



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
William A. Magellan, 1926-2004

September 24, 1988



[MP3 Audio File](#) [Length: 1:29:33] (41.0 MB)

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PREFACE

William Magellan came to San Diego with his parents in 1931. The family had, lived in the Portuguese community at Gloucester, Massachusetts. The father had worked as a fisherman in the rough waters of the Grand Banks. The Magellan family thought that fishing would be better in California and moved first to San Jose and then on to San Diego. They settled in the Portuguese community on Point Loma. William Magellan began his fishing career at the age of eight. In this interview he describes his life as a fisherman - his duties at the age of eight, and his later responsibilities as crew member and skipper.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

This is an oral interview with Mr. William Magellan. He was for years a skipper of one of the local fishing boats. The date is September 24, 1988. My name is Robert G. Wright.

ROBERT G. WRIGHT: Where were you born?

WILLIAM MAGELLAN: Gloucester, Massachusetts.

RW: Gloucester, when?

WM: 1926, September 4.

RW: How'd you come to San Diego, then?

WM: Well, my father -- he used to go to the Grand Banks for, for fish, and the weather was so bad there, so he moved to San Jose. Then he heard about fishing in San Diego and he was up in San Jose for only a year, and he came down here.

RW: Sure, did he have friends out here?

WM: Oh, ya, quite a few friends, they were all fishermen. So he came down here and fished.

RW: Are you guys Italian or Portuguese?

WM: Portuguese.

RW: Ah, ya, there was a big Portuguese colony back there in Gloucester.

WM: Oh, yes, oh, Portuguese. Ninety percent of 'em were Portuguese who owned boats.

RW: Ah, how old were you when you came out?

WM: Five years old.

RW: Five years old. So you really didn't see too much of the Grand Banks, uh, fishing or anything like that?

WM: No, I never went fishing back there.

RW: No, of course. But that was rough fishing off of 'the Gran Banks in those days. Your dad used to do that?

WM: Umhm. Well, my mother -- well this is a -- my mother, I have a sister who was born before me. My father's brother was married to my mother. My mother was pregnant when he died in the Grand Banks; 26 guys died that day.

RW: Ah.

WM: So, my father moved in, you know, took care of my mother.

RW: Sure.

WM: Not my mother, I wasn't even here yet, it was my sister, you know. She wasn't even born yet either. So after a year's time my father married my mother. So there was two brothers. That's why the name is the same, Magellan, my sister and I. That's when he came out here. He didn't like fishing out there no more.

RW: Yeah, yeah, I can imagine. Uh, well he knew somebody out here then, I take it?

WM: Oh yeah, he had a sister up in San Jose who was a farmer. Then he had a lot of friends down here.

RW: So this was about 1931, then?

WM: Thirty-one, yeah.

RW: That was the Depression years. Maybe that's another reason why he came out here. 'Cause it hit pretty bad there in the Boston area.

WM: Oh, yeah. Even in San Diego I remember when I was seven years old how bad it was, you know.

RW: Yeah, well at least you didn't have to shovel snow, or coal.

WM: That's right. [Laughter.] Well, my mother used to work, my father used to work, and when I was six, going to school, I used to walk to school and walk home. Take care of myself and what have you.

RW: What part of town did you move into?

WM: Right in Point Loma here. Been in Point Loma all of our lives.

RW: Oh, yeah, right down below here.

WM: Down below, way down that way, yeah.

RW: What school did you go to down there?

WM: Cabrillo.

RW: And then you went to Point Loma ...?

WM: Point Loma High School.

RW: Was fishing pretty good then, in those days? Well, I don't know, you weren't really involved with it in those earlier days.

WM: I started fishing when I was eight years old. Every summer. I never had a summer vacation.

RW: Was that coastal fishing?

WM: No, tuna fishing. I used to go out with my father and my uncles or whatever. R'W: Down Baja and so forth?

WM: Go as far as the Galapagos Islands, Panama.

RW: Started at eight years old?

WM: Eight years old. My biggest check, oh, let's see, until I was probably about fourteen, I guess, thirteen, was fifteen dollars.

RW: For the summer?

WM: For the summer. That was a lot of money in those days, fifteen dollars. That was a big check. The crew members, like my father, all he used to make was \$500 a trip, you know. That could be three weeks, or it could be three months, same thing.

