



NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: June 28, 2017

Michael Smith~ Oral History Interview

Laura Orleans

Michael Smith. Interview by Laura Orleans. *Workers on the New Bedford Waterfront*. New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. Date of interview: June 28, 2017.

This oral history was produced in 2017 as part of the Workers on the Waterfront Oral History Project conducted by New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center with funding from an Archie Green Fellowship provided by the Library of Congress.

New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center
38 Bethel Street
P.O. Box 2052
New Bedford, MA 02741-2052

Michael Smith interview, June 28, 2017

Background

Name of person interviewed: Michael Smith [MS]

Facts about this person:

Age	58
Sex	male
Occupation	owner of North Eastern Trawl, wire rope splicer
Residence	New Bedford, MA
Ethnic background	Newfoundland, French-Canadian

Interviewer: Laura Orleans [LO]

Transcriber: Amy O'Donnell [AO]

Interview location: New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center

Date of Interview: June 28, 2017

Key Words

New Bedford, cutting tires, rope splicing, wire, cable, roller wires, lumper, chafing gear, winch truck, sweep, rollers, club stick, scallop dredge, dredge bag, vice, block, swage, drum, leading eye, mechanical splice, marlin spike, twister, mechanical press, eye splice, coiling machine, chain bag, rock-hopper, cookies, quick splice, Flemish Eye, clamp

Abstract

Michael Smith is the 58-year-old owner of North Eastern Trawl in New Bedford, MA. His company specializes in wire rope splicing. In this interview, he describes his job, how he became a wire rope splicer, and experiences he's had over the past thirty-eight years as a wire rope splicer. He speaks about his company notably as a family business and how he enjoys his work.

Index

[0:00] Intro: Begins interview with location of his birth and upbringing, location of his formal education, and details his ethnic heritage. Summarizes his family connections to the fishing industry and how he got into rope splicing. Begins to speak about his mentor, Walter Bruce.

[05:00] Continues to speak about his mentor. Describes the early days of his work as a wire rope splicer. Describes some of Bruce's innovations for the industry. Talks about cutting tires to make rubber discs. Talks about his time in between working for Walter Bruce and starting his own company. Begins to describe how a wire rope splice is made.

[10:00] Continues to describe the process of making a splice. Details the uses for splices. Speaks about splice work he does for industries other than the fishing community. Details what a typical day is like for him.

[15:00] Explains some aspects of splicing that can be dangerous. Briefly discusses safety precautions. Describes his family's involvement in the business. Details the most common work he does for fishing boats.

[20:00] Describes the tools he uses for splicing. Speaks about some advancements in the industry he has observed over time. Talks about some of the changes he has seen in the industry.

[25:00] Expresses enjoyment he receives from doing his work. Describes what he likes about his job. Describes some changes in the community he has seen over time. Talks about working with his family on the job. Discusses how regulations have affected his work with fishing boats.

[30:00] Continues to talk about how government influences his work. Describes what he doesn't like about his work. Explains seasonal aspects to the business. Explains what he does with spent wire. Describes how he trained his son to do splices.

[35:00] Describes a difficult job he had in the past. Speaks about the difficulty he has experience hiring people. Expresses feeling that there has been a change in work ethic over time in the community.

[40:00] Speaks about being part of the "dying breed" of splicers. Describes the dependence of the fishing boats on his specialized work that he does. Summarizes his contribution to the fishing industry. Conclusion of interview.

[44:14] End of audio.

[0:00]

Laura Orleans: Okay. Today is June 28, in the year 2017, this is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center, funded by an Archie Green Fellowship, from the Library of Congress. As part of this project we are interviewing shore side workers in the New Bedford/Fairhaven fishing industry to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. The recording and transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I am Laura Orleans, and today I am speaking with ---

Michael Smith: Michael Smith.

LO: Michael Smith at North East ---

MS: --- North Eastern Trawl.

LO: North Eastern Trawl. I'm sorry. And the time is approximately 10:10. Something like that.

MS: Yes.

LO: Okay. So I know you just signed a release, but for the recording do you give us permission to record you for this project?

MS: I certainly do.

LO: Fantastic. So, also I know we also just established your name, but could you just introduce yourself?

MS: Michael L. Smith, I've been working on the waterfront for thirty-eight years, what else do you need to know? I'm sorry, I'm not good at this.

LO: That's okay! So let's back up a little bit ---

MS: Okay.

LO: When and where were you born?

MS: I was born in New Bedford, Mass, in 1959.

LO: Okay, and grew up here in the city?

Michael Smith interview, June 28, 2017

MS: Yes. New Bedford High School, graduated 1977. Went to Mount Pleasant, it was Mount Pleasant at the time, Grammar School. Keith Junior High, and then moved on from there.

