.

MR: So, you did a lot of work in the engine rooms?

HN: Yes, well I went to vocational school, you see.

MR: Oh great! Oh...[referring to something someone in the room gave to her].

HN: Is that an extra, Joyce?

MR: Is this an extra copy?

JN: I've got some more in the file, I know.

MR: Can we keep this one or do we need to make a copy?

HN: Don't look at me when you ask questions about this, look at Joyce, because Joyce is in charge of everything here.

MR: She's doing a good job of it. What we're looking at that Joyce just brought, is a very extensive resume, it says "Howard W. Nickerson and Associates, Consultants to the Seafood, Maritime and Fishing Industries." And this is the resume of Howard W. Nickerson, President, and it's about 10 pages.

HN: Is there a copy there of the story in New Bedford? My background?

MR: I don't see that, but this is fascinating because...

HN: What is this?

MR: It says you have extensive knowledge and working experience in all aspects of maritime and fisheries affairs including labor, production, processing, industrial relations, and local, state, and federal organizational structures. That's pretty impressive.

JN: Would either of you like something? A coke or Ginger Ale or something?

MR: No thanks, I just had some water. Do you have an extra copy of this?

JN: Yes.

MR: Great. Because what I will do, this will go with the documents for this interview.

HN: If she gives you a copy of something, that means she can keep it, right? That means you can keep it. That's the easiest way to do this I think.

MR: I'm looking at this. You were "appointed by several governors to committees relative to the problems and future well-being of the domestic seafood industry and the commonwealth resources from the sea around us." That's absolutely what we read about on the front page everyday. You were on the New England Fisheries Steering Committee, the National Fisheries Institute, and you say here "Congressman Hastings Keith Appointed me to his staff as a fisheries advisor and consultant and in that capacity I accompanied him to Europe for a 2 week period..."

HN: I was Union-oriented. So I got a job running the Union, fishermen's Union, and I ran quite a few things as you'll see.

MR: How did you go from the engine room to Union organizing?

HN: Well, I was at the vocational school for 4 years. I took a course in repair work and operation of engines. They don't just fall to you, you have to go look for something in New Bedford, especially at that time.

MR: It says here that you became a commercial fisherman in 1933 as a crew member from Wareham fishing mostly in Cape Cod Bay for sea scallops, which you said, and finfish using sandwiches at the canal as a discharge point. Fished principally from Newport...

HN: I should have read the whole thing. I haven't read it for a lot of years.

JN: I've been asking him all week to look over his papers.

MR: Finfish, swordfish, sea scallops, is kind of the story of...

HN: Is she arguing with me? If she has a different opinion...

MR: She's your manager, she's your agent. I'm just flipping through, this is amazing.

HN: I don't do this very often, but if you learn something here and you're not satisfied, you want to come back another time, that would be O.K. by me.

MR: OK. Well we'll definitely consider that.

HN: I'm not bashful at all. I'm proud of my own background because I've worked hard all my life and nothing came easy.

MR: Well, one of the reasons we're doing these interviews is we're trying to get the experiences and the insights of people like yourself that have influenced the current state of the fishery and know all the different aspects, the political, the economic, I noticed you've done a lot of economic development, this talks about the Fishermen's Union. You came ashore as a commercial fisherman in December '57 to accept election as a Union representative, starting January 2, 1958 with the Atlantic Fishermen's Union. And that Union, I've heard from other people from other interviews, had a huge influence on the industry here.

HN: ...the love [lot?] of my life gone... you want to do this? You going to take a copy of that home, you'll be better equipped to ask me questions after you've read that.

MR: Why don't we do that. We'll go, we'll take this, we'll take what we have now and then we'll come back another time. We'll do our homework. How about that.

HN: Close because I forget easily.

MR: Ok. Well that's what we'll do, we'll go back and read this and then see about coming up and asking more specific questions. How does that sound?

JN: Alright. When...

MR: I'm not sure, we'll have to go back and talk to the Festival Director.

HN: I came out of vocational in 1933.

MR: That was a tough time to be looking for a job, that's for sure.

HN: Well it was, but I had a job anyway. It's always tough in New Bedford to get a job, there are no easy ways to get a job here. If you want something that pays a few dollars, and most of the time you have to take what is available and you have to accept whatever they give you. And I was Unionized because I didn't like the way things were run most of the time, so I got involved with the Union, and I ran the Fishermen's Union here for quite awhile. When I ran it I shouldn't say that, I was elected office in the Fishermen's Union, and we got quite prosperous, we got good contracts, things got pretty good. Before the fishermen didn't have anything, everyone worked for a different individual and they do today for some reason. I don't know what they get now. When I was there, I had a contract with the boat owners and we worked for a few years, and I got bored, to tell you the truth. The owners got friendly so I got some opportunities I might not have got if I hadn't worked for the Union, and I was Unionized and then we got fishermen organized and we had a good fishermen's Union here, had quite a lot of strength. So then, when I wanted to do something else, I was going to leave, they didn't want me to leave, so I became the administrator for both organizations. So I did work there for the Union, my whole life, unfortunately, but I like working with people, and I liked trying to get something better for people than what they had. And that's what you had to do because things were pretty bad in New Bedford in 1933. And in the 1940's especially. But I never tied up the fleet or anything like that. I worked with the boat owner, and I worked with the fishermen. I built an organization at the Fishermen's Union, and we could work very well with the boat owners and with the organization. And I was blessed that I had a good counterpart. John Linnehan was a friend and he was a boat owner representative and I got a long good with him. After a couple years. It sounds kind of dullish, but for me it was very exciting. Young kid coming off a fishing boat, come from voc, anybody went to voc, you'd go for a job, "where'd you go to school?" "I went to voc". "Voc!" The kind of school that wasn't thought much of here in New Bedford. But every year we graduated people, and every year most of those people that graduated got a job making better pay than their fathers. It had a difficult reputation as a school, it's more a place where you send your kid if you couldn't make your mind, and things like that. In the beginning, when I first

went there, but we always struggle, we get good courses, we get better instructors, we got a better school, and not it's quite a good school I guess.

