MICHAEL USINA
St. Augustine, FL
***
Date: December 18, 2014
Location: Usina residence - St. Augustine, FL
Interviewer: Anna Hamilton
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: One hour thirty minutes
Project: Minorcans of St. Augustine

[Begin Mike Usina Interview]

00:00:00

Mike Usina: That's basically what was happening.

00:00:02

Anna Hamilton: So surprised, okay. I'm going—

00:00:05

Mike Usina: You just ask me the questions.

00:00:06

Anna Hamilton: Okay; I'm going to start and ID the tape so we know where we are. This is Anna Hamilton with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is December 18, 2014. It's Thursday, I believe; it's about 10 o'clock in the morning and I'm sitting with Michael Usina in his home in St. Augustine. And I would like to give you a chance to introduce yourself to say hi; just tell me who you are and what you do.

00:00:31

Mike Usina: All right; my name is Mike—I go by Mike—Mike Usina and I'm the direct descendant from the first Minorcans that came to—to Florida back in 1768 and since then at the end of their tenure down at New Smyrna they came to St. Augustine in 1777 and so that's kind of where I got involved with the fishing part of the history from there.

00:01:02

Anna Hamilton: And for the record will you tell me your birth date?

00:01:04

Mike Usina: Oh my birthday is June 7, 1941.

00:01:08

Anna Hamilton: And so for somebody who has never been to this area will you just describe the Minorcan community? Introduce me to them?

00:01:14

Mike Usina: The Minorcans were—now it's—it's grown tremendously. You know back in the—in our childhood they were very limited. Minorcans were a close group of people. They pretty well stayed together. They—they had their cultures and they kind of kept it to their self to include the fishing, and so anyone coming here there's a lot to—to see and do. But finding Minorcan culture may be a little bit difficult.

00:01:46

Anna Hamilton: Really?

00:01:48

Mike Usina: Yeah; when I say that because most of the—like a lot of our family they've moved away. You know they just moved to different places for work or whatever. And a lot of the early

fishing for instance has kind of died away. It's nothing like it used to be. And I can remember you know when I was a teenager in the early 1950s on through the '60s that it was a big deal. That's all there was to do. There were—there were no shopping malls, there were no electronics; so what you did is you went fishing. And—and turtle egging and gopher pulling and all sorts of things that we did for—a lot of it was out of necessity. I can tell you.

00:02:34

Anna Hamilton: In which ways?

00:02:37

Mike Usina: Oh to have something to eat; mullet for instance and fishing was a source of commerce for the early Minorcans anyway. I mean back in—if you had been a Minorcan probably in let's say 1780 and you were anywhere downtown St. Augustine because Minorcans had settled—they had been granted an area off of Spanish Street which is downtown St. Augustine and if you were Minorcan in that period of time, like I said doing anything around town you heard somebody come into the city hollering, "mullet on the beach!" And then everything would stop—literally stop. And fishermen would grab up their nets and make their way over to the beach. And that wasn't necessarily easy because there were no bridges. So they'd have to sail their little boats across or paddle or however they found a way to get over to the beach. And they would harvest the schools of passing mullet that would be coming along the beach, normally coming from north to south.

00:03:36

And they were a means of both food and commerce.

00:03:39

Anna Hamilton: And what was the phrase again?

00:03:40

Mike Usina: It's called—it was, "mullet on the beach." And—and you hear that a lot, very much so back in the day. I can remember myself and—probably in the '56—'57 time frame going down to the beach in my old Model A Ford beach buggy and—and be some—some of your friends or people you knew would be coming off the beach and they'd holler at you, "mullet on the beach!" So that was kind of I guess a Minorcan war cry there for a long time, but it's basically faded away. The only—only—only time you hear that phrase anymore, there's a book called *Mullet on the Beach* and—and then of course people like myself that remember that stuff.

00:04:25

Anna Hamilton: And what beach would you go to?

00:04:26

Mike Usina: Vilano Beach; it was for years—I never went to St. Augustine Beach.

00:04:30

Anna Hamilton: Really?

00:04:30

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Mike Usina: My old—well the old beach buggy I had I was scared I wouldn't make it. You know and of course I knew everybody that lived on the North Beach. I had relatives that lived there. The Usinas up at North Beach. So I had some place to holler for help if I needed it but it was—it was some good times. We had lots of fun. We would—I mean I've watched the sun set in the west and come up in the east on Vilano Beach you know either fishing for mullet or—or turtle egging. That was a popular thing back in the '50s and '60s, before they stopped it. And that's—the sea turtles would come up at first dark and go up to the edge of the sand dunes and dig a hole and lay their eggs and we'd be sitting there waiting on them you know. **[*Laughs*]**

00:05:13

And the Minorcans they made lots of stuff out of that. They made—they were great for pound cakes because one thing about a turtle egg, it's not like a—you can boil a chicken egg and it'll get hard, but you can boil a turtle egg from now on and it won't—the yolk would not harden in it.

00:05:27

Anna Hamilton: Really?

00:05:27

Mike Usina: The yellow part would never harden. It stayed—it stayed soft throughout the process. And the guys would poke a little hole in it and just squeeze the egg out and I never cared for them. That was one taste I never could—it was too slimy for me.

00:05:40

Anna Hamilton: ***[Laughs]*** But it would keep pound cake nice and moist?

00:05:42

Mike Usina: Oh yeah; it—that's why they used them. The bakeries—and you could sell them. The Minorcans would sell them to the bakeries for that purpose. And I've sold them to—to bakeries for that purpose, but—. And the turtle, sometimes there'd be ten or twelve would come up every night you know. And there weren't all that many people that had beach buggies capable of riding in that soft sand. See I had a pretty good beach buggy because you had to go basically—it was best at high tide. So they'd come up at high tide so they didn't have so far to crawl.

00:06:15

Anna Hamilton: What was the season for turtle egging?

00:06:16

Mike Usina: Oh it would start in—they start laying well in April but—late in April but the season, best I can remember it was from like June to August or somewhere in there. I couldn't tell you the exact time frame but it was a couple months-period there before it would close. And you were supposed to leave twenty-five eggs in the nest, which I did sometimes and sometimes I didn't. But you know how—how that goes. But we would scrape the barnacles off the turtle and clean it up you know to—which was providing a service to them because those barnacles eventually would eat right through. So we would clean them off; you know and—and you had to stay there and make sure they got back to the water. You weren't supposed to go off and leave the—I never left a turtle on the beach without making sure that it was safely back into the water.