RW: Whatever it took to fill. How many trips would he make a year, though?

WM: At the most, four.

RW: At eight years old, what did you do?

WM: I used to pass bait, do dishes, and fish small fish -- I used to jump in the racks, you know, and fish small fish.

RW: Anything to bring 'em in, huh?

WM: Anything to bring 'em in. Used to tie me down to the racks, put a snap on the back of me.

RW: That was pretty wild ...

WM: Well, my uncles liked me to go out with them because I was a lot of help as far as steering the boat and a lot of different things, you know.

RW: Did you used to stand up there and throw chum?

WM: Chum. Or pass bait for the drummer.

RW: Chumming is an art, isn't it?

WM: Oh, ya. You had to be a pretty good man to get a scoop of bait and control it with your hands like this, you know.

RW: It sounds simple enough, but what's the technique of that?

WM: How to spray the bait. There's, say, ten guys in the racks and you start at number one and you just "chsh" [spraying sound] spray it, you know.

RW: Around the whole stern?

WM: Around the whole side of the boat and the stern.

RW: I understand it was kind of hazardous because the guy's pulling the tuna in with the hooks a-flying.

WM: Squids would hit 'em, or different things. When we first started -- when I first started, let's put it that way -- we didn't have a canopy over the bait box. So the chummer used to put a bucket on his head.

RW: This is the days before steel helmets.

WM: He used to put a bucket on his head and stand 'way on the other side.

RW: I assume sometimes the guys got ...

WM: Knocked out. It got 'em right, my father got a squid right in here, you know.

RW: Right in the cheek, huh?

WM: I saw one guy, oh, I was probably fourteen years old, I guess, a wahoo fish jumped out of the water and caught him right here, went all the way up to his eyes -- split his head right open!

RW: Jeez!

WM: In those days there was no doctor, no, well, Coast Guard or anything. You had to come in. Time we got in his head was five times the size when he lived ...

RW: It must have been agony.

WM: Oh, god, it was really bad.

RW: The fin of the fish?

WM: No, the beak of the fish, you know. A wahoo is related to a barracuda, with a real sharp - he just caught him right here and ripped him right up.

RW: That was a guy in the racks, though, wasn't it?

WM: Ya, he was in the racks. Just a regular crew member.

RW: What was the name of the boat your dad -- did your dad own a boat?

WM: My dad didn't own a boat until 1942. He was out on his main trip when the war started.

RW: Oh, boy.

WM: And he lost that.

RW: The Coast Guard took it over ...

WM: The Navy took it for one dollar.

RW: What was the name of the boat?

WM: Anaem. [Spelling?]

RW: Anaem, it's still around? **WD:** No, no, that's a different Anaem. This was a wooden Anaem, little bay boat. Two hundred ton.

RW: They took it over because they wanted to use it for patrol ...

WM: Patrol boat. They put my father, well just not my father; they must of took ten boats away that day in Panama -- it was all in Panama -- and put 'em all in a prison camp.

RW: Really?

WM: Well, not in a prison camp; they put 'em in a camp with fence around it and they couldn't leave, you know.

RW: Why was that?

WM: Well, there was no way to get out. The only way to come home was to come on a cargo ship to San Diego or Los Angeles, or whatever, you know. And there was just none around 'cause the war was on, you know. So they had to wait three months before one came.

RW: Came through the canal, going up north. It seems like they could have put 'em on a Navy ship coming through.

WM: No, they didn't want to do that. Plus all the money my father had was in that boat! Then they took it away and gave him one dollar and kept it till 1945 and we got it back.

RW: Well, what was the first boat that you went out on when you were younger, then?

WM: I went out on Triunfo. Then I went out on the Yankee. I made quite a few trips on the Yankee as a kid.

RW: That was the old wooden Yankee?

WM: Umhm. Then I went out on the Viking.

RW: Were those all owned by your family, I mean your uncles and so forth?

WM: Owned by family, uncles. Just the Anaem was my father's. Till the war ended I went with my father on the Anaem.

RW: Was it a pretty tough life for you? You started at eight years old; did you build up into it, or what?

