



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
Nathaniel O. "Joe" Dunn, 1920-2016

August 7, 1997



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PREFACE

Nathaniel O. "Joe" Dunn is an avid fisherman and became a deckhand, and later a captain, in the sport fishing industry in San Diego. This interview gives detailed information on the activities involved in the daily, and/or per trip, business, and therefore is a worthwhile addition and of historical value to the archives of the San Diego Historical Society.

Shirley A. Brandes

December 29, 1998

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

This is an oral interview with Mr. Joe Dunn who was for years involved with the sport fishing industry. The interview is being done aboard the Berkeley for the San Diego Maritime Museum. Also a copy of this cassette tape is going to the San Diego Historical Society. The interview will be done with a video camera for the Maritime Museum. The date is August 7, 1997. My name is Robert G. Wright.

ROBERT G. WRIGHT: Mr. Dunn, will you give me your full name, please?

NATHANIEL DUNN: Nathaniel Oney Dunn; nickname is "Joe."

RW: Where and when were you born?

ND: In Taft, California on February 29, 1920.

RW: When did you come to San Diego and what brought you down here?

ND: My father and mother had been married here in San Diego. My mother and father had friends here and I came and stayed with them. My father came down and worked in Balboa Park. At any rate, I thought I would come to San Diego and do the same thing.

RW: So, you were 16 years of age when you came down here, a teenager. Did you go to high school here?

ND: No. I quit school and went to work.

RW: Oh, yeah, those were Depression years, weren't they?

ND: Yeah, you almost had to go to work.

RW: Did you work during the Exposition?

ND: No, I was too young.

RW: Did you go to work here in San Diego?

ND: At various jobs. I worked on produce trucks; I hauled hay out of Imperial Valley. At that time the old Mountain Springs Grade was terrible. I did that until probably 1939 and then I joined the Navy. I got out of the Navy in 1946.

RW: What did you do in the Navy?

ND: I was a gunner's mate. I was in the South Pacific mostly. I was on the USS HADLEY; it was a destroyer escort, a DE. I was on a tanker and went in as an armed guard. They put us on civilian ships. I was on two tankers, but it was good duty. You get back to the States pretty regularly.

RW: what did you do when you got out of the Navy?

ND: I was a heavy equipment operator for just a short time. Then I bought a truck service in Bishop, California. I sold that in 1952 and came to San Diego and went to work in the sport fishing industry.

RW: How did you get involved with that? Did you know something about it?

ND: I love to fish. Every spare moment I had I would go out on fishing boats. At that time the sport boats were right here at the foot of Broadway.

RW: Was that the H&M Sportfishing outfit?

ND: Yes, the H&M, the Mascot III, with Manny Silva. That is when I first met Manny.

RW: I understand he was a real good skipper. He made sure everybody got fish.

ND: He was a wonderful man, a wonderful man, as nice a person as you could possibly meet, as well as being a great skipper.

RW: Did you talk to Manny about getting a job in sport fishing for H&M?

ND: No. At that time I didn't think about going to work, fishing, for a living. I just wanted to fish whenever I could. Then in the later years after I got out of the Navy ... I met my wife here in San Diego. While we were at Bishop when I wanted to go fishing I would ask my wife if she didn't want to come down and see her father. For some reason I always had a fishing pole in my truck.

RW: What is your wife's name?

ND: Dorothy.

RW: When did you actually start getting into commercial fishing?

RW: How did you go about it?

ND: In 1953 when I left Bishop I fished two and three times a week with Bill Poole, just as a passenger. I fooled around for six or eight months just fishing all the time. Finally it dawned on me that I had to go to work if I was going to support my family.

RW: Did you have children by then?

ND: No.

RW: Was Bill Poole part of the H&M?

ND: No, Point Loma Sportfishing. At that time H&M was in the same location, but there were two different offices. Point Loma Sportfishing consisted of just a bunch of fellows who had small boats. They formed an association. I don't know how many members were in it. There must have been ten or twelve members, and it was called Point Loma Sportfishing. H&M was right across the breezeway down at the foot of Broadway.

RW: Did you go out as a crew member?

ND: I asked Bill Poole for a job. He said he couldn't afford me. He thought that I would require a lot of money because I had been in business for myself. At any rate, I went to work for Bill in February and I started from there. The only thing I knew about the fishing industry when I went to work for Bill was that you were on the water and there were fish in there. If you would throw bait out you would catch one. It didn't take long. Bill was a wonderful teacher. I didn't even know how to put a boat into gear, you might say, so far as sport fishing, or running a boat, is concerned. Bill was a wonderful teacher and he didn't hold back at all. He was real helpful in getting you to be able to do your job.