00:07:06

And the fishing part of it, the mullet were thick. Mullet season would be you know usually in September when you'd start getting the north-easters and you would go over and they would be just schools of them coming by. And—and that's when you would go out with the mullet net and cast your net and sometimes you had—I mean they—common; I've caught 100 to a throw but you know—but of the smaller ones. Now the big mullets you don't—you wouldn't catch near that many but then mullet would start roeing by mid-October. The roes would be big enough to eat and that was a favorite thing—food for Minorcans would be mullet roe and grits. They would take and fry the—they'd fry up the roe and make a big pot of grits and a big plate of grits and you'd take that roe and cut it all up in it with some ketchup and that was kind of a—kind of a treat.

00:08:06

Anna Hamilton: Is that something you all would eat in your family?

00:08:09

Mike Usina: Oh yeah; absolutely. That was a big thing. I think I was probably ten years old before I realized there was another fish besides a mullet because that's all my father did was fish for mullet you know. We would go **[*Laughs*]**—we would go over to the beach and—and—and he was—he liked to fish and—and that's what we would do and yeah I can remember the Vilano Beach bridge ***[Interviewer's note: the bridge connecting mainland St. Augustine to Vilano is the Francis and Mary Usina Bridge]***. It had burned and I can't remember the year. I was trying to think about what year that was. It had to have been in the late—well it must have been after

the war because I can remember there was a ferry that you would, you know, you'd have to get on a ferry and ferry across over to the beach because there was no bridge. They were building the —the second bridge which was the concrete bridge which they replaced here back in '95 when they built the big high-rise. But—but yeah those—it was trips to that beach and then of course by the time I got old enough I was you know every day you might say.

00:09:10

And back even after we got married, I mean we would go—I'd get home from work and we'd get in the old beach buggy and we'd go to the beach. And so that was just part of what we did. And pretty much I don't know; I mean I can rattle on and on.

00:09:28

Anna Hamilton: What was your father's name?

00:09:29

Mike Usina: My father's name was Julian, Julian Arthur. My grandfather's name was Arthur and our history goes quite back because my—my great-grandfather started the dairy, Oakland Dairy which was in 1875 and he sold products to Henry Flagler. So it was down on Saragossa Street and later it moved out to what they call I guess out of ***[Interviewer's Note: State Road]*** 16, Shallows Road I guess it is—what it was. They moved the dairy out there and it finally closed in early '50s due to you know your—your big dairies coming in like Foremost and Sealtest, Superior; I think Superior bought—which would have been my first cousin because—Charlie, he was running that at the time that it closed.

00:10:21

Anna Hamilton: Do you remember spending time at the dairy?

00:10:23

Mike Usina: I can remember going to the dairy. My oldest brother used to milk the cows. I can remember—I can remember him milking cows, but I wasn't old enough for none of that—at that time.

00:10:31

Anna Hamilton: What was your brother's name?

00:10:33

Mike Usina: My brother's name was—was Arthur and we called him AJ and he would milk the cows and do work around the dairy. And my uncle originally took over after you know my grandfather got too old to run it. His son Arthur—my dad didn't get involved too much in the dairy other than he used to deliver milk. That's how he met my—my mother was delivering milk and so—but I guess that's another story.

00:11:05

Anna Hamilton: What's your mother's name?

00:11:07

Mike Usina: Mary; I mean—I'm sorry, Ila Marie, Ila Marie Masters was her maiden name, so I've got Minorcan contact on both sides of my family from my mother's side and—and my father's.

00:11:20

Anna Hamilton: What was the name of the dairy?

00:11:21

Mike Usina: The Oakland; for some reason that's what they called it. It was called the Oakland Dairy.

00:11:27

Anna Hamilton: That's interesting. Right at the end of Saragossa Street; it's hard to imagine that there today.

00:11:31

Mike Usina: Oh no; that—that area yeah. It is hard to imagine having you know enough cows and he had—they had quite an operation from what I—you know what I've read about it. Certainly I'm not old enough to remember it—any of it, but not that part of it but where they were on Saragossa, but I even got a couple of old milk bottles from it you know that—that were used back in the '20s, 1920s.

00:11:57

Anna Hamilton: That's neat. Where did you grow up? Where did your parents settle?

00:12:00

Mike Usina: Right here in St. Augustine, born and raised here as was my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather and I suspect my great, great-grandfather, right Theresa?

00:12:12

Theresa Usina: Uh-hm.

00:12:12

Mike Usina: Yeah; so that goes back—you know we go back a direct—a direct link.

00:12:17

Anna Hamilton: And did you live in like the historic downtown or did you live—?

00:12:20

Mike Usina: I've lived all over. We lived on—out in—off of 16 what they call Rabbit Hill. My father was left a bunch of property out there so we lived out there in two or three different locations. We lived on Mulberry Street one time which is off of San Marco not too far—just probably a stone's throw from the city gates, actually Mulberry Street was. We lived down there for a while and then we lived over on Anastasia Island and—and the last place before I got married, we—well we lived on Matanzas which is right there where the old Bozard Ford, because he bought that property—some of that property from my father and then we moved to—

had a place on Sanchez and when we got married that's where the wife, Theresa and I lived for I guess we were there, what, seventeen years or so.

00:13:12

Theresa Usina: Eighteen and a half.

00:13:13

Mike Usina: Yeah; what was that?

00:13:15

Theresa Usina: Eighteen and a half.

00:13:16

Mike Usina: Eighteen and a half years on—on Sanchez and then we've been out here ever since.

00:13:21

Anna Hamilton: [***Laughs]*** Do you have a favorite part of the area that you've lived in?

00:13:24

Mike Usina: Not really. I mean all of St. Augustine is fine to me. With things the way they are now I prefer it out here because it's quiet. There's so much traffic and things downtown. It's—it's really grown to the point where it's not really fun to go down there anymore, although you

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

love it. You know and if we go we usually go at night you know when it's kind of thinned out a little bit.

00:13:45

Anna Hamilton: I want to revisit fishing just a little bit and we talked about mullet and we talked about mullet roe. How else would you fix mullet to eat?

00:13:56

Mike Usina: Well that—well they—I can tell you what; when I was a kid growing up I had boiled mullet, fried mullet, roasted mullet, stewed mullet, any way you could fix a mullet—chowder, and of course smoked mullet was probably a real Minorcan mullet was smoked mullet where they would take—like you smoke anything else. You know you would take and you didn't scale them; all you did is you cut the head off and then you would cut them right down the back and open them up and clean out the inside and salt and pepper them. And you had a smoke house and you would put them in there and smoke them. Usually it took you know anywhere from six to eight hours depending on the size to—to smoke them.