LO: An odd question but what can you tell me about your family's ethnic heritage?

MS: My father is from Placentia, Newfoundland, and my mother's French-Canadian. Not really sure which ---

LO: Sure, and then the Newfoundland connection, obviously is, there are a lot of ---

MS: Right.

LO: --- people in the fishing communities.

MS: My grandfather had fishing boats, you know, my father never went fishing, but my grandfather had fishing boats. I had uncles that were in the fishing industry. But that wasn't the reason I got into it. I do have an uncle through marriage, Walter Bruce, and he had the company.

LO: Oh, okay.

MS: And he... when I turned eighteen, you know, and graduated high school, I was kind of, I was up, I didn't know what I wanted to do. You know? So I was working as a roofer. And then my mother's like, I got laid off from that because of the weather. My mother's like, "Well, why don't you go see your uncle?" Because at the time she worked for Verizon, or AT&T at the time, and she wanted me to get into the phone company, but I needed something in between. So I went to see him, and of course he's had a lot of family members before me, so he never thought I was going to work out as well as I did, because all the other family members didn't work out too good. So I just, you know, started, and I didn't do splicing right away, I had to do the grunt work, make big chain bags, cut tires, we used to cut tires- we were actually one of the first ones on the waterfront to cut tires, you know, so I did that first, and you know he brought me along slowly, and I started splicing. He'd throw me in every now and then, but it wasn't an easy thing to learn, you know? And I knew I wasn't going to go to college, I was good with my hands, but I wasn't academically, you know. So we started splicing and little bit by little bit he'd send me out on jobs and everything, and I kind of took to it. So then I just fell in love with it, and I've been doing it ever since. So ---

LO: So he was really kind of your mentor.

MS: Yes, he was. He definitely was. I mean he was a milkman, he actually went fishing, he was a carpenter in the day, and he had the biggest arms on him. You could not fit a wrist watch around him. And I don't know if you've ever like, touched a pig, but his whole body was like that. [Laughter] No! I'm serious! Solid as a rock! Well, that's the best way I can describe him, you know? If you've ever felt the animal, this is what his whole body was like this. I mean, he was just a solid, solid, human being. And he spliced his whole life, you know?

LO: And when you talk splicing, is that strictly wire splicing or both rope and wire?

MS: No. Well they did a little rope, but mostly, mostly wire. Cause back in the day, they would use these roller wires and they would squeeze the eyes down on the wires and they would put rollers on them, and I mean, they would go through twenty in a trip, you know? So. Here's a picture of them.

LO: What did your wife just hand you?

MS: There's a picture of him. Right there with ---

LO: Can you describe it... for the listening audience ---

[5:00]

MS: I think he was a lumper, back in 1952, when John F. Kennedy wasn't even the President. He was a Congressman, and he came to New Bedford, and that's my uncle, right there.

LO: Wow. That's wonderful.

MS: Yeah.

LO: So, actually you anticipated many of my questions on this track here ---

MS: Kind of wrapped it up real quick!

LO: No, no, no, no! We're not done.

MS: [laughs] No, I know.

LO: So can you remember your very first day on the job there, by any chance?

MS: Oh wow it's, let me ---

LO: It's a long time.

MS: So long ago. Yeah.

LO: What were some of the earliest things you said cutting the tires, do you want to explain a little bit about how that was used?

MS: Right. We used to go get tires at you know, they'd send me out on the road and I'd pick up old tires back in the day they were all nylon, no steel. And then we'd bring them back to the shop and we had a machine that we actually cut the tires with, and then we had a press and we'd punch out either five inch discs or seven inch discs, and then Walter was actually the one who came up with the chafing gear idea. Which is pretty amazing. You know, him and his son, very intelligent. So a lot of times, Walter would come up with something, like he came up with the twister to take the twist out of the wire, and then he was one of the first ones to get a winch truck on the waterfront also. So I, they've tried patenting different things, but you know ---

LO: So those discs again, just, I do know a little more than the average person, but explain a little bit how that all functions with the dredge.

MS: Yeah, well what they needed, once again back in the day, you didn't have all these rollers, a lot of times it would be like seven inch discs or five inch discs on a sweep, so a lot of times you know, they were cutting discs for their own use, they weren't really selling them, they were putting them on the club stick. They were making the club stick that goes on the bottom of the scallop dredge to hold open the bag. And I think he was one of the first ones that they were always made out of metal. Out of steel. And then he started putting tires on them, putting rings, trying different things to come up with a different way. Of the club stick.

LO: So basically when you are talking about chafing gear, the purpose is to protect the dredge---

MS: Right. To protect the bag. Excuse me.

LO: That's okay. Not at all. All right, let's flash forward a little---

MS: Okay.

LO: So you were at Bruce's for how many years?

MS: Twenty-seven years.