RW: Has Bill died?

ND: Oh, no, he is still very active. He is one year older than I, I think.

RW: So you must have gone to work for him for just a few dollars a day as a deckhand.

ND: Yeah, as a deckhand, right.

RW: It was a different process going out as a fisherman customer versus being a deckhand. You had to wait on the other fishermen. Did you show them how to bait their hooks and all of that? What boat were you on?

ND: The Polaris. It was a converted ABR, a 63-foot war surplus.

RW: How many passengers would you take out on one trip?

ND: Thirty-five at the most.

RW: Did you stop off at Point Loma to pick up bait at the bait barge?

ND: Right. When we would go out at night it would be a real race to load bait just as fast as you possibly could because all the boats at that time were probably of the same speed. Most of them were surplus boats. In fact, one of the boats that used to pull the targets for the Navy out at sea was there. A fellow by the name of Chuck bought it and he named it old Ironsides because it had shields on the sides of it because the boats in boot camp training at that time really didn't hit what they were shooting at. There were two or three smaller boats, landing crafts converted over to carry passengers, all under 15 tons, mostly.

RW: Where did you go fishing?

ND: Coronado Islands, primarily.

RW: It seemed like you had a lot of competition, the H&M and a number of boats with Point Loma people.

ND: Oh, sure, there was a competitive spirit. That was part of the fun. We were all friends, but you want to outdo each other if you possibly can. Plus, that is, more or less, your bread and butter. If you are consistent with a good catch, the public knows that that is the boat to go on. The next time you may not be the top boat. All the fellows were good fishermen; some were a little more aggressive. That is why we had to hurry up to get away from the bait barge so you could give it your best shot, the very first anchor job you did at the islands. You always want to anchor up according to the current and all of that.

RW: What time did you want to be out at the Islands?

ND: You wanted to be there at daylight. At that time we used to leave at two o'clock in the morning, between two and three, and then you would be at the islands by daylight or a little before. You would move around and fish. You would quit fishing between 11:00 or 11:30 a.m. and be back at the dock between 1:00 and 2:00 o'clock every day.

RW: You didn't do it seven days a week, did you?

ND: Most of the time. It was fun. Really, these were not too long hours.

RW: Did you have problems getting customers?

ND: Oh, no, not at that time. All you had to do then was just find some water out here and you'd catch a fish.

RW: I mean getting enough customers on the boat to make the trip pay.

ND: Sometimes you would, but the minute the season got into full swing and the fish would start biting good, you had plenty of business.

RW: Did a lot of the people come from Los Angeles, or San Diego, or some other place?

ND: For the most part very little of it came out of San Diego. You'd sign people up for every trip and by the time you signed 25 or 30 people up and looked at the register, you'd only find a half a dozen or so local people. The bulk of it came from the Los Angeles area, Riverside, and San Bernardino.

RW: Did you ever have any well-known people come on board, movie stars, or others like that?

ND: Off and on, I suppose, but I don't remember. In later years Billy Casper used to fish, but that was out of Mission Bay in the 1960s.

RW: What kind of fish did you go for?

ND: Yellowtail, white sea bass, barracuda, calico bass. At that time the rule of the thumb to fish tuna and albacore was the Fourth of July. We wouldn't have to go far like you do now. You'd just go out beyond the islands, 20-30 miles and you'd be able to fish albacore.

RW: Did you have problems? Did you have to have a license to fish from the Mexicans since that was in their territory?

ND: We had no problems, but we did have to buy daily permits for each passenger on the boat. The crew would get a yearly work permit.

RW: What did you charge a customer for a trip?

ND: To go to the islands it seems like it was maybe \$12.00.

RW: Is that all? But then that was big money in those days. Do you remember what you were paid?

ND: Fifty dollars a week.

RW: But that was a seven-day week, wasn't it?

ND: Yeah.

RW: Did your wife object to you being gone that much?

ND: Oh, I was fortunate.

RW: Did your wife like fishing?

ND: She loved it.

RW: I bet you came home smelling kind of ripe, too, didn't you?

ND: Yeah. Now we have hot, freshwater showers. In those days when you took a shower on the boat it was salt water and GI [Government issue] soap.

RW: Back then the people brought their fish home in gunny sacks, didn't they? Did they have the canning exchange then?