MR: And it put you in good standing to work with the fishermen and boat owners?

HN: Well, I was a fisherman for a long time myself. I know both sides of the story.

MR: Exactly and that's what it takes.

HN: You couldn't B.S. me if you tried, it might look like I was getting B.S-ed but I wasn't. But I liked it. I liked running the Union. It's rather shameful, I had a good job but I got bored. I want to do something else, I want to do something to advance.

MR: So what was that? What did you do after you got bored?

HN: Oh, everything. Everything is there...

MR: All of this... O.K.

HN: Did different jobs. Go back a page. It's my employment record.

MR: Emergency fort [inaudible] Planning Committee, Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation, New Bedford Mayor's War on Poverty Committee, Small Business Development Service, Neighborhood Youth Corps, State College Trustee, Harbor Development Commission, Advisory Council, New Bedford Redevelopment Authority... then I noticed you appeared in Washington for conferences, filing briefs, appearing before Congressional Committees or Hearings... you were kind of the voice of New Bedford fishermen?

HN: Was what?

MR: You were the voice of New Bedford fishermen in Washington it sounds like.

HN: That might be right, in a way.

MR: So you had a hand in a lot of the legislation affecting the fishermen?

HN: I was not ambitious enough... I didn't want to leave New Bedford and go to Washington or somewhere else to work. Even in the Union I had good opportunities but I wanted to stay here in New Bedford. I like New Bedford, I like the people in New Bedford, and I was doing alright. Maybe if you read that over, not today, but someday when I'm not here, and if you call later in the day... in the morning after 11am, Joyce will be here, any day of the week.

MR: What this is, is a ... the City of New Bedford and the City Council, January 14, 1999, it's a resolution honoring Howard W. Nickerson as 1998 New Bedford Man of the Year. And then this is all the reasons why. This is wonderful.

HN: That was another thing too, I came out of vocational school, vocational school was not very well thought of, in comparison with the high school, New Bedford High School, we had to make our own way all the time. “Oh, you went to Voc, you didn’t go to High School?” I said, “Well that is a High School.” It’s just a different way of teaching kids how to get a job, get work. MR: I just saw, it says that you’ve seen the change from wooden boats to steel hulled fishing machine and from the old fish houses to modern stainless steel and tiledwalled fish processing plants. I was just talking to some people in an earlier interview who were talking about that whole change...

HN: Let’s change one thing in your mind, we don’t call them fish houses, they are not fish houses...

MR: Well that’s... it’s in quotations, “fish houses.”

HN: I don’t care what they say... I’m telling you... did you come here to learn something?

MR: You bet I did.

HN: Well, I don’t like calling them fish houses because they are not fish houses, they are another plant just like any other, only our product is fish. A lot of times... “where is it you work”? “Oh he works at Moss Fish Drill [inaudible]” and their nose goes up. But we were proud of what we did, we made good money as a fisherman, and I made good money when I was there. We had a tremendous impact on the City of New Bedford because at that time there was a lot of money in the fishing industry that came into New Bedford. Even though there was more of it afterwards, but we were able to get decent jobs for some of the guys.

MR: You were noticed here for helping to found the New Bedford Scallop Festival?

HN: I sat the first Scallop Festival. I had a hard job to sell it to the industry and to the City. But we had to have it. We had no good publicity, we only had bad publicity. So we thought, a couple of guys from the Fishermen’s Union and a couple of guys from the management side, Seafood Producers Association, we got together... John Linnehan is a magic name here for that.

MR: Oh yeah.

HN: Seafood producers. He was there. He trusted me and I trusted him. Two honest people. You don’t usually find that, usually in any industry, one side is out to get the other side. John, you want to get to meet him and talk to him, because he is a good man from the industry. He knows, he knew his business, the management. He never went fishing, he didn’t know anything about that end of it. But he was a good manager. He ran what was called then the Seafood Dealers Association. I was insistent that they have somebody like me for a counterpart, sit down and discuss our problems. I felt if you had somebody representing the management side and somebody representing the labor side, we could get along with each other. We never had anything before... the fishermen wouldn’t speak to a fisherman! Fishermen did not have a good name here, and without him, there would have been no fishing industry.

MR: Why don't we leave it there and we'll come back another time.

HN: How did you know I was ready to stop?

MR: Well...

HN: Intuition.

MR: Intuition, absolutely.

HN: I don't disregard it.

MR: No, I don't either. Why don't we turn this off. I'll say thank you very much and is this an extra copy as well?

JN: No, I'm afraid not, I think that's the only one I saw. I might have one...

MR: Well, it's all in here, anyhow. That's a summary. And I read some of it on the tape. Wonderful.

-----End of Interview-----
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 1/06/2025