LO: Wow. Quite a while.

MS: Yep.

LO: And then tell me about the genesis for this company today. Or maybe there's something in between.

MS: Well, it was just, you know, after twenty-seven years, marriage, [*laughs*] we went our separate ways, that's about the best I can tell you ---

LO: Yep.

MS: And I worked at a wire company for a little time, you know, the whole time I always had a vice in my truck and I would come down on weekends, or after work, when I wasn't working at the wire company. Always trying to put splices in for people, which worked out. I mean I didn't do very many but I always kept my hand in the waterfront. And then when this came about, there was a company on Long Island closing, and a friend of mine, who is basically a silent partner in this, you know, would you be interested in doing this? And I'm like, "Of course I would, I miss the waterfront. I really want to be get back doing you know, what I'm familiar with." So that's basically how it all came about. We went to Long Island, picked up the press, picked up the truck, you know we bought a truck, had somebody in Maine build the winches for it, for us. And over the years I've collected vices, because I knew someday this day was going to come. So that's why I have four vices, two on the back of the truck, and one there, one that goes in my pickup because I, I knew what I wanted to do when I left Bruce's. I hated leaving, but like I said, the time was right. So.

LO: Tell me, can you sort of define or explain what a splice is?

MS: That's a tough one ---

LO: Or how you create a splice? Maybe take me through the process. What do you do?

MS: Well it's usually a six stranded wire and it's not like rope, that's for darn sure. With rope, you tuck each strand individually, and then as you splice the rope, you tuck one strand, then go on to the next strand, it's not like you can run out one strand, you have to tuck each one and then turn it, and then tuck each one where with wire, you tuck all the ends first, and then with the last end, you splice that through a lot of times

[10:00]

I'll put six tucks in everything, no matter what. I mean, even when I was a kid and we were splicing, we used to make legs for the side trawlers and we'd only put four tucks in them. But now, it's just like, I don't take a chance anymore. I mean, you know we've never ever had one pull out, you know, I was always taught four if it's going in the water, six if it's overhead lifting, or if it's holding a dredge or something. So I just always put six in everything.

LO: So what are all the different uses of this wire splices in the gear? Obviously in the dredge --
-

MS: I'd say the main thing- excuse me I didn't mean to interrupt you ---

LO: That's okay! [*laughs*] It's your interview!

MS: The main thing is when it goes in and out of the block, if you were to use a mechanical splice, it would break right behind the swage. Where with the hand splice it gives, you know. So it goes in the block, and all the ends get crushed down and you don't even see the ends, they don't get caught in your glove anymore. But that's the idea of it. When they pull up that dredge, they pull it up right into the block as tight as they can, and then obviously a guy with a take will come over and hook up to the dredge and then they'll come alongside of the boat. But yeah, the whole reason for the hand splice is it crushes nice and even onto the drum. And then sometimes like if a dragger will have a net drum, the leading eye will be a hand splice. Because that is where the drum is the tightest. And as you put ground cables or something on it, the drum will get a little bigger, so then it's not so hard for the other end, which is a mechanical splice. So. That's pretty much the reason for it.

LO: And is all the work that you do fishing industry work?

MS: Yes, but I do also do, not splices, like tow trucks, cranes, what else? I have been doing like zip wires, there's a company in East Providence that gives me a lot of work for that. That seems to be the up and coming thing.

LO: Well and what I've been learning through these interviews is that a lot of companies trying to diversify the kinds of clients. I mean, the fishing industry is a significant one and sometimes because it's seasonal fluctuations or regulations you need to have some other things to go to.

MS: There's highs and lows in the fishing industry. Like when we set up this interview, I didn't know you know, usually it's one of these things like something comes up, I like to try to get it done as soon as I can, or I don't like to say no. Because I don't want to lose a client. So, usually I'll try to work with him, and if it doesn't work out, [*laughs*] we reschedule the interview. That's all.

LO: So here's the trick question. So tell me about a typical day here.

MS: Well, I mean, like I said, it could be like today, where I'm twiddling my fingers or the phone rings off the hook. Like I have ground cables out there that I have to work on. So I'll start stretching them out and the phone won't stop ringing. It's like it knows I have something to do. And then you just try to set it in. A tow truck might show up, "Hey, can I get a wire?" Sure you put her on. Or ABC could call, and need roll off cables, so I'd run down and do them, or like Frates disposal - they bring all their trucks to me. And I put the cables on. So I never know what I'm going to be doing. I could be sitting here and the phone call, "Hey I need, you know, two three hundred fathom pieces. You know, of wire, when can you have them for?" So---

LO: And does most of the work take place here at the shop? Or do you do stuff on site?

