Interview with Donald Spooner

Narrators: Donald Spooner
Interviewer: Markham Starr
Location: New Bedford, MA
Date of Interview: September 29, 2012
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

Abstract
On September 29, 2012 Markham Starr interviewed Donald Spooner as part of the Working Waterfront Festival Community Documentation Project. Donald describes his upbringing and childhood in Fairhaven, MA. As a Boy Scout, he used to visit Guilmette's machine shop on Main Street in Fairhaven, learning to use different tools and eventually started working, making wooden doors for draggers. After high school, he joined the Navy in 1950 and served for four years. During his time in the Navy, he was stationed on a destroyer in Key West, where he worked on the development of new acoustic torpedoes. After his service, Spooner returned to Fairhaven and continued his work in the fishing industry. He has fond memories of his childhood in Fairhaven, where some people in his neighborhood were involved in quahogging or lobstering. Despite the changes in the industry and the challenges it has faced, Spooner remains connected to his roots and the community he grew up in.

Markham Starr: …turn that on. Even though I know your name, I'm going to ask you, what is your name?

Donald Spooner: Donald A. Spooner.

MS: And where are you from originally?

DS: Originally, still live, Fairhaven. Been livin' in the same house all my life.

MS: So your parents were from here, Fairhaven?

DS: They, my parents were from, from Boston and then they moved here. My mother was originally from New Bedford.

MS: What business were they in, your father, your mother?

DS: My father, my mother divorced when I was 6, 6 months old. And then my mother raised me for a short time and then my Great Aunt in Hope Beach or a section of Fairhaven, down Sconticut Neck, raised me. And I've been in the same house all my house, sir.

MS: And what is your connection with the fishing industry?

DS: Well I was, like I say, I lived in Fairhaven and I joined the Boy Scouts and we used to go down to Guilmette's machine shop on Main Street in Fairhaven right at the end of Spring Street and used to do things….manual things for Boy Scout merit badges and all that. And he saw that I could use different tools and all that. So he asked me I wanted, if I wanted a job. And I said, yeah, and I was just a freshman in High School and I started there. In fact I used to leave school and go there and work until 5:00 and then go home and then used to work Saturdays. And I worked there through, all of High School and then I went in the Navy back in 1950.

MS: And what type of work were they doing at the machine shop?

DS: At the machine shop, Mr. Guilmette…it was a welding and machine shop and he made the trawl doors for the draggers. And what happened was that we used to make the wooden doors from 5 foot all the way up to 8 foot. And they were all wooden doors. We had a forge there, plus the welding and all that. And so he, Mr. Guilmette, bought one of the old linemen, line trucks from the electricity company, New Bedford Gas and Edison, and he bought an a-frame in the rear of it and he used to go down to the dock and take the doors that needed repairing, and mostly repairing, and he bring 'em up and repairs the shoes and the brackets that needed being repaired or replace some of the wooden panels or planks that needed repairing.

MS: And what year was that, where you were in…?

DS: This year, I was working for him from 1940, let's see, 1945 to 1950 then I went in the Navy and I came back and worked with him there.

MS: When…can you describe what the typical doors were when you first started there, what…how were they constructed?

DS: Well they were, we used to buy the planks from Big 3 sawmill in Mattapoissett which I don't think they are in business now. And we used to buy the bottom plank, was an oak plank, either inch and a half or two inches thick, depending on the length of the door. And then there were hard pine planks for the other…three or four planks were hard pine. And then there were the metals what they called a side shoe we used to have to heat that in the forge and then we had a form and we'd would a pin in there, having drilled a hole previously and then bend it sideways. And then after we'd arch it for, because it had to be like a rocker and then we'd start assembling the…It would take three days to make a pair of doors.

MS: And the doors themselves at that point were just flat, no shape?