WM: Well, I had to do it -- not had to -- my father wanted me to go and make a few bucks, you know. 'Cause we didn't have nothing. I used to wear all hand-me-down clothes from the Medina boys, you know. Harold Medina was my age and his parents in those days had a little bit of money so I used to wear all of his clothes. So, every dime I made or saved by going out fishing and not eating, I mean I ate on the boat, not at home, you know. So, saved right there. I never had a summer vacation.

RW: Well, not really. Some guys would love to go out on a fishing trip as a vacation.

WM: Then I quit school in 1942. I was pretty young. I had to quit school because they took it over from my father and nobody was, no money coming in. My father went to work as a guard at one of the shipyards. Nobody would hire my father 'cause he was too old, and there was only four tuna boats left. So, my uncle had a boat, so he hired me, you know.

RW: So you went out fishing then?

WM: Yes, fourteen, I think I was fourteen years old. At sixteen I got one share.

RW: Oh, wow, you really moved up.

WM: Then I went to join the service.

RW: You joined the Navy?

WM: I joined the Navy but they classified me 4-F.

RW: Was something physically wrong with you, or just ...

WM: No, I went up there and when you take your physical, they ask you if you have any illness, and I says I have a cyst, you know. So they examined me for my cyst. And I came home and my mother asked me what was wrong. And I says they told me I had a "cyft".

RW: Wrong terminology.

WM: So she took me to the family doctor, Dr. Hollander, and he says he don't have a "cyft" he has a cyst. So I used that for an excuse all the time while the war was on. See, the Army wanted to take me then after that. Then they had one patrol boat, one tuna boat that was a patrol boat -- there was actually two of them, but I was on one of them -- and as long as I stayed on that boat we were in the Coast Guard reserve, you know. We patrolled a little bit. We all had uniforms, but the only time we could put our uniforms on if a Japanese or a German ship would come up along side us, then we had to put the uniform on, or never wear it, you know. So we never had to put it on.

RW: I know that you guys were told to keep your eyes open. I know you had radios.

WM: No, we were the only two boats that had radios. We used to call in twice a day to the Coast Guard, or whatever, you know. All CW, there were no radios, just CW. Telegraph, it was all telegraph.

RW: Then you were sort of doing two things -- one, patrolling, and the other fishing!

WM: We reported everything twice a day; we reported everything we saw and where we were at. Once in a while they used to tell us go over there and see what's there, you know.

RW: I assume you never saw anything?

WM: No, we never saw nothin'. We saw one time a submarine, but we didn't get to see what kind it was -- it just came up and went right down. Could have been American.

RW: I remember in those days I was living downtown and working downtown learning a watch repair trade down on 5th and Broadway in the Granger Building. I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old at the time and they thought we were going to be invaded every time and thought there was Japanese around every bush. And didn't realize that most of the Japanese around were pretty good people.

WM: Yeah, they were. I mean I had a few friends, you know. And they locked 'em all up.

RW: Yeah, that was a shame.

WM: Yeah, that wasn't just the Japanese. I don't know like they say too bad Japanese, look at the property they took away from the Italians, the Portuguese and what have you. Like my father's boat. That boat in 1942 cost \$200,000 -- that was a lot of money, and my father put his life earnings in there, you know. My mother was working, and my father, you know, and he lost it all right like that. They gave him one dollar, for four years.

RW: Well, he lost it for three years. When he got the boat back, did he start making some money?

WM: They gave him the boat back, but the boat was all destroyed and we had to fix it all up again. It cost us \$60,000 in those days to put it back in shape.

RW: And the Navy wouldn't ... ?

WM: No, they just gave us the boat back -- and the one dollar.

RW: As is, huh?

WM: As is.

RW: What did they do, make it a gun boat or something?

WM: No, they used to carry gas.

RW: Oh, they might have taken it over to the islands.

WM: Oh, yeah, it was over to Guam, I mean, you know, Saipan, all those places over there. That's where they were all at.

RW: That's a shame. Well, when you got it back did you finally start making money with the thing?

WM: Oh, yeah, we made money with it, you know. Then I, I started running the boat when I was, sheesh, 1946. I was pretty young, yeah. Nineteen forty-six, or 1947, I got married in 1948.

RW: Um, is that when you started learning how to work a crew?