MS: Oh, I do a lot on site, but most of the, you know, preparation takes place here. I mean I just did a boat yesterday. I went down, it was only supposed to be a hand splice, and then he's been tied up for a month so then as we started looking at the wire, we noticed up to the cut splice he needed all new wire. So we said, "Just take it all off, bring it back to the shop, and add eighty fathoms." So. He had a hundred fathoms, so we put eighty on the bottom of that, you know. And a fathom is six feet. So we add four hundred and eighty feet to the six hundred feet he already had and I gave it back to, I took it off Monday and gave it back to him Tuesday. But like I said, that was only supposed to be a splice. And then you go down and sometimes you don't know what you're going to encounter. Like when you take the wire off the big boats you could go there, throw in a couple of splices, and if they break up, they look at you and go, take it off and end for end it. Now end for ending, is a lot of times, we'll put two pieces of wire, eighteen hundred feet on a boat. And a scalloper will usually, commonly,

[15:00]

use only a hundred fifty fathoms, or nine hundred feet. So then once that is used up, we'll take the wire off, completely turn it around and then we'll use the nine hundred feet on the other end.

LO: What's the weight of nine hundred feet of ---

MS: Well, eighteen hundred feet I think is like, four thousand pounds, forty two hundred pounds?

LO: So we're talking heavy gear.

MS: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

LO: Does that pose a danger in the work?

MS: I suppose it could, yeah. [*laughs*]

LO: Not that you haven't had any, kind of ---

MS: Yeah.

LO: Yeah?

MS: I was splicing with my son one time, and he was on the far vice, and I was on the near vice, and you put in, four/five splices and your arms start to get weary. Well apparently I let the wire slip out of my hand well luckily it didn't catch me. But I had a pair of glasses on and it knocked the glasses clear over to his side and he went, "What are you doing?" I went, "I let go of the wire!" I mean it could have done some serious damage but it just caught the glass luckily.

LO: Are there special clothes that you wear at all? You said something to me about gloves ---

MS: Yeah, I mean just during the winter. Oh yeah! I always have to have gloves on---

LO: Not safety goggles or anything?

MS: Well, you should wear safety goggles too, that would help. Because you're cutting with a big metal saw. You know? So there is bits and pieces, particles that can fly, so. Yep, for the most part, you have to be safe. Safety conscious.

LO: So tell me about the company. Obviously it's a family business. You've got your wife and your son sitting in the room with us. Are there others that work with you?

MS: My youngest boy, who's twenty-one... My oldest boy is twenty-four, and my wife who is good enough to help me during the day when the kids can't. For the most part. I mean, I...

LO: What do they do for roles?

MS: I mean, my wife does anything I ask. She pulls ground cables or she tightens the vice for me if we have a big job to do. She marks the wire, paints the wire with me. She's all around; leads the wire on the truck, she does everything. And so do the boys. It's just the boys can splice the wire.

LO: And what are your son's names?

MS: Lucas, and Zachary. And like I said, Luke is twenty-four, he just graduated Mass Maritime, course he's in the process of looking for a job, which should be coming any day. And Zachary is a cook at Matt's Blackboard. I almost said the old place. So, they're good enough to help me, because usually, like Zachary will work at night, so if he's got time during the day. And a lot of times, I swear, ninety percent of my work is like in the morning, before lunch time. At least some of the big scallopers. [*phone rings*] Sorry.

LO: It's okay! We can keep going. So tell me what time does the day start? Do you have a typical ---

MS: Usually my hours are 7:30 to 4:00 but I get in here, I try to get in around 6:30. I try to get in early, because if there's --- I'm one of these guys if I got work to do I try to get it done as soon as I can. Because I never know when the next big job is going to come, so I mean I've always been one of these people the minute something comes in I try to get it done. So.

LO: And what's the most common job that you guys do?

MS: The main wire on the fishing boats. I have a big client Eastern Fisheries. And I think he has twenty-six boats? Twenty-seven boats? So I'm pretty much on call, 24/7. Whenever he needs something.

LO: And does that work where you go ---

MS: I go to the boat, you know, and a lot of times it's splicing or like I said, end for end, or marking the wire, or putting new wire on, and that keeps me busy.

LO: And so when you do, say a wire job on one of his boats, how long would that last? Is there a replacement thing like seasonal once a year? Or ---

MS: The nice thing about them, excuse me once again, is like each skipper has two boats. So what they'll try to do is use the wire up. Back in the day, when you could just go 24/7 and there was no regulations, it was great, you just kept going fishing you know, and you could get your money's worth. But what's happening now is they're so limited that, they'll go fishing two or three trips on one, then I'll go down, take the wire off, and put it on the other boat, and then they'll uh, they'll put in two or three trips there, then you know, they do the same thing with all the gear. They'll take the two dredges, put it on the other boat, they'll take all their gear or all their food, or any, shackles, or whatever they need for their fishing trip, put it on the other boat, and so I do that with the wire.