DS: They were just like a ski front, like it couldn't be just like a square box and then it was semi-curved in the bottom so that for flowing on the bottom of the ocean. And then we had what we called bottom shoes and we had two pieces, some of them had a piece of 3 or 3.5 or 4 by 1 flat stock that was welded on and then another piece of half inch for wear and then the doors could, when they came in, the second shoe this way here when they wore down, they usually, the Captains would want Mr. Guilmette to take and replace the shoes because they're wearing. And so it usually was the outer shoe that was worn. And then we could replace it easy. And also, the Captains or the crew could tell if the doors were going…sliding properly on the bottom of the ocean. And the door is, people that don't know what a door is, all it does is two A-frames with the shackles with cable going up to the wenches and then there is two, two u-bolts, cleats on the rear, on the outer, that would take and they would connect the mouth of the net to that. And the doors keep the keep the net open as they drag it on the bottom of the ocean.

MS: Were you there when they started switching over to iron doors?

DS: Yes they started switching over but we never, we never made any of them. Because it was quite involved.

MS: How long, do you remember roughly when the wooden doors finally event…finally disappeared or there still some in use?

DS: That I don't know. I haven't been away…I've been away from the industry for a few years. So that I wouldn't know.

MS: When did you get out of it?

DS: Well in the 60s. Early 60s. Yup.

MS: Oh the size of the doors. What, why different sizes?

DS: Yeah the length was anywhere from 5 or 5.5 foot by about 38 inches up to, we've made 4 by 8 foot door. That was the largest one we ever made, and at least 1000 pounds each.

MS: And the yellow pine, the hard pine, that…

DS: Hard pine and then we had the oak on the bottom, it was more stable. There were more pieces of metal that there and that was taking the brunt of the, of the ocean, the ocean floor.

MS: With the hard pine coming from, do you remember where that came from?

DS: Locally it was, local from either Mattapoissett or Rochester. Was all mostly local materials that the saw mill got, had from their forest that they had.

MS: How much…did you have a lot of interaction with the fishermen coming in to get to know…?

DS: Well they would come in and speak to Mr. Guilmette, you know, tell 'em what they make orders for pair of doors and all of times what happened was, I started, because Mr. Guilmette would go out and used to tell me what size, you know metals and all that. So after a while I started making a chart for each fishing boat and this way here it would be…and a lot of times the same door was used on several different fishing boats so we would, I would keep a list of each boat. And then another was each Captain, usually the brackets, that's where the shackle went on to, were an inch below center. Now some of 'em wanted an inch and a eighth right on center or what, so we would mark, make that note in there. And another reason for taking and recording the sizes of the different pieces of metal or materials that what would happen is the Captains, they would be out on George's Banks or out draggin' and they'd lose the whole side. So what they would do is call by ship to shore telephone or radio, call Mr. Guilmette and tell him that they had lost a whole side and that they wanted a pair of doors. So this way here, by having all the dimensions of the different fishin' boats and materials, we could take and start making a pair of doors for them so that by the time they got in, unloaded, we'd have the pair of doors all ready for 'em to go out.

MS: Barring disasters like that, the doors-how long would a typical wooden door last?

DS: That I mean, no it depends…dependent on the bottom that they were rubbing on and all that, could last 3, 4, 5 years or they could lose the whole side in one tow. [Laughs]

MS: But pretty durable then…

DS: Yes, sir.

MS: Except for major disasters.

DS: Yes, sir.

MS: Where you were, where you were living as a kid; was that a fishing community as well? Were mostly people in your neighborhood fishing or?

DS: Well, in Fairhaven, where I lived, they were some people that did, what they call quahogging or lobstering right down in Priest's Cove and Sconticut and all that. They used to, what they call the hand, the hand tongers instead of using that single they would have a basket on the long poles with their pin in the middle and they would just go and bring up the quahogs in Priest's Cove.

MS: I assume that's all gone now? So there's still…

DS: No, well I guess with the pollution and all that and I don't think… Some areas are opening up. I know they can go quahogging over in West Island and areas around where the waters are cleaner.