00:14:40

And that was pretty much—and again, this is a source of commerce. I've sold—you couldn't put them in this house that I smoked and sold you know. **[*Laughs*]** But that's things that you did. And—and but again, the mullet roe was—was very popular. And you know—

00:15:01

Anna Hamilton: Who would you sell the smoked mullet to? Who is buying that?

00:15:03

Mike Usina: Individuals, just people around. I could take a—man I could take 200. I worked at Fairchild and started in 1960 and I could take—on a—on a Friday I could take 200 out there and sell them, you know and sell them about a quarter a piece.

00:15:21

Anna Hamilton: And how do you eat smoked mullet?

00:15:23

Mike Usina: Well you don't eat the skin. **[*Laughs*]** You have to take and you just peel the meat right off of the—the scales are on the bottom and then the skin and then of course the meat. You would just peel it away from the skin. And—and then eat it, and then of course on one side there were—it was plain and the other side was the backbone and you'd have to peel that backbone off and—and discard that because that's where the bones were. People would—our youngest son, he makes all kind of stuff. He's—he still does it. I mean he's picked up a lot of the stuff I did. He—he makes—he makes a mullet dip and all sorts of different things.

00:16:02

Well in fact he had mullet smoked, my grandson's twenty-first birthday was Sunday and had a party out there and he had roasted oysters and—and smoked mullet along with—with other stuff.

00:16:16

Theresa Usina: Clam chowder.

00:16:16

Mike Usina: Clam chowder, yeah that's right. That's a Minorcan treat also is clam chowder.

00:16:20

Anna Hamilton: And will you tell me about clam chowder?

00:16:23

Mike Usina: Well clam chowder is—is one of the so-called delicacies and there's a lot of people, a lot of restaurants now have what they call Minorcan clam chowder but I question that. But anyway locals that made it somewhat different and you just simply would make like you'd make a stew. Theresa you could explain that better than me. I'm not a—

Theresa Usina: I'm not a talker. ***[Laughs]***

Mike Usina: I'm not a cook but you would take the clam and I—I can tell you; we would—I would go out and—and harvest the clams out of the mud you know in the creeks and the river and wash them good and stick them in the freezer and when they popped open we'd just cut the clam out and that's what you would use to you know to make the—make the chowder along with potatoes and tomatoes. We always made the—I guess you'd call it the Manhattan style, the one that's red. Never made the New England or white; it was always—all the locals, nobody—everybody makes it out of the tomato—. And they put their Datil peppers in it; yep. And the one

we made the other night for the party, I forgot about that—Theresa said, 'how about checking this and see what you think about—do I need to put some more Datil pepper in it?' So I tasted it; you know, I said, 'well I don't taste any—any Datil pepper in it.' So she says, 'well how many should I put?' So I got the bag of Datil peppers out of the freeze and I said, 'oh let's put about three in each—of these in each one.'

00:17:51

So she cut them up and put it in and it ended up hot as hell. **[*Laughs*]** I like it warm but I don't like it too hot, but it did. It—I tell you what; you got to watch how many of them you put in it because they'll heat it up in a hurry.

00:18:05

Anna Hamilton: ***[Laughs]*** Will you tell me about the Datil peppers for somebody who has never had one or doesn't know about it?

00:18:11

Mike Usina: Datil peppers, that's another Minorcan; that's another story all together. Minorcan, I think took to Datil peppers like they did mullet on the beach when they came here. I think—I think Datil peppers were already here personally but anyway. You take and—they use it in just about every type of—of food dish now you know. The pilaus and of course the clam chowder and now there's people who do all sorts of things with them, even take and dip them in chocolate. But—I need to clear my—they do all sorts of things with Datil peppers. They have festivals and things which are neat. And that's—it's—it's quite a—it's quite a big thing in St. Augustine and it's really blossomed.

00:19:01

When I was growing up if you weren't a Minorcan you didn't get your hands on Datil pepper seeds. I can tell you; they were very protective, just like with fishing. If they had a fishing spot and you—and I can't tell you the times you would be going up the river and you'd go on one of your favorite creeks we call it, which is a tributary off the main river, and you would go in and there would be a boat; they'd see you coming and if they were catching fish they—they would actually pull up an anchor and go someplace else so you wouldn't see where they were.

00:19:30

That was common. That's what I said earlier about—Minorcans were, and I understand why, they were close-knit and family-oriented because if they weren't they wouldn't have survived the treatment that they endured in New Smyrna which bonded them you know and they had to really stick together and it followed through.

00:19:48

Anna Hamilton: And that's something that was passed down through the generations?

00:19:50

Mike Usina: I think so. Yeah; I honestly—I think that it was something you know just passed on and—but it's you know now you've got so many Minorcans. They've grown. Gosh you know from—from a few hundred to many thousands, descendants you know through the years, but it's pretty much—I think pretty much the same.

00:20:12

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Anna Hamilton: It's still the same close-knit community.

00:20:15

Mike Usina: I think so. The Minorcan part of it I know the—the ones that we associate with you know are pretty close-knit.

00:20:23

Anna Hamilton: And they've lived here for—

00:20:25

Mike Usina: They've lived here all their life just like us, just—just like us.

00:20:29

Anna Hamilton: That's—that's interesting. I also wanted to ask you about shrimping.

00:20:34

Mike Usina: Oh shrimping? Now shrimping was something that back in the day—and I'm going to talk about the day, back in the Minorcan days—they made the shrimp nets, they didn't have to make a net over about four foot because the shrimp were so thick. And what I didn't quite understand; the—the size of the mesh and that's the little square that it's in the net, they made a quarter-inch mesh and I found that through coming up with some old remnants of nets and things from many—from back from the probably '20s or '30s.

00:21:12

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

And they—they—I noticed that the nets were small. And I can remember them with the little four-foot, five-foot was a big shrimp net. And they had no trouble; I mean the shrimp would have been thick in the summer. I know—I remember talking to my dad a bit about it; I mean he could make one cast and catch more shrimp than you could fish with all day. And there were no rod and reels. You know I mean you fished with a hand line. It was well—it was well into the '50s before I had a rod and reel. I can tell you that.