[20:00]

And then they try to get the most out of their wire. They'll use it up, and like I said, I'm not exactly sure if it's forty days or something like that, you know, but they'll try to get the most out of the wire.

LO: Sure. Tell me about the tools that you use.

MS: Spikes.

LO: You spoke about the... Spikes?

MS: Spikes. Hammers.

LO: So spikes like marlin spikes?

MS: Marlin spikes, yes. Like this one here.

LO: And what's the role of a marlin spike?

MS: That will go in the wire, to open it up so you can pass the wire through it. And you need vices, a twister. The twister, what the twister does is it takes turn out of the wire. And I'll tell you right now, if the big guy didn't invent that I don't know how you'd do it.

LO: So they were hand untwisting?

MS: Right. Well, either that or just tying it off and there was no untwisting of it. It was just to keep it steady, and I mean sometimes a whole crew would help. Hold the thing. So I mean as I'm getting older I find like I have to use a hammer sometimes to get the spike in the wire. I'm fifty-eight now and like I said I've been doing it for thirty-eight years. So, it's getting a little tougher, but I'm still able to do it.

LO: And so other than the, I'm sorry, so other tools you have the press ---

MS: I do have a mechanical press that goes from I think from one-eighth up to an inch and a half, it will squeeze a swage on the wire.

LO: What's a swage?

MS: You make the eye splice, and then you put either a stainless steel swage or a carbon steel swage on the end of the wire and then you squeeze it and it holds it in place.

LO: Coiling machine?

MS: I have a coiling machine, and like say, a short piece of wire, like a roll off cable, you know you can coil this up separately. On the coil machine. And you don't need a spool. To spool the wire up. Yes. This is a swage right here. This one is stainless steel. A lot of times you'll put a stainless steel swage on when it's rigging so it doesn't rust, or the carbon steel swages, when you know it's going to wear out, you can put them on and then a lot of times if it goes in the water it's not going to last very long, it'll rust up so that's when they use the carbon steel swages.

LO: And are you still involved in cutting up tires? Is that still part of ---

MS: That, no that was we gave most of the equipment to F & B Rubber. Which I was glad because that was brutal too, just trying, it was less and less places to find tires. Close by. We used to have all our regular haunts, but that was a whole different thing. But then you know, like I said, for two years I squeeze links and you earn that aspect of it making chain bags. Which was kind of monotonous, it was kind of like a factory job, I wasn't crazy about it, but hey, you have to, when you're breaking in the industry, you have to learn all the ins and outs, you know? And then over the years you kind of transformed when I worked at Bruce's into like rock-hoppers, which is a giant sweep with rubber discs on it, and you made it really, really tight and then passed the wire through the top end of the cookies and then you know, basically as you're pulling it with the boat it would hop over the rocks. A lot of times with the roller net it would get caught on the rock, the rock would go in the net, tear up the net, and then that would mess you up for the whole trip. With the rock-hopper, it would come up to a rock, it would get pulled tight and bounce over the rock. The rock wouldn't go in the net. That's one of the advancements we've made in the industry.

LO: Can you think of other changes in the time that you've been involved? You've seen a lot.

MS: Oh my goodness. You should have given me these questions beforehand.

LO: Ahead of time, right? It's okay, we can come back to that.

MS: Yeah, yeah okay.

LO: So you mentioned cookies, which I was waiting for that term to come up. So are there are other terms that you can think of that are part of your world, you know your work world.

MS: Yeah but I don't know if I should share them with you! *[laughter]*

LO: Well you've got rock-hopper, that's pretty unique to this equipment.

MS: Well I mean it's a man thing, that's all I can tell you.

LO: Oh, okay. *[laughs]*

[25:00]

MS: I mean, there's a part of the boat, which I don't even know the real name for it. I'll tell you down the road.

LO: Okay, we'll do that off the record.

MS: Yeah, we'll do that off the record.

LO: Tell me what you enjoy most about your job.

MS: Oh, I just love to splice, and I love coming to work every day, and I love the camaraderie with the fishermen. Because I've made so many friends. It's --- I just love it. I really do. I can actually say, I mean you talk to everybody nowadays and they're like, oh man I got to go to work. No, I really enjoy it. I mean, it's taken it's toll on my body. It really has, you know. I mean up until two years ago I never had an operation. I had the two wrists done for carpal tunnel. But that's only because I wasn't sleeping at night. So for the most part, I really love what I do. I mean, you can't beat it- you're outside all the time. Yeah, you get days where it rains, snow, things like that, but for the most part, just the camaraderie with the fishermen.

LO: It's a special place, the waterfront.

MS: Oh it is, it is. Yep.

LO: Do you think that this sense of community has changed at all? In the years you've been involved?