MS: So just backing up a little bit. You went into the Navy and…

DS: In 1950.

MS: For how long?

DS: Four years. I was on a destroyer for two years in Key West, what they call an experimental destroyer. It was…we brought out the new acoustic torpedoes and we used to go out and operate with a target submarine and then we would come back in and we'd go out early in the morning and operate with a target sub and then come back in the afternoon. Off of Key West.

MS: Did you enlist? Is it…

DS: I enlisted, how I enlisted was a friend of the family was the Coast Guard and ship inspector, [brief interruption, door opening] ship inspector in the area here and he used to be, his office was in Providence and he used to have regular business suit and all of a sudden I saw him in uniform. And so what happened was I asked him, I says, how come you've got your uniform on? He said, something is happening and I can't discuss it with you. So then on the radio I could hear different things that were happening in the Far East and so then about the Korean thing and so I says well, having been in the Boy Scouts and slept in the pop tent, I didn't want to be sleeping in no fox hole so I, I joined the Navy because I felt that this way here I'd have a clean bunk and three squares a day.

MS: Did you like being in the Navy?

DS: Oh very much. I kept busy all the time that I was in and in fact, I took correspondence courses while I was in and I went to, what they call machinery…I was in what they call the "A Gang". We used to take care, repair all the refrigeration, and all the different things in the galley and throughout the ship. And I went to what they call Machinery Repairman School. I signed up for that out in San Diego, well I signed up aboard ship of course went out to San Diego for 12

weeks to the Machine Shop training there for machinery repairmen and I was promoted and I passed the exam for 3rd Class machinery repairman. Which, this is the…that's the rate that I just found. [Gets up]

MS: Oh, that's great. Huh.

DS: And so once I made 3rd Class, I made 3rd Class Petty Officer, then they didn't rate 'em on the destroyer. We had a good size, a machine shop on the destroyer and so I got transferred to what they called Destroyer Tender in Norfolk and that Destroyer Tender, we used to have an average of 6 destroyers alongside and we had to repair everything on that, on those destroyers. We even had a foundry on the, on the tender. And then I knew, I think I was on there three days and the third day and I went over in the Med for 6 months to repair and take care of all the ships over there. Over in the Med. So that was a learning thing. And I went into, I also went into Guantanamo Bay, when in Port au Prince Haiti, and went into Havana Cuba.

MS: And then so when you were done with the Navy you said you went back to the machine…

DS: I went back to the machine shop and he was slowing down a little bit. And so I always did construction work and so I know carpentry and all that. And so I was able to work for, although part-time, work for some contractors building houses and then I went full-time into heavy construction. And I ended up getting into the carpenter's union and my first job was working on the Callahan Tunnel when they built in up in Boston. And then the last job I had in, in the carpenter's union was Frionor no Quaker Oats came in to New Bedford to make dog and cat food and I worked for them, well not for them but I worked for LeRancher [ph] who did form work and all that. And then I went across the floor one day because they were bringin' all the machinery from the Quaker Oats plants that they had had up in Maine. They were closing that and they were bringing that to New Bedford. And I…because of the transportation costs of the different goods that were needed for making the canned food and the empty cans, the grain and the cartons and all that. And then the product. And so but they found that New Bedford just had enough fish but it was the main thing that they had the facilities and in fact the plant had railroad tracks going right inside and they could put four, I think it was four, freight cars, box cars in there, close the doors and then load 'em up or empty 'em out as needed. So anyhow. So what happened was, that was the first winter I ever worked in construction. Usually I was laid off every winter. So then I took and I came down here on Water Street and signed up for the New Bedford Gas and Edison Company so I came down here everyday. And so one day I came down and the employee, the secretary told me she says, we have a job but you're going to drop two-thirds of your pay. I says "I'll take it." So I got laid off on a Friday and I started there on a Monday. And then I worked my way up. I've bid, the same day, I got hired at 8:00, 9:00 I've already bid out to another job over because they used to…over in the gas site. In fact, the building that I started is, was right, is right in the corner here. And I started as the afternoon janitor and then I bid over because that job was stationery, it wasn't automatic progression. So what happened was, I took and bid for a laborer over in Gas, over in Gas Works because back in the 50s, oh no back in the 70s and before, they used to make manufactured gas here. It wasn't just natural gas. They used to make it here. We had what they called the holders and everything. We manufactured the gas here and then they would mix it with natural gas or when natural gas came in to play, but the holders would go up and down according to the amount of gas. And I

