AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 02:  EPISODE 1:  SARAH FORTIN, Fish Net Maker. New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Announcer:  From the Library of Congress in Washington DC

Theme Music:  “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce (Host):  Welcome to “America Works,” excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This America Works podcast features fish net maker Sarah Fortin, who works for Reidar’s Trawl & Scallop Gear Marine Supply in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Fortin, who grew up in the community, talks about learning her trade, the skills she needed to master, and her boss – Tor Bendiksen. She also told us about the vibrant community of fellow workers who continue to make New Bedford one of America’s most important fishing ports.

Fortin was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by oral historian Fred Calabretta, from the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. Several years ago, this wonderful Heritage Center received an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center to document almost 60 New Bedford workers employed in an amazing variety of waterfront trades.

INTERVIEW

Sarah Fortin:  I never had any fishermen in my family, but my dad used to do some work painting boats and stuff like that down by the docks. Then he actually worked for this company, he was a machinist, like a welder, and he worked on trawl doors and stuff. I was a 15-year-old kid that needed a job so I came here and then Tor just kind of just gradually taught me things and I never left.
Fred Calabretta: When was that? What year did you start?

Sarah Fortin: Geez. I was still in high school so that’s what? I’m 29 now, so that’s about 2003 maybe? 2002? ‘03?

Fred Calabretta: Did you start full time?

Sarah Fortin: No, I was coming in after school and building some chafing gears and that’s kind of -- I don’t know if you know what that is, but just little piece things that I could make a certain amount of money and I could just take my time and get them done. Then I got quick at it, so Tor decided to keep me and teach me some other stuff.

When I first started, I was kind of doing, it was building chafing gears that go on cod ends on the bottom of the cod ends so that when it brushes up against the ocean floor it doesn’t chafe out the expensive twine. And I just kind of started doing those. My dad used to bring them to the house and I learned how to do it at home and then I just ended up coming into the shop and doing them here. It was, you know, 15-16-year-old kid making 80 bucks in four hours. That was gold. So I stuck around and kept doing that and as I got better at it, Tor decided to have me build like little survey trawls and stuff. He’d cut out all the pieces and start out all the seams for me and get everything lined up and then I’d just go on and do it. Then have him come cut it out when I did it wrong and have to re-do the whole thing. It was kind of a painful process, but over time he saw some kind of potential in me, I guess, and taught me all sorts of stuff. Now I can take a net plan and a bale of twine and turn it into a trawl.

I’m kind of, I guess, Jane-of-all-trades. I do all sorts of stuff around. Like I’ll make wires and the sweeps. I don’t do that that often, that’s usually the guys that do that, but I can build the sweeps and all the ground gear and then the net that goes with it and put all that together and working with the shackles and the chains and all that stuff.
Fred Calabretta: What’s your regular schedule? What days and hours do you work?

Sarah Fortin: Monday through Friday, 8 to 4:30. And here and there I’ll come in on a Saturday if we got a lot of stuff to do or need an extra, a little bit of cash that week or something, I’ll come in for Saturday mornings, but for the most it’s a straight 40 hours.

Fred Calabretta: Do you ever get sort of like emergency work if somebody tears up a net on the bottom?

Sarah Fortin: Oh, yeah. I’ll be in the middle of a brand-new net project on the floor and then Tor will get a call that somebody snagged up on something and they want to go fishing tomorrow or the next day or something, so we’ll get a net, they’ll bring in a net and we’ll just have to drop everything that we’re doing and get to that. It depends, you know. He balances out what’s emergency and stuff like that. I don’t really make that call. That’s more him, but yes, I have to jump between things all the time for people coming in. “Oh no, I broke my wire!” “Oh no, I lost half my stuff! I got [to have] a new everything!” It’ll be a net I just built two months ago and they lost the whole thing or shredded it all up. It’s heartbreaking.

Fred Calabretta: What’s the hardest part of the work? Or what’s the toughest part or what don’t you like so much, you know?

Sarah Fortin: The hard part is probably staying on point, like staying energized and on my game 40 hours. I mean, it’s physically demanding being on your feet all day and lifting and pulling and tugging and doing all that kind of stuff. It’s tiring, so it’s, sometimes some days it’s hard to get through the day just because I’m just tired, you know? My body’s tired or my hands are hurting and they’re tired. That’s tough.

I wear gloves when I can because, like, when I’m doing wire and chain and stuff like that, I’ll wear gloves because you get caught on the little burrs and stuff like that all the time. But with
twine, I choose speed and dexterity over gloves because I got to, like, hold things and then bring the twine around and pull a knot over my fingertips and I’ll lose the tips of the gloves all the time, so I can’t do gloves. I need to feel what I’m doing.

I got my handy-dandy knife belt [laughs] and then I use the plastic needles to lace the twine on to pass it through and all that stuff. Sometimes I got spikes that I use and fids and things to splice ropes and combo wires and stuff like that. Then when you get into the wires, I got all sorts of things. I got the thimbles and the sleeves and the presses and the vices and grinders and I can’t even think of the words for all... Most of them I just call thingamajigs, because I can’t remember [laughs].

Fred Calabretta: What about the whole thing about like not being a guy? Was it tougher getting into the work? I mean, did you feel you had to prove yourself because you’re a woman? Did you get into any of that?

Sarah Fortin: I mean, there’s been a bit of a struggle here and there with some of the old-timers, like, because they don’t, they’re just not used to seeing a woman that knows as much as I do about the twine and stuff, and it’s kind of hard for a 60-, 70-year-old man who’s been working with men on a boat his whole life sometimes to accept that there’s a 20-something-year-old girl that knows more than him. I mean, there’s been a little struggle there, but for the most part, everybody’s nice, you know? They understand that I know what I’m talking about. I haven’t really struggled with the whole respect thing.

I mean, it’s there. I mean, a lot of times I’ll get that little, like, “Damn, you’re really going for a girl. Like, look at you.” You know? Stuff like that, but it’s all positive. I haven’t really gotten anything negative from-- I’m just the girl at Reidar’s. Pretty much everybody knows who I am because there’s not that many women in the industry.
Yeah. They’ll come in and compliment my stuff all the time or let me know that what I built for them is working out. They’ll thank me all the time and helping them with stuff outside and their gear and all that. They’re good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Nancy Groce (Host): You’ve been listening to fish net maker Sarah Fortin, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by oral historian Fred Calabretta, from the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center. To hear the complete interview with Sarah Fortin, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at http://loc.gov.