MS: In what way are you talking about?

LO: Well that's a good question.

MS: Yeah.

LO: I've heard from old timers that they often say, oh you know it used to be such a wonderful community and it's all gone now. They'll sort of lament the sense that, and maybe, and a little bit like you know now there's so much business that's conducted by phone and email, and fax, a little less face to face? But where you're on the boats, maybe it's different.

MS: Well, I think that's what I like about it, you know. Because like I said, I do have a hearing issue, so I would rather be face to face and find out exactly what they want me to do. Course I don't text or anything like that. That makes it difficult which I'm sure is down the road but uh, yeah, it's just the sense of one on one, looking somebody in the eye and doing it that way, rather than over the phone. I just think it's so impersonal. I'd rather be down there, like I said I just can't get enough of it.

LO: So talk to me a little bit about working with family.

MS: Oh it's fun!

[*laughter*]

MS: Maybe you should interview them!

[*laughter*]

LO: I was going to say, they're all sitting in the room here so ---

MS: I'm not the easiest guy to get along with. I'm kind of a perfectionist. Everything's got to be done my way. Yes hon? [*to wife*]

Wife: Yeah, your way or the highway.

MS: My way or the highway.

Wife: That's why we're in Building F because there's nothing but fun.

[*laughter*]

LO: So what are the positives about having your family in your office?

MS: Like I said, I don't know, I love my family, I get to see them every day.

LO: Do you find you can speak in shorthand a little bit to each other? Because you know each other pretty well?

MS: [*laughs*] What's the shorthand, hon? [*to wife*] Um, yeah.

Wife: It's much easier to tell a family member when you're not doing things correctly as opposed to if it was a paid, an employee that you'd have to be a bit more gentler with.

MS: Yeah. Well sometimes I find that gentle side doesn't work. But. For the most part, they love me, I love them, so ---

LO: Um hmm.

MS: And we're going on thirty years of marriage, so can't be too bad.

LO: So I said we wouldn't talk about regulations, but you did mention them at one point. So how do you feel the regulations have impacted your, the work that you do?

MS: Yeah.

LO: If at all?

MS: Yeah, I mean, ever since the government got involved. I did go to Woods Hole when I was working at Bruce's and I don't know how many years ago that was, and there was a fisherman who kept trying to tell him that you can't use a scallop dredge on one side of the boat and then go back dragging because your marks aren't going to be the same. So what we did was, and I don't know how long it took him, to finally agree to have us check their wire. And they would, like I said, they would do like a survey with the net, and then they would tow a scallop dredge for I don't know maybe a month, and then you know, go back fishing with the net, and the marks weren't the same. So we went down, we hauled all the wire off as far as the marks were brand new. And they said this is where you start, so we went to that point, and as you put those two marks even, and as you haul them back on the boat, you put the next two marks even, and the two on the truck would be going off. And then you know, so you'd paint them, you wouldn't put those two marks even. You'd paint them where they would be. You'd paint the wire where they should be. And then you'd go by the paint marks. Now you'd pull this one up, the marks are like this, they're going off by

[30:00]

six inches, and now all of a sudden, all these big wigs and scientists who are paying attention are like scratching their heads, going no that can't be. We're like, yeah but it is! So when we get to the end of the wire, one side was off, I swear seventy-five to a hundred feet. So we really thought they were going to have their --- change their attitude towards what we were doing but I think lo and behold when they looked at all the data that they had accumulated over the years, then that would be no good. You know? So they kind of just came out and said it had no effect on what they were doing. And we were like, but wait a minute, we gotcha. We gotcha! You know, I mean just tow a net like this, and see how much the mouth is open. So that's why you're not catching fish. But, they- it's the government, you know? They kind of make up the rules. I mean, it is what it is. And I don't know what else to tell you, I thought we really had them.

LO: I think your glasses might be bumping against your microphone.

MS: Uh oh, that's not good. We might have to do the interview all over.

LO: No ---- so I asked you about your favorite part of the job, so on the flip side, what's the thing that you dislike the most? Or is there something that you know, you come in and you go, "I got to do that today."

MS: I don't know, at this point I don't, I guess I really don't have something I don't like. I just enjoy coming to work every day. I just enjoy coming to work every day, and doing what I have to do. Because a lot of times if I don't have anything to do, then I enjoy just having something to do. So.

Wife: How about a dirty garbage truck?

MS: Yeah, a dirty garbage truck is probably not my favorite.

Wife: That's my, that's my least favorite.

LO: So what do you do for the garbage trucks?

MS: Well, we have to take the old cable off and then run a new cable through it. You know? So, yeah.

LO: And the cables are used to open and close the---

MS: Um, it's to lift up a giant box that goes on the back of the truck, so uh, yeah. When you get a real bad one that's ---

LO: In the summer?