worked there but I always went to night school. Went to vocational night school to move myself up and I got my 3rd, my fireman's license to operate boilers. Then I took my exams and moved ahead. Plus education and I moved up to 2nd engineers. But in the meantime, I did build, bid out from the gas side over to the electric station which is still standing. I retired from there, I moved up. I started as a laborer and fireman in the gas, electric station and worked my way up to assistant Watch Engineer. And I always worked rotating shifts. Worked seven straight mornings, two days off. Seven straight afternoons, two days off. Six straight nights, and four days off. For 28 years.

MS: Is that something you wanted to do, the rotating?

DS: Well that was the system that they had there then, and that way there was one person wasn't locked in to one shift continually. That was their process. And it was a 20…we'd get rule…normally we'd keep 1 and 2 turbines on and sometimes when, that was what we called the high pressure where that was 300 pounds steam going into there. And what we'd call the low pressure ones, that was 200 pounds steam. And those cycled what we called cycling. Sometimes 7 and 8, or 7 and 9 were on because number 9 was a high pressure. It would take the steam at 900 pounds and exhaust it at 200 pounds into the low pressure ones and sometimes those would stay on. But later on, when more production in other parts of the states in interconnecting line, they would take and cycle it off. But we would start taking them off at 10 or 11:00 at night and start rollin' 'em at 4:00 in the morning to start putting them back on.

MS: Back to the doors. Was there a lot of competition in New Bedford building doors?

DS: There were, I think, two…they used to make them down at Hathaway Machinery and there was another one, we made 'em and no one else that I knew did make 'em but they did have some outta town, whether up near Boston and all that. That I don't know their names, for the outta…people are in the industry.

MS: Were there a lot, back then when you were in high school and working. Were there a lot more small, independent businesses like that?

DS: Yes, there were quite a few small ones that were on the waterfront. But most of the boat yards, they had their own shops so that they do the product too. Not that I knew of any of them that would make the complete doors. But we had the process.

MS: And were the vessels much different then?

DS: They were…then when I was going up there were all wooden vessels. Then they start coming out with the steel vessels, stern trawlers. When I was growing up, it was all side trawlers and not stern.

MS: And do you have any rough ideas for how many vessels you were producing doors for on average in a year?

DS: Oh we had at least, I would say, at least 30. At least 30. I remember the Christina J, the Solvent J, and that's one of the few I can remember.

MS: Did you ever have any interest in fishing or?

DS: No not at the time, I didn't have at the time, I saw what it was a hazardous duties and I had, no desire.

MS: And do you remember much about the fishermen themselves who were coming in, did you?

DS: Well it was mostly the Captains not, I'm sure the crew would come in but they would mostly be talking to my boss, my boss Mr. Guilmette because they had to go through all the paperwork and what ever had to be done. But one thing as a side line, during the '54 hurricane. I was working at the shop and Mr. Guilmette was called out by the, I forget for the wall, Civil Defense, to go down to West Island to help with his truck to get the people off and all that. So I stayed back at the shop but I, but we didn't have, the dike wasn't in then. And so I saw the waves, water coming over Middle Street. So what I started doin', it started coming into the shop so I started taking all the tools and electronics, the micrometers and the machinist tools and putting them up on cabinets and all that. And then I looked outside and there was at least 2 feet of water and there was only about a 2 or 3 inches in the shop. And the doors, the main doors on the Plaxford [ph] Shop and the overhead doors for the other part of the shop were caving in so I put a set of fishermen doors to hold up, to brace up so they wouldn't snap off. And then all of a sudden one of the overheard doors, the bottom panel was bent so much it snapped and the whole water came in and I came out of there with water up to my…underneath my armpits. And so I just headed home and walked home and that was right on Main Street in Fairhaven.