00:21:41

But and so but the fishing was—shrimping was good and then in the summer time back in—in my—of course way before my time, but you would go to the St. John's River and you would bait them up. And—and a lot of the Minorcans would go out in the—they'd go out during—in the spring and they would construct a platform which you were allowed to do. They've stopped all of that .They just waded out probably to waters you know up under your arms and you would take and put—they would go and cut these cypress trees, little small diamond cypress trees and they would wash them down into the—into the sand and then they would build a framer on them and put a deck on it. And then what they would do, come dark, before dark, you would wade out, take your washtub with your net and your—and your fish meal and—and—and flour and stuff that you mixed with it or most of the time—they didn't start using flour 'til my day—what they would—they would take and go get mud from the beach, you know I mean the—the—you'd get it anywhere along the causeway going over to Vilano. They would get mud and they would mix the fish meal in it. And probably before fish meal they would crush up oysters—it was excellent. Well actually, crushed oysters is the best bait.

00:22:58

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

And you would mix it together and you would make the—they would make the bait balls. I made mine flat like a pancake so you didn't catch them so bad in the net. And you would toss—you would toss them around in the boat and then when it got dark the shrimp would come in from the channel and it was nothing to catch a washtub, a number three washtub full of shrimp. I mean it was—that wasn't a big treat—I mean big feat. They were that thick and this was back in the—in the '50s, '60s, and into the '70s they were that thick.

00:23:29

Anna Hamilton: Would you use them for bait primarily or would you also—?

00:23:32

Mike Usina: Oh I sold them. I mean we would eat them of course. You know, we'd fill the freezer and then you know and we would sell them. I mean that—again that was a source of commerce. But that was—that was quite a bit. Now shrimping you know there's—it's always the north river was full—still we got shrimp. You know I mean nothing like it used to be of course and of course you got the shrimping industry which has dwindled down to not—not a lot anymore. But—but in the day it was quite an industry. Shrimping was a big part of St. Augustine. A lot of your big name families, mostly Greeks were the shrimping side of the—the group of Minorcans and Greeks that came over. It seemed like the Greeks were the—were the shrimpers.

00:24:18

Anna Hamilton: And most everyone would shrimp in the St. John's River or would anybody go to the beach to shrimp?

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

00:24:23

Mike Usina: No; they went—you wouldn't go on a beach. You had to go in the creeks. They didn't—you wouldn't catch nothing on the—on the beach. You had to go—they would—they would—they were in the tributaries. I call them creeks; that's what they are. And you'd go at low tide and they would drain out of the little tributaries and things around and settle into the holes. You learned where these places were and that's where you would—you would cast your net.

00:24:47

Anna Hamilton: It sounds like an all-day affair to go out there and—

00:24:51

Mike Usina: No, no, no; you didn't have—actually you didn't have all that much time. You had to do it right at low tide and you had to catch it probably the last hour of the falling tide and the first hour coming in so you only had a couple hours because once that tide started coming up they disappeared. They just went on up the creek you know into the shallows and—and places because they more or less fed off the mud anyway.

00:25:12

Anna Hamilton: Would you see a lot of other people shrimping at the same time?

00:25:13

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Mike Usina: Not a lot. Not a lot; now the St. John's was another story. You would see a lot of people out there, sometimes as far as you could see in both directions. I never—I never—I shrimped a little bit off of a stand but my—my preference was the boat, always had a flat-bottom wood boat and that—you know and you would drive a stake you know and tie—tie your boat in between it and that way you could fish off of either—either side of it. And I'd bait three spots on either side of it. And you know shrimp moved; they don't necessarily stay in the same area. They would move up and down the river, so you kind of had to follow them. If you had a stand you were stuck.

00:25:50

I mean when they were there you caught them and when they weren't there you didn't, so —but by boat I could go anyplace up and down that river. So I would follow them.

00:25:59

Anna Hamilton: Is there much of a difference between the shrimp in the St. John's river versus the more like brackish tributaries?

00:26:05

Mike Usina: Well St. John's River is brackish. Actually—

00:26:10

Anna Hamilton: Is it?

00:26:10

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Mike Usina: Oh yeah down this area yeah; it's—that water is red. It's got salt in it but you know saltwater fish and shrimp go all the way down into Lake George. And you catch mullet in —in Silver Spring. I mean mullet are in Silver Springs. If you ever go in there and ride the glass bottom boat; have you ever done that? But you probably saw the mullet and there's some real big ones in there and they had to come out of that St. John's at some point into the—what they call the Silver River. It comes in off of the—not the Suwanee but the Ocklawaha I guess would be the one which probably comes out of Lake George.

00:26:52

But yeah; there's mullet everywhere. Mullets are in every ocean in the world. There's mullet and it's a little point of—I'm getting off the subject but mullet is the only freshwater fish with a gizzard. Did you know that?

00:27:07

Anna Hamilton: ***[Laughs]*** No; what does that mean?

00:27:08

Mike Usina: All right; it has a gizzard just like a chicken. You know chickens have a gizzard. And the reason that the mullet has a gizzard is because they're a vegetarian. They don't—they don't eat bait; you won't catch them with shrimp on a rod and reel. They eat you know mud and grasses and—and things of that sort, so that's why they have a gizzard, and a lot of people didn't know that. Some of them eat it; I couldn't—I didn't care about eating no gizzard out of—out of a mullet but I knew people that did eat them and—and raved about it.

00:27:39

Anna Hamilton: Really?

00:27:40

Mike Usina: Yeah. **[*Laughs*]** It just wasn't my thing. You know too many other parts of a fish to eat other than a gizzard. But yeah; the—they had a gizzard and another thing called a gall. It was a little green sack. You had to be very careful cleaning them because if you cut it then that green got into the meat you might as well just throw it away because it left such a foul taste. But that's the only fish I know that—that had a gizzard and a gall.

00:28:05

Anna Hamilton: And now you mentioned selling mullet too. Did you sell it like unsmoked and just raw—?

00:28:08

Mike Usina: Oh yeah; yeah, absolutely. It wasn't a lot of market for mullet per se because it was so plentiful you know and—and it just is not a—to me something that the restaurants never served them. Now if you go to Pensacola, over in Pensacola on the west coast they have—they serve mullet right on the menu. And the mullet over in Pensacola, Bay of Pensacola, much better eating than they are over here because over there it's sand and over here it's mud. So they get in the mud here and—and if you catch the mullet out of the—the ocean you know after they've been out in that ocean a while they kind of clean out because basically in the—they come out of the St. John's. They're going in the St. John's by the millions and when it's getting near time,

like I said, once a good north-easter strikes up, any time in September and October they stream out of that St. John and that's when the Mayport people are waiting on them up there. They used to catch them with big seine nets, big gill nets. But then they come out of the St. John's and come along the coast and that's when the Minorcans will be sitting there waiting on them with their old beach buggies and their mullet net you know waiting on the mullet. But no; there's not much of a market.