ND: It seems like the Mormon Church was the primary exchange then. The church would come down to the dock and pick the fish up and they would give you half.

RW: In other words, if you got a ten-pound yellowtail, they would give you five pounds in cans?

ND: They would give you half of what it came out to. In those days, too, you wouldn't even keep a ten-pound yellowtail. Probably the average of the fish that we would keep would be 20 pounds.

RW: So, if I brought in a 20-pound yellowtail to shore in the earlier days, I took it home as is. Then later the Mormons came in and would give me ten-pounds cans of yellowtail?

ND: Right. If they would get ten cans out of your fish they would give you five and would keep five.

RW: Considering the head and tail and the service and all of that, did it seem like a fair exchange?

ND: Oh, sure.

RW: Especially if you had to drive all the way back to LA [Los Angeles] with a smelly old fish.

ND: That is right, but you know going back to LA they would have ice chests.

RW: Did you have any accidents, like somebody falling into the water or get pulled into the water?

ND: Probably a time or two someone would get involved. But later on we got the rail that was high enough. Then we improved on the nonskid on the decks. It didn't take long until it was reasonably safe, no matter what.

RW: How about drinking on board? Was that allowed?

ND: No, no.

RW: Because of the safety factors?

ND: Well, so far as the crew was concerned, there was no drinking.

RW: I was thinking about the passengers. Some of them might drink too much and get out of hand.

ND: Well, occasionally there is a bad apple every once in awhile. But for the most part they were out there for a good time fishing.

RW: On a given trip, you would arrive on the boat at 1:00 o'clock in the morning, or something like that. Then what? You would have to get the boat ready to go, get the passengers on board and signing them in?

ND: Everybody had a bunk. You'd have them sign the register

RW: and enter the jackpot. And in those days you'd have rotation and you'd issue four different colors.

RW: How did that work, really?

ND: You'd have red, green, yellow and blue. You'd even it up so that your load [was] divided by fourths. When you would start to fish you would put on the time schedule. You would rotate every 30 minutes so everybody would have a chance to fish in the stern. That is the prime area mainly because you are on the anchor and you shape up on the current. If you are on the stern, all the bait that you are throwing to attract the fish and chum goes back. The fish are right there while you are doing that and your lines, if you are on the stern, are going right straight to where you are throwing the chum. That is when you are on the anchor. So consequently if you are up in the bow or on either side, you cast out, but your lines still want to drift to the stern. It gives everyone a chance by rotating around the boat.

RW: I want to ask you about the jackpot.

ND: That would go to the largest fish caught.

RW: Oh, the jackpot is made up of everybody putting, say a dollar in, and the winner gets the \$30.00. That kind of puts a little more fun into it, doesn't it?

ND: Oh, yeah, sure.

RW: What is the largest fish you remember catching on your trips? Was there an average size? Were there any extra large ones?

ND: In those days you could catch black sea bass, which was legal. Now it is not because they are an endangered specie. They were a real target for spear fishermen.

RW: I understand they got huge.

ND: Oh, yeah. I think the largest that I personally saw was

RW: when I was on the old Polaris. We were at Guadalupe Island and one of the fellows from Franklin Insurance Company ... They had chartered the boat at the time. ... that fish would probably go to 500 pounds, a black sea bass.

RW: What would you do with a 500-pound fish - put it back or take it home?

ND: Unfortunately you can't put them back because they fight

RW: to the last minute and then they just float to the top and that is the end of them. They fight to the death.

RW: What did the fellow do? Did he take it home and get it canned?

ND: Well, we usually just gave it to the church or let people who wanted them have them. The smaller ones, people would want. It is a good fish to eat. It has the consistency of a pork chop.

RW: Was bottom fishing a big part of the business?

ND: In the wintertime. When your migratory fish left and the water got cold, we would fish just right outside of San Diego at what we called the nine-mile bank.

RW: So fishing was pretty seasonal all year round? It was pretty much having to judge what you were going to do each part of the year, what you were going to fish for, and where you were going to have to go to get it. Tape 1, Side B: Getting back to the schedule for an average trip, you get everybody on board, get them a bunk and get them a rotation so they are ready to go. Then you would get underway. Did you have to be involved with getting the bait, the sardines on board?

ND: Sardines and anchovies in a holding tank for chumming. You would have your holding wells, your tanks, and you would have little hand wells around the edge for the passengers to get their own out of the small wells.

RW: Your job was to see that everything went well, no tangling of lines, poles, see that everybody gets baited up properly?