MS: --- stinky, yeah. That's why you're here. That's why you're here. Yep.

LO: So are there seasonal aspects to the business? Does it get really, really busy say, right before scallop season, or ---

MS: The fishermen, the scallopers get their days March first, yep, sometimes there's times when they want me to prepare their wire, get it ready to go. Because a lot of times they might not go out March first but they'll say, all right, get it ready within the month, because then basically they have a year to use up the forty-five days. You know. If indeed it's forty-five days, don't quote me. And then like, what's, what I've noticed sometimes, when I'm done with the scallopers it seems like the draggers need their wire. Because I do quite a few boats in Boston. There's like ten boats up there that I do. So I'll go up, put the wire on, and a lot of times what a job consists of is if somebody wants two twelve hundred foot pieces I'll mark it, get ready to go, have it on two spools, bring it up to the boat, take the old wire off, splice the new wire on the bottom, haul that on my truck, and then give it back to them. And then if any marks need to be fixed, I fix the marks, if not, I'll get to the end and you know, put two eye splices in and they'll be good to go.

LO: And what happens to the old wire? The spent wire?

MS: A lot of times I'll bring it back here and I'll put it on coils, and hopefully you know I'll find a junk yard that will take it. Nowadays they don't want the wire.

LO: I was going to say is there some kind of market for it?

MS: Well, I mean you get so much a ton, but because of it's being wire they're not crazy about it. You know in certain places. So. But I mean, there's still people that take it. I'm lucky I'm able to get rid of it.

LO: So I assume that your family learned from you?

MS: Right.

LO: Your sons and your wife.

MS: Right.

LO: What's the training process like?

MS: *[laughs]*

LO: Maybe I should be asking them.

MS: Yeah, I mean, it takes a lot of practice sometimes. Because it's like in this day and age, you know you don't use as many hand splices as you used to. So now I have to think of creative ways to make hand splices. Like when my youngest, when I first taught him, how old were you, fourteen Zack?

ZS: Yeah.

MS: About fourteen years old, I had a nice job during the summer, it was thirty foot pieces of five-eighths stainless steel and the gentleman wanted a hand splice in one end. And he said, you got all summer to do it. So I basically cut all the wires,

[35:00]

and I said to my son, just, you know, I taught him how to splice, and he just kind of went for it. And that's really the best way to learn. When you have a job like that, and you can just take your time, and "Hey dad I need help," but once you get it, you can just bang them out. Like we did, I don't know how long ago it was, it was a cable company in Connecticut and they wanted a machine splice in one end, and a hand splice in the other end. And my uncle didn't want to take the job because he didn't think he could do it. But lo and behold, he offered it to us, he says, you can use my facility, but the guy wants it done by Thursday. And this was like, Memorial Day weekend. I don't know, twenty years ago? And it was nine hundred fifty-four splices. So. At the time, I had a partner and I said, "If you want to give it a shot, we'll do it." And he goes, "I think we can do it." So we gave it a shot, and we got it done. So.

LO: That's great, that's actually I was going to ask you if you remember a time when you had a particularly challenging job and ---

MS: Unbelievable.

LO: --- and you did it. That's crazy.

MS: Unbelievable. It was like two hundred three-eighths, two hundred half ends, two hundred five-eighths, a hundred three-quarter---

LO: Did you work through the night?

MS: Well we got it down packed, and we could bang out, you know, luckily they were all four tucks, you know? We banged them out. Once you get going, we just kept going, going, going.

Wife: Did it take you the three day weekend, or ---

MS: Oh it definitely took the three day weekend! [*laughs*] Yes. Yeah, no I mean, we got it done. Which, I was very proud of that. The fact that we were able to do it. I mean it's one of those things. If I commit to something, I'm going to do it, you know? So I mean nowadays, I'll get orders for like four hundred pieces of three-eighths aircraft cable with an eye in one end. And uh, he'll say, "Oh you got two weeks." It's a lot of work, it takes about twelve hours, two men, if not longer, to bang it out. But we get it done. But like I said, it's one of those things. If I got enough time I can do anything.

LO: What are you going to do when these guys get other jobs?

MS: I know! I know! It's almost coming to that! I've tried hiring people and they'll last for a month, they don't stay. Because I mean at first everybody's like, "Oh yeah, I can do that. No problem." And then they see what it consists of, and they're like, "That's kind of hard work." But in this day and age with the kids, they just don't come back.

LO: Do you think that's something that's changed? A little bit? Back when you were a kid for example, the work ethic?

MS: Work ethic, yes. There's a lot to work ethic. I mean my kids have work ethic because I taught them, and I mean, they, they're really good. I got to give them credit. They're always there for me. Whenever I need either one of them, they're right there for me. So. I can't complain about that.