00:29:28

I mean I've sold them you know a few here and there. I've sold them you know to individuals but as far as—I called Salvador one time. I had a—I had a darned three-quarter ton pickup truck. My dad had it, big old dual-wheel thing and Thanksgiving day I went over to Vilano and I filled that thing to the top with roe mullet. I mean you couldn't put another mullet in and it was jumping out. I had to quit and come home. And I called Salvador; they had a number you could call you know for you know when they were closed and they offered me like three-cents a pound. So I told the guy; I said I'll tell you what I'll do. I says if I'm going to give them away I'm going to give them to somebody I know. So it's funny. I come home and a buddy of mine helped me and I cut the roes out of all the ones that were roed because I could get a good price for the roe. And the mullet, I drove over—we went out King Street out there to—it used to be they called it the Old Georgia Market and it's where the black residents kind of hung out there you know. And—and so I pulled up in there and got out the truck and I held up a couple mullet and here they come you know. And I give away that whole truckload of mullet and I enjoyed every mullet I give away. And I ended up with seven—eight bucks in change. You know they'd give you a little something because they was tickled to death to get them.

00:30:54

But I enjoyed that more than three-cents a pound I can tell you.

00:30:57

Anna Hamilton: It's interesting that it's so popular but you don't see it on menus here really.

00:31:02

Mike Usina: They tried something and I can't recall the year; it's been probably thirty—forty years ago maybe by now. They tried changing the name to Lisa; did you hear that one?

00:31:13

Anna Hamilton: ***[Laughs]*** You know I just read a blog about that somewhere.

00:31:15

Mike Usina: Yeah; they changed it to Lisa thinking that—that would make it more appealing to people but it didn't go over. Nobody—no Minorcan I know ever called them a Lisa you know. That—that didn't fly with us. We stilled called them a mullet.

00:31:28

Anna Hamilton: Well it doesn't seem like it would work very well. ***[Laughs]***

00:31:29

Mike Usina: It's—no, no it didn't but your restaurants, no, no. They—now smoked mullet is another matter. There's a lot of people that smoke mullet and sold smoked mullet. And I could

sell a truckload of them today if I had them. They're very popular but it's time consuming. You know now the mullet are scarce and nothing like they used to be and then you know the work of cleaning them and spend eight hours smoking them and you know the—it's just not feasible for me anymore.

00:31:57

Anna Hamilton: Do you still have like a smoker that you would use for mullet?

00:31:59

Mike Usina: No. I got rid of that stuff some years ago. **[*Laughs*]**

00:32:05

Anna Hamilton: I also wanted to ask you about your dad's drum camp.

00:32:09

Mike Usina: Okay, the drum camps now were—that was—that was a seasonal thing. That was —January there wasn't much going on so we would prepare for the drum season and you know we would buy the—you know you would set out what they called drum lines, just it's a trotline. But we called them, you know they called them drum lines, which I can remember going up with my father and—and his friends up on the Guana which is you know the Guana Wildlife Area now but back then that was a—an open—anybody could go up there and camp. And they would build cabins and go up and you would start in February and—and you usually didn't catch any drum until late February and all through March. And about the middle of April they would be

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

gone. But they did like the same things as mullet; they would come in the rivers to spawn. And after they spawned they would go—where to, heavens knows. I know they—I know they caught—they've caught black drum as far as—as New Jersey. That I know.

00:33:17

And they also catch them down in Banana River and Indian River which is Old Galley—that's what used to be a favorite spot. We used to go down there and catch them in January. My late cousin that passed away, he and I used to go down there and catch them. We'd go down there and fish all night. And around that Old Galley bridge and it wasn't nothing to go catch five or six. But back to the cabins, that was quite a thing. You know you'd go up and spend the weekend and they would bait their lines. You know they'd go up and bait them Friday afternoon and then you would—you would run them on the tide. You would want the tide to be slack because that tide run pretty strong. You'd go out at slack tide and remove some—I mean some of them had you know fifty hooks and then when I got old enough to fishing on my own, you know I'd—I mean sometimes I'd have two lines. I had one—I used to put one all the way across the river from the mouth of the Guana all the way over to the other side. And— and would catch quite a few, but yeah; that was some good times going up there and—and me and one of the boys that was my age. We'd wander all over that Guana. I've walked every inch of that thing at one time. And I used to see wild hogs and—and you know deer and turkeys and everything else we would see. And we was just little guys you know.

00:34:44

Anna Hamilton: Wow. How old were you?

00:34:45

Mike Usina: I don't know. We was probably ten, eleven, twelve and thirteen somewhere in there. By the time I got fourteen I guess it was I started fishing on my own. And Frank Usina, you know over at North Beach, they had the fish camp at the time and Jack, whom I got close to. Jack and I were very close. And I started the—my first year was—let's see I fished in 19—my first year on my own really was 1957. And—and I stayed right there where the—I spent the whole drum season right there in the bait house and I had me a cot and I spent—I started in there the first of February and I fished and didn't catch nothing for a month. I'd go out there and bait that line religiously **[*Laughs*]** you know. And you'd hear the things grunting; you know you'd hit night they would grunt.

00:35:44

Anna Hamilton: Really?

00:35:45

Mike Usina: They'd make a booming sound you know and you—you could hear them grunting but they wouldn't bite. The water temperature, they won't bite 'til that water temperature gets fifty nine degrees. And I studied this stuff and I started checking that water temperature. And you know I would—then I knew from then on when to put that line out. I would check that—after that—after that first dud of working my butt off and nothing—for catching nothing for so long I said well, this won't happen again. So I figured out when they started biting and that's when I waited. So the next year I waited 'til well into March.

00:36:20

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

But yeah that was—and again that was another source of commerce. I used to sell them things for ten, twelve cent a pound. You'd catch them anywhere from twenty pounds to you know sixty, seventy were common.

00:36:34

Anna Hamilton: And what sort of—

00:36:34

Mike Usina: Every now and then you'd catch a big one.

00:36:36

Anna Hamilton: —what sort of a fish is black drum?

00:36:38

Mike Usina: Black drum it's in the same family as your red fish, you know your—your—we called them red bass and now they call them red fish. Same family; it's—it's just a big—it's a—it's a much—you know red fish are you know long and more or less thin but the black drum were large. They had you know a much taller in structure and they got much bigger. But the meat wasn't—I wouldn't compare it. It probably wasn't as good as the red fish. Certainly wasn't any market for it. That's another thing. It was like the mullet. It wasn't any really market for them and— but you did get a lot more form them than you did mullet, but even the roe mullet you couldn't—you couldn't get nothing for them. If you got seven, eight cent a pound for roe mullet you was doing good. But yeah; the black drum and—and gosh I eat a lot of them, you know you

would clean them, skin them, you had to skin them because of the—and cut the red meat out because it had a—you'd have to bleed them when you catch them before—you know you need to cut the throat while it was alive and hang the up and get—you know bleed them. If you didn't they weren't really fit to eat because that red would be all in the meat.

00:37:50

And—and so after you cleaned them you know you would—I still cut the red out. You know it was such a big fish. You'd cut it in steaks. You'd fillet it and—and then you would just cut it in—in steaks like—and fry them. I even smoked them but they was too dry to—it didn't do good smoked.

00:38:10

Anna Hamilton: Well that's something else I wanted to ask; so mullet was good for smoking because it's—

00:38:14

Mike Usina: It's oily. Mullet was—is an oily fish just like blue fish are real good for smoking. I would—I mean I don't care nothing for blue fish fried. That or mackerel or none of that stuff, Spanish mackerel or king mackerel, none of those. I don't care for them. But they're an oily fish and they smoke good. And they're better smoked, but the mullet, yeah it's really good because of—of they stay nice and moist and they're oily and—and do better. Fish like whiting and things of that sort you know are dry. Drum, flounder; flounder is my favorite. That's another thing; that was my—that was my passion was floundering.

00:38:57

Anna Hamilton: When would you go floundering?

00:38:58

Mike Usina: Floundering, they would—as soon as that water warmed up, any time in April usually. And you would flounder right on through 'til this time of year now. Once that water cools off they disappear or they move—move back into the ocean I would say—what wasn't caught. But yeah, floundering was really another—another big part of Minorcans' repertoire I guess you would call it. ***[Laughs] I***t was kind of—we would go into seasons you know from January—February and March of drum fishing and then along came the floundering. And then you would flounder and I can remember floundering when I was just a little guy with my—my father and older brother. And my nearest brother is nine years older than me.

00:39:53

So I was somewhat of a lost—an accident. I told that to a lady one time and she says no child is an accident. But anyway I was the last one to come along and they were much older than me, so—and you know during the war years it was lights-out in St. Augustine, because the German u-boats were patrolling up and down the—the coast, so the—you had to have lights out. So I don't remember none of that; I'm not old enough to remember that being born in '41, but—but I can remember starting really well long about '48 and '49. I can remember going with them and there were no South Beach jetties as we know it now. That was nothing but sand going out the inlet. The North Beach jetty was there, but there were no South Beach jetties and we would go start in the back-end of Salt Run and walk all the way around Salt Run and right on out to the inlet. And you had—you didn't—you couldn't—you weren't allowed to gig. You had to take a—

they would take a broomstick and a quarter-inch rod and drive it into the end of that broomstick and—and sand the needle point on it and you would have to stick the flounder and you would stick them and then you'd have to run your hand down underneath him and catch the rod to lift him up because if you tried—he'd just slide right off if you tried—it wasn't no way to hold him on there. You weren't allowed any kind of barb.

00:41:15

And we would go and of course I was the sack guy. And I would carry the sack. I wasn't allowed to stick no flounders. I'd probably get away but they was you know—anyhow, I could—I would carry the sack until it would get too heavy and then of course one of the brothers would have to take over then. But a little insight: I can remember very well walking you know out doing our floundering and you would come back and normally you'd just walk back because you'd have all you wanted you know. And you—it wasn't much use of going over to the same area that you had already walked across. So anyhow, I can remember on the way back seeing the wildcat tracks on the beach where they had been following you. Never saw one and you would walk along holding a lantern you know. Coleman had come out with the gas lantern you know with the mantles on it and you'd—you know you'd put white—you had to use white gas and you would pump it up and it'd give off a good amount of light. And—and you—you would see you know what was behind you. I can remember—and they would comment about them. You would see the tracks and they'd smell that fish and they would follow you but never—I never ever saw one.

Anna Hamilton: Wow.

Mike Usina: That was kind of neat though.

00:42:29

Anna Hamilton: And so you'd go at night for flounder?

00:42:30

Mike Usina: Oh yeah; yeah, well yeah to gig them you'd go at night. And of course once you know I got old enough to have a boat you know I started going—going myself you know and putting lights on the boat and you would go along at night with—and then they—they allowed gigging it started sometime I don't know in the early to middle '50s, they allowed you to have a gig. And it's been that way ever since up to a five-prong gig. And now you can just stick them and just pick them up and you know you have to you know knock them off with your foot to get them off the gig.

00:43:04

I made a little—I made a little deal where you—I just—a block of wood where I'd just slide them right up in a slot and then just pull them right off. But yeah; I've stuck them, many a flounder and again that was—that was nothing to go stick—if I stuck twenty that was a bad night. You know I mean it's nothing to go stick thirty or forty with lights that—that you couldn't see ten feet you know. The lights weren't all that good but now they got—and see, if we go out now and the limit is ten, like I'll go with my son and I mean if we stick ten between the two of us we've done something. You know you might get eleven to twelve but—. It's not nothing like it was you know; everything is—and it's so many people.

00:43:55

You know I sold I couldn't tell you how many I sold for twenty-five cent a pound to the —to the restaurants and it's where I sold my fish was to restaurants. You got a better price. And individuals just like I did with the shrimp. I sold them shrimp; I used to get fifty cent a pound for shrimp you know. And mostly individuals. And of course the flounder was individuals other than I started a—I know you've heard of the Raintree Restaurant, okay?

00:44:26

Anna Hamilton: Uh-huh.

00:44:27

Mike Usina: Back in my day it was called the Corner House and I got in with those folks and I had to clean them for them. But they give me a good price. I think he give me like sixty cent a pound and—for them just like they come out of the water and then I would fillet them for them. You know they had no way of—of cleaning them and I had to clean them for them you know which—which for that extra money it was well worth it. Great day, I sold them fish for years.

00:45:00

Anna Hamilton: I might pause just for a second.

00:45:03

Mike Usina: We was talking about flounders.

00:45:04

Anna Hamilton: Yeah and I want to make sure—we've been talking for a little bit and I want to make sure that we have a chance to talk about cast nets. So I might shift over to that; will you tell me about the kinds of cast nets that you—?

00:45:15

Mike Usina: Okay; the cast nets—been around a long time. The Minorcans in the day, they made two types of net. They made a Spanish net which is a net with a bag sewn into it which was probably very popular for the early years, but when I got involved in making nets the Spanish nets were kind of dying out because the fish were so hard to get out of them. I will—I will show you in—you know later the difference in the nets.

00:45:45

Then we went to what's called an English net, which was a net—the same as they are today and it's—as opposed to having a bag sewn into it, and the only thing with a Spanish net, if you wanted a seven-foot net, if you wanted a seven-foot net you had to—you had to net an extra four-feet at the bottom to tuck it in because you had a two-foot bag on it. So that was an awful lot of work and to try to get the fish out of them, man you would—and they—the—they had—they had in their mind that—that the only way you could catch mullet in shallow water was with a Spanish net. But that wasn't so; you would throw that net and it—and they literally would run into the bag. Whereas the Spanish net—I mean the English net, it's one with the—the tucks in it, the brail lines, whatever you want to call them and it's got the horn and the swivel in the top. And when you cast that and when you pull it in it makes a bag; it tucks. And the fish are in the bag.

00:46:52

And I—you know I could—I'd catch so many more with this but them poor guys over there with that Spanish net, I'd have to laugh at them. Me about fifteen to sixteen and here they are with them old Spanish nets trying to get the fish out and I'd go out there and catch a net full and go up on the beach and dump them out and I'd be back out and have another net full before they got the ones out they had just caught. So that was the difference; you know you could catch so many more because you could throw the net you know. It didn't take nothing to get them out. You'd always have somebody you know with you picking them up and putting them in the—in the beach buggy, the sack, or tub or whatever. But that's the basic difference between the Spanish net and the mullet net and that's pretty much the same today. The material has changed. There's three dates that I'll mention. One—the first one was 1939 and that's when DuPont came out with the synthetic materials as we know it today—nylon and the poly materials and plastics and things that—. And basically what DuPont—the reason for nylon was the ladies' hose, or stockings as we know it. That—that's what the market was.

00:48:07

And the ladies would line up you know to get the—get the—a hose to cover their legs you know. And then it was some years a little later I guess in the early '40s when they—when they started you know making twine and—and so then comes the war and so you couldn't find nylon for making anything out of until after the war. But I can—when I first started making nets it was nothing but cotton. You could use linen but linen had kind of faded out and cotton was the material of choice up until the—actually the late '40s and then people kind of drifted away from the cotton because cotton was a high-maintenance. It would—you had to—you had to dry it. If you made the mistake of taking a—plus it didn't last long and it wasn't very strong. I mean I—

first net I ever had was a cotton net that I made, and it was a-Spanish net. And I can remember throwing thing over roe mullet and watching them go through it and knot holes in it. **[*Laughs*]**

00:49:22

But anyhow and then when the nylon come along that—that stopped that pretty much. But yeah; cotton was some—all through—my ancestors would have made nets out of linen and cotton. Cotton has been around for a long time and of course linen before cotton. Well then the next date that come along was probably the most important date. Prior to 1952 every webbing of any—any kind of net webbing, I don't care what it was, was made by hand. Then in 1952 a Japanese firm came out with—with an automatic webbing machine which made net with—webbing with a machine. And—and that really revolutionized the—because you know you can imagine and I only made one, I knitted one 100-yard, not—not 100 yards, yeah 100 yard seine which is 300-feet and—and if you wanted a beach seine that's what you had to do; you had to make it by hand. Then when you know along comes the webbing machine and then they started making 1,000-yard nets you know and pulling them with a boat. You know they would—they had these boats with the motor mounted right in the middle and they would **[*Laughs*]** go out from the beach and—and the net peeling out of the back you know and they would make a big circle and come ashore. Then they would pull it in with trucks.

00:50:57

So but anyhow back to the net stuff, the—a lot of—some of the older fishermen really were opposed to nylon because the notch didn't stay real tight like the cotton formed a really good tight knot. Where the nylon—early nylon didn't and then along about '57 or '58 there was a company called Tangle Fin that came out with a really good first bonded nylon which had a—

the knot stayed tight. It wasn't slick. You know your early nylon was really slick and it would just—the knots would just loosen right up.

00:51:33

You had to hang the nets up because the knots would loosen on them. They would hang them up to keep them—keep them, the weight of the sinkers would keep—keep the knots tight. But nylon then again the early mono-filament—mono-filament came out the same time—the same time nylon did but your mono-filament was like wire. It was real stiff and—and you couldn't knit with it. They couldn't even use it for—for line on a—on a reel for fishing until 1959. That's the third year when DuPont again came out with a—with a much softer pliable nylon called [saran]. And that pretty much was the end of the nylon nets. I've never stopped. I never cared for the mono-filament nets as what I do. As far as fishing they're great. No maintenance to them; you know they're—they're made out of—everything is plastic. The sinkers—now even making sinkers out of plastic which I don't—I don't care for but they're not as heavy. And these new nets that you buy now are pretty much—there's a lot of issues with them.

00:52:54

But anyway the Minorcan nets were—went from linen to cotton to nylon and that's where I've stayed, myself, in that respect. But I started making nets in earnest probably in 1955. By 19—I guess not much after that I was—I guess as good as anybody, totally proficient in every aspect of making nets.

00:53:26

Anna Hamilton: And so you would have been fourteen?

00:53:28

Mike Usina: I would have been fourteen or fifteen.

00:53:30

Anna Hamilton: Wow.

00:53:31

Mike Usina: And I was totally proficient at making—because I started making nets when I was probably about nine or ten. And this is the thing: I picked up watching my father. I didn't—as far as—I cannot remember him sitting me down and saying, 'this is how you do it.' I don't recall that. I remember me watching him and then just picking it up and emulating you know with getting the cord and the needle and—and practicing these things, you know and I pretty much picked it up myself. I had a much older brother who was very good at making nets also and there were two types of knots, you know. There was the old Spanish knot which was kind of slow and then the—the newer knot, the English knot was much faster and I can demonstrate that to you at some point here if you wanted to see it.

00:54:18

But yeah; the net-making—and I really got into it you know and—and back in that timeframe, the '50s—'40s, '50s, and '60s—well my timeframe would be the '50s, all through the '50s I used to make nets and sell them to the firemen. When I say make nets, that was just the blank—what I call a blank. That would be a seven-foot net ready to put the sinkers on it. And I used to sell them to them for $10.

00:54:50

Anna Hamilton: To the firemen?

00:54:51

Mike Usina: To the firemen. I would sell them the nets for $10 and then they would put the sinkers and the tucks you know and the lead line and whatever you know and I don't know what they—I don't remember what they charged. They used to get—I sold a many a one for $25 and $30 that I made myself. It used to cost me oh my, gosh it didn't cost me—you would go get the lead for—at the junkyard for eight—ten cent a pound. Now I don't know what it is now; I hadn't bought any in many years. I've got lead that I've just gathered and kept over the years.