ND: Right. For your first-timers, or anyone for that matter, to see if they needed help. If you weren't on the tank chumming, you would be on the deck helping with the tangles, gaffing the fish when they 'come to holler,' putting the fish in the proper sack.

RW: What is this 'coming to holler' business?

ND: You are fighting a fish and for awhile you don't see anything. Then as it gets near the surface and you can see the fish, you usually holler for a gaff. You'd stand right there and gaff the fish as it gets to the surface. You really don't wait until it gets to the surface because it flops around.

RW: Is that when you can lose them off the hook?

ND: Right.

RW: Then their weight is in the water and out of the water they weigh heavier, so you gaff them on board. I assume you put them in that person's sack.

ND: You hang up sacks around with the numbers that correspond with a person's number.

RW: So that is pretty much what you had to do all the time you were out there? It sounds like it would be pretty tiring.

ND: When the fish bite you really don't get tired until after it is over because of the excitement and everything. You have to love fishing and you have to enjoy it, or, like you say, it would be very tiring. But if you enjoy it and like people along with it, it is an enjoyable job.

RW: When does the skipper decide to quit for the day and leave the fishing grounds?

ND: It is the time of day. The skipper would move around; you didn't just anchor in one spot. You'd look around for the fish just like you were running up and down a stream. It is the same thing. You would pick your spots according to the current and the time of day.

RW: That is the secret of being a good skipper - knowing the waters and the type of fish is running at a given time of the year. The time then, you would leave the fishing grounds at, say, noon because it would take two hours to come back?

ND: On the way home you would balance the fish to see who won the jackpot; you'd clean the fish.

RW: Oh, you had to clean the passengers' fish? Wow!

ND: You would gill and gut them.

RW: So the passengers didn't have to clean their own fish? And the guts would be thrown over the side? In cleaning the fish, did you weigh them before you clean them or after you clean them?

ND: Before. We didn't actually weigh them on a scale unless it would be an exceptional fish; you'd weight it when you got back to the beach. We'd just use a balance scale.

RW: I assume, once you got all the passengers ashore with their fish you had to clean up the boat, too, didn't you?

ND: Oh, sure. But that was a necessary evil.

RW: How many deckhands would be on a boat?

ND: There would be two skippers, the regular skipper and then a licensed skipper because the Coast Guard requires two licenses aboard on anything over 12 hours. Over 12 hours you have to have an additional license on board and two deckhands.

RW: Why would you have to have two skippers? Because one might get tired and the other one to relieve?

ND: That is it, or in case something might happen to one. That rule I don't think came into effect until later. It wasn't in effect when we first started. Later, and I don't remember just when, the Coast Guard decided that we should have two licenses on the boat. They might have had problems in the past.

RW: How long did you continue working with Bill Poole?

ND: I think I probably worked for Bill seven or eight years or so. Then I went to work in Mission Bay when they developed that.

RW: After the jetties were in?

ND: Right. I worked there until about 1967. Then I went back into San Diego Bay and started running a boat called the Betty Lou that belonged to someone else. I only ran that for a couple of years and then I had an opportunity to buy a small boat for myself.

RW: What is the difference between going out of San Diego Bay versus Mission Bay? Were there smaller boats out of Mission Bay?

ND: They were mostly what you would call half-day boats. That was a good spot there. You are right at the fishing grounds in ten minutes and you are almost ready to fish right off the kelp beds.

RW: Where were the boats moored at in Mission Bay? Where was the landing?

ND: Quivira Basin, right there where the Islandia Hotel is now.

RW: Are they still in business there?

ND: There is Seaforth Sportfishing there and Mission Bay Sportfishing.

RW: That was a lot easier work then, wasn't it?

ND: Not really, because you would leave the dock at 6:00 o'clock in the morning, so that would mean that you would probably get up at 4:30 every morning. Then your evening trip you wouldn't get in until 6:00 o'clock by the time you'd get the boat cleaned up.

RW: So, you would have two half-days?

ND: In the summertime you would run a sundown trip along with the others.

RW: That is three trips then. How long would you be out for the half-day trip?

ND: Half-days were five hours each trip, but then that would be tying up, cleaning up and getting ready to go again.

RW: Later you said you got your own boat, a smaller boat.

RW: What was the boat you had?

ND: The Champ. I fished out of San Diego Bay, Point Loma.

RW: When did all the sport fishing move over towards Shelter : Island area and Point Loma off Scott Street?