WM: Well, I was always, ah well, I started young, you know, and I always had a good set of eyes on me.

RW: That's the secret.

WM: So i was always the mastman ever since I was, shoo, 14, 15 years old. So I was always up in the mast, you know.

RW: Now the idea of being up there is to look for a school ...

WM: Schools of fish, yeah.

RW: The water's pretty flat, pretty far out there.

WM: No, it makes ripples or jumpers, or you can see a fish flip, or a fish ripple, you know. Different ways of seein' 'em, you know.

RW: How 'bout birds?

WM: Bird schools.

RW: Ah, Leonard was telling me that a log, a floating log was an attraction.

WM: Well, that was when we were percenters more, bait boats we just -- never did fish off a log. I did one time as a bait boat, but we just happened to see that the fish were on the log, you know. But we never did try a log just to go throw bait on it, you know.

RW: What's the difference? I mean, there is a log and there's fish under there and whether you use a bait boat or a percent, what difference does it make?

WM: Well, we were awful dumb in those days, I mean really dumb. Like when we used to fish from here to Panama, let's say, we never did look in between. We'd just go to a bank, like Lusitania Bank, and try that. Leave there and go to Morgan Bank and not look in between Lusitania and Morgan. And leave there and go to Clarion or Secoro or any place, you know. We'd never look in between. So if we did see a school in between, that's just traveling fish, it's no good. Until my days, you know, that's when we started doing, things. So now there's all kinds of little tricks. Shoot, that's why I hated percenting is the day you left the bay you started looking for fish. You were out 60 days, you looked 58 of those days, you know. RW : You ended up percenting too, didn't you?

WM: Oh, yeah.

RW: I don't want to jump ahead too fast, I'm trying to go along chronologically. How did you like being on the boat? It was kind of, I mean ...

WM: That was my life. I was lost in land here. I like to be out to sea all of the time. I always said when I was a kid, I wanted to be the skipper; I wanted to own the boat. And it happened.

RW: Did you study, take navigation?

WM: Oh, yeah, I went to school I, ah, navigator. I had my captain's license and everything, you know.

RW: Did you study here in town?

WM: In San Diego.

RW: Take classes?

WM: Yeah. I used to go to class at night and between trips, you know.

RW: And you can study at sea?

WM: You can study at sea. Rules of the road and navigation and all that stuff. First aid. I had to study first aid, fire fighting and all that stuff, when you had your license renewed, you know. A license is good for five years. I had five different licenses, I mean five different renewals.

RW: Twenty-five years of being skipper. You always went out with family members, in the beginning?

WM: Oh, yeah, in the beginning.

RW: And then did you, when you were about 21 or something like that, you started actually skippering your own boat?

WM: Yeah, started skippering the Anaem, my father's boat. Then I skippered that for three years, I guess it was. Then we were coming home with a full load and the boat caught fire outside of Ensenada. And we sunk at three o'clock in the morning.

RW: Oh, no.

WM: [Laughter.] So that was the end of that boat.

RW: What happened?

WM: Ehh, it had a short in the engine, I guess, and just caught on fire, you know. It was so fast that nobody had a chance to look over anything, you know. We didn't even have time to stop the main engine.

RW: So it went down turning over, huh? You guys didn't have any fire extinguish systems on board or anything?

WM: In those days we had very little. So we jumped in the skiffs, you know.

RW: Were you kind of marooned out there for a while?

WM: No, we in the water, well, not in the water -- we were in the skiffs, till four hours later a little tramp steamer was leaving Ensenada going down to Cedars, all Mexicans, you know, they made that cruise once a day. So they picked us up, well, they saw the fire, you know. And they passed by the fire and we were there. They put us aboard a steamer going up to Los Angeles and the steamer really got mad. Found out that we were quarantined. See, quarantined is when you hit a foreign port you have to fly a yellow flag and clear here. So the steamer didn't have to clear and when we got aboard the steamer the whole steamer had to clear. So the skipper was really mad for the steamer!

RW: It's a wonder he didn't throw you over the side when he went by! What a shame to lose a boat that quick.

WM: Umhm. Well, then I got one right away because, you know, we always did well. Then I bought part of the May Queen.

END OF INTERVIEW