MS: So what was the destruction like the next day?

DS: Well, with the trees down and telephone poles down and…in fact I had bought a car, I had got my GI bonus and I bought an old car and I had parked it across the street in the park, the park parking lot went out there as I saw the water coming up wanted to move it. I couldn't move it, there was a huge branch right across the whole car. That was it. Kissed it goodbye.

MS: Was there much damage to the fishing fleet do you remember?

DS: Oh yes there was I mean, fishing boats up on the bridge on, and then on Crow Island and…

MS: Did that end up with a lot of repair work? Did you do other things besides doors in something like that?

DS: Oh yeah, well he did, we, he wouldn't go out because much of the shipyards, boatyards would do the repairing so he never went out to work on that. The only other thing we did so was made what they called, radar was just coming out then for the fishing boats so we started making, we started making the platform or the bracket that went on the pilot house for Marine Radio. So we would weld it all up according to their dimensions then it would be shipped up to

Boston to be galvanized and then when it came back, then the owner of Marine Radio would, we'd deliver it to him and he'd bring it down to the fishing boat and put it up the base on top of the pilot house and then the radar equipment on top of it.

MS: So I imagine after the war, a lot of equipment became available that was…

DS: Right. Yes. Yea, that's when sonar came out and all that.

MS: Do you remember much about during the war, what the fishing industry in New Bedford was like, and Fairhaven.

DS: That because I was…[switch tape] 000 Wasn't here. I was in the Navy then and so.

MS: I mean, during World War II.

DS: Well I was just a youngster and was too busy going to school. I don't remember so I don't want to give any false information.

MS: Yup, no, just curious, yup yup. Well, let's see anything else about the fishing industry that you remember? Or?

DS: That, I can't remember the only other as a side line I remember when I was a youngster that they used to have what they called frost fish. But I don't know, I don't know if it was whiting or what. And usually I used to go get it in Pope Beach, near the Pope Beach Pavilion. I think it was whiting. That I'm not sure. And then usually, when the first frost when the water started getting chilly and the first frost was right, we called it frost fish. You could go down at night and with a bucket, a flashlight and a spear and it would be right near in the shallows, the shallow water as soon as you put the flash light on it it would stop there and you'd just just take your spear and put it in your bucket. And they were about 8 to 10 or 12 inches long. And but I what happened was they had their own manufacturing ships that they used to clear everything and there was no regulation and they cleared everything out and that's what they said. But I remember going out for my frost fish.

MS: And that was as a kid?

DS: Yes, yes. MS: Yeah, let's see. I guess that's about it.

DS: Well I thank you very much for having me.

MS: Well thank you very much for, for coming down. We really appreciate it you know gathering up all these old little pieces you know to put together what did go on.

DS: You're saying that, that's one thing I noticed even when I was in the Navy over in the Med. Whatever port we went in to, we're over there for 6 months like I had mentioned to you. That whatever port we could come in to like…I would never stay downtown. For the two or three days we were tied up there on Liberty. I would go always in the neighborhoods. So if came into

New Bedford and tied up at the State Pier. I wouldn't stay down around Union Street and all that, Elm Street. I would down the South End or go up the North End to their, to the neighborhood restaurants and shops and speak with the people and that's where I learned a lot. Like that one instance in Cannes, France.

MS: Well great. Thank you.

----------End of Interview----------
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 1/18/2025