ND: That was in the 1950s. That is where I started fishing

RW: with Bill, right there off Scott Street. He was one of the main founders and leaders of the whole industry. His name was Captain W. E. Poole.

RW: How long did you fish with your own boat, the Champ?

ND: I am still doing it. The one I first bought is called the Galilea now. I took the Champ name with me when I more or less stepped up to better equipment. I sold what is now the Galilea and built another boat. Then I sold that boat and had another one built.

RW: Where did you have your boats built?

ND: Long Beach, California, at the Seaway Boat Company.

RW: You still own a boat called the Champ which is moored off of Point Loma?

ND: Out of H&M Sportfishing, and I am taking people out on a regular, daily basis now. Then in the fall we will run what we call multiple-made trips. We go south down as far south as the Alayus Rocks, about 480 miles from here.

RW: How big is your Champ?

ND: It is a 75-foot with 12-ton fish hold, refrigeration, spray brine and all stateroom accommodations.

RW: Do you run the boat yourself, or do you lease it out to somebody else?

ND: We operate it. I own it and I run it.

RW: Who is the "we?" Do you have other people working for you?

ND: Oh, yes, we have a crew. The "we" is my wife and I. I have a regular crew on there and occasionally I will take the boat out for two or three days at a time just to let the regular skipper have some time off.

RW: So you have a skipper's or captain's license?

ND: Right.

RW: Is it profitable to do this? I know you must have tremendous expenses, a crew, the fuel. I guess it pays off, otherwise you wouldn't be doing it.

ND: If you watch your p's and q's and be more or less aggressive, it pays off.

RW: From the early days of the 1950s when you started, how much has it changed today? Do you have to go further to go fishing?

ND: Oh, sure.

RW: Because of being fished out, or what?

ND: I don't know really if it is fished out. Sport fishing doesn't hurt the supply of sardines. You may take 150 scoops of bait ... By scoops of bait, I mean loading scoops that hold 15 pounds of fish. You may not load up quite that heavy; it may only be ten pounds of fish per scoop. So the only fish you are going to kill are the ones that fishermen actually put on their hooks. The rest of those fish you take and throw them right back into the ocean again. The fish you are actually trying to catch you are just feeding, bringing their meal to them. Sport fishing doesn't hurt or outfish anything.

RW: You are not catching large amounts of fish, like commercial fishing with the nets and so forth.

ND: Anything this is undersize, we throw back in.

RW: I guess there are laws as to what size you can keep. Have you had run-ins with commercial fishermen?

ND: That's been going on since the beginning of time. It is just a natural thing. It depends from what side of the fence you are making your living. The commercial man thinks he is entitled to make a living; the sport fisherman thinks he is entitled to object to killing everything in the ocean. I don't want to be negative about it. It is just part of the industry of the fishers. Some of it I approve and some I don't, but that is what makes good poker games - the difference of opinion.

RW: Are the numbers of people wanting to fish holding up? Is sport fishing still a good industry and is it because there are more people or more people interested in fishing?

ND: There are more people interested. You've got more attractive boats that are just very comfortable. The boats nowadays have staterooms, wash basins in them; there is air conditioning; you have music. They are larger and they are faster, but everything is relative. When I went to work for Bill that 63-footer was top of the line.

RW: Do you know of any sport fishing boats getting lost?

ND: Sure, like everything else. There are wrecks on the highway and trucks are lost, cars are lost. But San Diego as a whole has a very good record for safety.

RW: Do you have any competition with fishing out of San Pedro?

ND: Actually, we compete for the same people, but Mother Nature kind of takes care of that and the location.

RW: Because you've got better fishing down here?

ND: As a rule. We are closer to the fishing grounds. It is much easier for the people to drive down here and then go out, so you'd be fishing in a much shorter time.

RW: You are not really retired, you are just semi-retired. You own a boat, somebody else handles it for you.

ND: Right. I go fishing when I like to, as a passenger.

RW: Can you think of any names of people whom you've known over the years in fishing? Did you know the Minors? [Howard and Miona Minor of H&M Sportfishing Co.]

ND: I knew of them when I was just coming here to fish as a passenger.

RW: Who else? Can you remember other peoples' names?

ND: The Millers, Ralph Miller and his father. They started H&M Landing. Eventually I went to work at their Landing.

RW: I want to say thank you for the Maritime Museum and the San Diego Historical Society. I am glad you came down. It is kind of a crazy place to interview anyone down here in the hole of the Berkeley. So for me and everybody else, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW
