Editor's Note

Jennifer Murray
Introductory Note

by

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George Mendonsa was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1923. His father, Arsenio Mendonsa, came to Newport from Madeira, Portugal, in 1910 and supported his family by working as a trap fisherman. Arsenio passed on his knowledge and pride in his work to George, who has worked in the floating fish trap industry in Rhode Island for most of his life.

The use of floating fish traps is one of the oldest commercial fishing methods known. At one time the dominant commercial fishing technique utilized in Rhode Island, floating fish traps could be found throughout Narragansett Bay, along the ocean coast, and in the sounds. Twenty traps remain in use in Rhode Island waters today compared with four hundred in 1910.

Constructed for the contours of a specific location, an ocean trap net is usually close to 1680 feet long and is secured in place by 125-gallon steel flotation buoys and as many as twenty 1000-pound anchors. The traps are designed to intercept what were once vast schools of fish migrating to and from coastal waters in the Gulf Stream.

Since 1945 George Mendonsa has been part owner of the Tallman and Mack Fish and Trap Company located on Spring Wharf in the midst of Newport’s dramatically changing waterfront district. Through a lifetime of experience working on the water he possesses an elemental familiarity with the ways of the sea and each season knows to the day when his nets must be in place to catch specific species of fish on their migrational journeys. Mendonsa’s work is not just a job, but a unique way of life which is vanishing because of growing development pressures along Newport’s waterfront and the severe depletion of several major fish species upon which the floating fish trap industry is economically dependent.

George Mendonsa was interviewed extensively as part of the Newport Historical Society’s oral history project “The Fishing Industry in Newport, Rhode Island, 1930-1987.” As the Historical Society’s oral historian, I conducted that project in hopes of documenting the rich history of Newport’s fishing industry and the complex changes it has undergone. Expressed with the informal spontaneity and personality that only spoken language can convey, George Mendonsa’s tape-recorded transcribed narrative provides a wealth of primary source material on the floating fish trap industry in Newport from the 1940s to the present. Told from the wise and insightful point of view which results from years of first hand experience, his spoken
memoir includes detailed information on species migration and stock depletion, the work of fishing, technological changes the industry has undergone, the way of life of those involved in it, and the far-reaching problems the industry faces.

The future of Newport's floating fish trap industry is at best uncertain. In May, 1990, I began to keep a visual record of George Mendonsa and his work by photographing the many aspects of life on and around Spring Wharf. This documentation includes images portraying work at sea and on the wharf, fish buyers and peddlers, the net field where the enormous nets are set to dry in autumn, and the net loft where the nets are constructed and repaired by hand during the winter months.

Images selected from this body of work, Mendonsa family photographs, and excerpts from George Mendonsa's oral history narrative are combined here. "GEORGE MENDONSA: Newport Trap Fisherman" and an accompanying photographic exhibit at the Newport Historical Society have been designed to encourage an understanding and awareness of a unique and vital aspect of life in Newport, Rhode Island. This project is supported by the Visual Arts Program of Sea Grant, University of Rhode Island.