LO: But I have repeatedly heard that from people on the waterfront, just very challenging to find any good ---

MS: It is, it is! I mean I'd rather take like a forty-five year old guy that knows what he's doing, than, I mean my brother-in-law was here last week and every time I turn around he's sixty-two, he's grabbing the wire, and I'm like, "Easy, Jerry." But no, no, he's right there, I didn't even have to ask him. He's like always constantly helping. I mean, that's the thing, you just don't see it in the younger generation. The work ethic is terrible.

LO: What do you see, looking forward? What do you see in the next ten years?

MS: Well, I hope by the government getting involved that it gets better. But I don't know? I mean back in the eighties, when they started getting involved, we were like, is it going to work out? Is it going to get any better? They were pretty much saying the fishing industry was dead back then, but you know, we've learned to survive. And thrive. I mean, we are one of the richest ports. So.

LO: So I think I've pretty much covered the things I had written down. Are there things that you would like to talk about that we haven't ---

MS: From when I started, I was thinking of this, I can only think of two guys that are still splicing. And one is Chris Pacheco, who has a chain bag business, he makes chain bags, him and his two sons, and he splices on the side. And he's done it since he left Bruce's. We got him from Voc like two years in.

[40:00]

He's about my age, I think he's two years younger. And so he still splices, I just saw him yesterday. And then there's another guy who works for Ship Supply, Tony. And he, those are probably the only two who have been doing it as long as I have. So.

Wife: It's a dying breed.

MS: Yes, it is a dying breed. They always say eventually everybody's going to be replaced by machines. I know they have a machine to put in hand splices but I don't know if it can go to the boat and put in a hand splice, so.

LO: And actually so that was another question I did have, when they're out at sea, is there any need for anybody in the crew to know the basics of splicing?

MS: Well once again, back in the day, I think everybody needed to know how to splice. But nowadays, you know, the guys will be like, "Man I don't know how you do it. You know we tried doing that out there we don't have the tools." I know of only one skipper, Ronnie Shrader, that will put in his own splices. I mean other guys will, it's called the Flemish Eye, you take two strands and you open it up and you can put it back into itself and you take the two strands and go back into itself and then they'll put a clamp on it. That's called out there a quick splice. I call it the Flemish Eye. Because a lot of times we'll slide the swage up on it, squeeze the swage and it's not going to pull apart. So that's the idea behind the clamp, to hold it in position. But once again, you have a clamp that's going to be coming in and out of the block, which could get caught, so that's why you usually use a hand splice. Excuse me.

LO: Because I would imagine they would have to end the trip if they break a cable.

MS: I've seen that happen. They do have to come in, because nobody knows what to do.

LO: And what would cause that? Is it getting caught up on a rock, or a wreck, or ---

MS: Or fatigue in the wire, the wire is getting old and they don't realize it. A lot of times when I go down to splice the wire, I'll tell them if it's breaking up, I'll ask them, "Are you in soft bottom or if you're in hard bottom?" If it's hard bottom it's really hard on the wire, if it's soft bottom it's just you know, basically pulling a dredge in sand, and, but either way, just the weight of the dredge alone I would think would be... now you add another five, ten thousand pounds to it. I don't care if it's good wire or not it's all going to put strain on the wire, so --- uh, yeah.

LO: So we can wrap it up, or ---

MS: Does anybody have any comments?

LO: Yeah, and I can also do separate interviews if you want short ones?

MS: Yeah, that would be fine. With me. I don't know ---

LO: But I really appreciate you taking the time because I know---

MS: My pleasure.

LO: --- things are busy and sort of an unusual request. But I think it's really important for people to have the opportunity to hear from those that have these specialized skills because like you said, you're one of the only, people that have been doing it the longest, and most people in the world don't even know what a splice is---

MS: Right.

LO: --- let alone how to make one.

MS: Well when I tell them I deal with cable they go, "Oh so you hook up cable TV?" It has nothing to do with cable TV. It has to do with wire, and then I try to explain it, and a lot of times they kind of go, "Oh, okay." And they kind of drift off, and I kind of lost their attention. It's kind of one of these things you, remember gimp, in camp? Well, it's kind of like that only inch and an eighth gimp. But the best I can tell you. I mean you're working with your hands, and let's face it, if I don't get it right, they could lose everything, so. We get it right.

Wife: I think we can all stand on shore and watch a boat go out but you just don't know what it takes to get that boat out there in the first place.

MS: Exactly.

Wife: There are many hands involved that create that experience.

MS: And some fishermen said to me, "Man, I could never do that." And I say to them, "I could never do what you do." You know? I mean, I could never go out fishing. But I have no problem putting in the splice for you. You know?

LO: Well, great, thank you so much.

MS: Thank you!

[44:14] End of audio