ANNOUNCER: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

THEME MUSIC: “Payday,” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

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

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this America Works episode features marine underwater diver Jim Mercer. Jim works on commercial fishing boats in and around the port of New Bedford, Massachusetts. It’s a unique, challenging, and dangerous job. Jim, who grew up in the New Bedford area, loves it. He was interviewed by Madeline Hall-Arber on behalf of the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center as part of the American Folklife Center’s Archie Green Fellowship project “Working the Waterfront: New Bedford, Massachusetts.”

INTERVIEW

Madeline Hall-Arber: So how did you get started with this?

Jim Mercer: Probably family business was a dive and ski shop. My mom’s brother was a diver, and actually got my dad into diving in the ‘60s. Sometime ---

Madeline Hall-Arber: For recreational diving?

Jim Mercer: Yep, they said, “Let’s open up a store.” And then my dad started teaching sometime in the ‘50s. He was a dive instructor. So my dad stuck me in the water and in the ‘70s. I remember getting into a wet suit with some soapy water and squeezing into it. And that was -- yeah, the rest is just history.

The first job I did was probably fourteen years old. I cleaned a couple of tug boats in Fairhaven, and that--I should have--that was a, that was a really tough job. I should have known [laughter] from that that it was going to be tough. But I always just enjoyed the -- I enjoyed getting guys
off and running. It's a good feeling when you, when you watch the boat go out and you just checked it and you know it's good, and so on.

On a day-to-day basis I wait for phone calls and take care of the fishing boats in the water. On the bottom, looking at propellers, the coolers, the intakes, the transducers, the zincts, and any other problems that they might run into along their trip.

Madeline Hall-Arber: So, what kinds of things are you looking for?

Jim Mercer: Well, the obvious would be a rope in the propeller, which sounds simple to everybody else; but a few extra barnacles or any growth or anything that possibly went through the propeller to disturb its function. Maybe like a bend or something that wasn't there the last time.

Madeline Hall-Arber: So is that how people know to call you? Something's just not right with...

Jim Mercer: Yeah. There's a checklist that the captains have, and it will just say “diver” on there. And the shore engineer will, will call me; or the owner will call me and say "Okay, you know, we got to check for the diver, let me know what everything's looking like." If the boat's sitting, they're going to call the diver after it's sat, and I'm going to put more time on the boat.

It's the first thing that I look at is the propeller. After that it would be a good look at the coolers, so the-- a lot of the larger boats, if you see them out of the water they have these --- it's basically a radiator. It’s outside the boat. And the barnacles love to grow on it. Barnacles or worms or mussels or whatever you might have would bother the cooling... So it would be propeller, then the coolers, and then sometimes the obvious stuff: changing pipes on the inside, changing valves on the inside of the boat, they need me to block up the vents, stand by, they block them, they fix them.

Madeline Hall-Arber: You mentioned the dry suit, can you just describe what kind of suit you wear and what time of year?

Jim Mercer: Yeah. Well, the suit thickness goes by millimeters. Let's see: I have a seven mil dry suit, which is the thickest; and that would be up until about now, which is April. I'll be taking that off shortly, hopefully, but right now I'm in my warmest dry suit. I can wear regular clothes or maybe some like thick pajamas underneath and that's going to keep me pretty comfy.

And then as it warms up, I'll go to six mil, and a five mil, and a four mil. I got the whole, the whole gamut. End up with a lot of suits, end up with a lot of gear. If I go too thin, I end up poking myself with barnacles because they can cut right through the neoprene.

Yeah, so I get wet on the hands, and damp on the head, and everything else is--unless I poked a hole in it, everything--when I'm getting out of the water I'm completely dry. The hardest part is having right about now, when the water needs to be warmer [laughter]. And it should be getting warm soon, but it, it doesn't seem like it wants to!
It's--there's, there's not too many really hard parts. I dislike when it rains and the water clarity is very dirty. The reason for that is not because I'm scared of the dark or anything, it's--I can miss something very easily.

You can’t rush into things. I would tell the person getting into it, you can't rush into things. Go and hang out at---go and work at the shipyard. Go and know what the bottom of the boat is. Have an interest in diving. Don't be scared of cold, dark places. Some guys are into the tractors, and whatnot, but I was always into the boats, the bottom of the boats.

Every day is pretty dangerous. Every day. It’s not--it's not easy, I say this lightheartedly, but it's...They say, “Go and check the propeller,” and I'm not staying five feet away; I'm not staying ten feet away; I'm not staying' two feet away. I'm, like, basically making love to a propeller. I'm wrapping myself around it, I'm looking at it in every little aspect possible. There's four blades, and five blades, and three blades, and looking at the blade edges. And if it's...If somebody turned an engine on, it's like a- it's a blender! It’s not -- Every day is dangerous. And nobody wants to be the guy that turns the engine on when the diver's down there.

I always know that it’s dangerous; that what I’m doing is dangerous. That there's not too many other people that will do it. There’s not too many other people that’ll do it and stay with it; there’s not too many other people that will be comfortable.

It's a unique job and it's what I like.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC:  Played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (Host): You’ve been listening to commercial marine diver Jim Mercer from New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center as part of the Archie Green Fellowship project “Working the Waterfront in New Bedford,” a year-long documentation project directed by folklorist Laura Orleans.

She and her colleagues at the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center recorded the voices and experiences of some 60 Massachusetts port workers. Their stories are now a permanent part of the Occupational Folklife Project at the American Folklife Center.

The hear the complete interview with Jim Mercer and to listen to interviews with hundreds of other contemporary American workers, please visit the Occupational Folklife Project online at www.loc.gov/foenkife -- or just search online for the “Occupational Folklife Project.”

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is staff folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

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