00:55:25

But and the twine, you would get a twine, a quarter-pound for seventy cent. It would take a pound to make a seven-foot net. So you could see you know I might have you know $4, $5, $6 maybe at—at best in a net you know and sell it for $30. And it takes m,e I don't know—it depends on—I mean I have a formula, depending on how many windings you put in the net you know there's either fourteen, sixteen, or twenty-one winding nets. And the more the windings the more the webbing, and therefore the longer it takes to make it. But the Minorcans make twenty winding nets originally. They pretty much—that's what they did. Then it dropped off; you know they—they figured out you know back in—. And my father, he made fourteen winding nets and where he picked that up I have no idea. I don't remember but most of the Minorcans made sixteen. That is in the '50s.

00:56:29

Back in the, you know the 19th century, early 20th century you know they—they made 21 winding nets. That's what you believed they had to be; they didn't—I had an old man on the beach one time arguing with me. It was kind of a thing; you'd be on the beach and have—and you—the old fishermen they'd see a kid you know. 'What kind of net you got, boy?' You know and you **[*Laughs*]**—and they would—you know you'd tell them you know. 'Where did you get that thing?' 'Well I made it.' You know and 'so how many windings you got in it?' And I'd say 'fourteen.' 'Fourteen?' He said 'that thing won't open. You aren't going to catch nothing with that.' I said 'well go look in the back of that beach buggy if you want to see what I've caught with it.' And I had this old guy; he was real persistent. He said 'I tell you what; he said you spread that thing out on the ground' and he said 'I'm going to put my net over it and he says I'll completely cover it by a foot.' You know I said 'look; you know I don't want to humiliate and embarrass you but that won't happen.' I said 'your net is seven-foot.' I said 'mine is seven-foot.' And I said 'it'll be inch for inch.' 'Oh no,' he says—he says 'that net you got, it can't open enough.' I said 'all right; let's go see.'

00:57:36

I spread that net out on the ground and just as round as this table and he spread his out on top of it and right on the match for match and poor man had egg on his face. But I explained something to him. I said 'you know—you know I've been doing this a while now and I can tell you that you figured the circumference around a net is figured by twice the—you know if it's seven-foot it's fourteen times three will give you, you know from point—this side all the way around that back. That's how many feet is going to be around that—that circle. So it makes no difference how many windings you got in it; it's going to be the same distance.' But boy he

didn't know what to say. So anyway he waddled on off. But yeah; that's the way you figure how much foot line you need on a net. If you got a seven-foot net, seven and seven is fourteen and then you just times three. It would be what—forty—on a seven-foot net, it would be what—forty-five? Is that right—forty-two; seven and seven is fourteen—fourteen times three would be ten, twenty, thirty, be what—?

00:58:50

Anna Hamilton: Forty-two.

00:58:50

Mike Usina: Forty-two feet. Well that's close enough but that—that is the formula for it and then of course that you know however big it is it's the same formula whether you—whether it's seven-foot, six or eight-foot or whatever it is. It's twice the height times three will give you how much foot line and you always buy a couple of feet extra because it's hard to put it on there right on the money. But anyway the—that's pretty much the—it on the—on the nets. I don't know you know—

00:59:23

Anna Hamilton: You primarily make the English nets?

00:59:25

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Mike Using: That's all I make now. I don't—I made—I got a Spanish net that I made for show and tell. I made a little six-foot Spanish net just to show people you know how they were. And it's more or less a toy; you know I never use it.

00:59:37

Anna Hamilton: And your dad, then, made English nets?

00:59:39

Mike Usina: He made English nets. I never—I never him—I never remember him with a Spanish net at all because I guess I—you know he used to laugh about them, too with them Spanish nets trying to get the fish out of them. **[*Laughs*]** And my dad was born in 1900, so and you know, where he—I guess he picked it up from—from his father most likely you know because I mean every—back when I was growing up every Minorcan knew how to make a net. It's just something you know that you learned to do and you wanted to do it.

01:00:16

Nowadays you can forget it. Try to find somebody to teach. I put—I put a thing on—on Facebook. I was looking for an apprentice you know and got absolutely no response. You know aren't nobody—they aren't going to put those smart phones and iPads and stuff down long enough to do something like that. **[*Laughs*]** You know because it takes a while to get very proficient you know to get really fast at it. You know it takes you a long time if you didn't know how. I can probably make seven-foot, fourteen winding net in probably twenty-four hours.

01:00:56

Anna Hamilton: A straight 24 hours?

01:00:57

Mike Usina: Well not at one time. I mean that's how long it would take it from the time you started 'til you—'til you put your last row on it you know and then of course the more—of course the longer it is the longer it would take but that's probably about the quickest and you know maybe a little less but—. But I can make an eight-foot one in no trouble in thirty hours. That's with a one-inch mesh. Pretty much is what I make now is I like to—I like to stay about a sixteenth under an inch; that little bit of roe mullet, if he can get his nose in it he's going through it. He'll stretch it and you take a four or five-pound I mean he'll—he'll get in it. He'll—if he can get his nose in there **[*Laughs*]** he will stretch it because it will—it will slide. Those knots will slide. You know with enough force, so that's why I always try to stay a little bit and you don't want to get too big because a lot of these guys make—make nets that are—with an inch—eighth inch and a quarter and I—you know that's too big a mesh for me. I mean I've—I've learned over the years of what you should do and what you shouldn't do.

01:02:11

Anna Hamilton: I bet. What are some of the tools that you use?

01:02:13

Mike Usina: Well you—well basically all there is to it is called—now modern-day people call it a shuttle and a—and a—and a finger board. That's what they—that's what they call it. I call it a knitting needle and a gauge. Same thing; but and you string your cord on it and I use a large

needle because I don't like knots. I pride on keeping the knots down and when I say a knot, that is where when you run out of cord you have to refill your needle and tie back in. And the—the little needle—the smaller amount of cord that you can knit with that means you're going to run out much sooner and that—or you're going to have more knots in it. And when I say knot that's what—you can't disguise it. You're going to have a little knot there. And knots tend to sometimes hang up in the webbing and it's nothing worse than to throw your net over a bunch of fish and start pulling it in and the darned thing is hung up and half of them get out. **[*Laughs*]** I pretty well remedied that; I don't—you don't see my knots too much. I've kind of learned how to blend them in where you don't see them.

01:03:25

Anna Hamilton: What is your favorite part about making cast nets?

01:03:27

Mike Usina: My favorite part is the knitting part. The least favorite is making the sinkers. I've got let's see; I've got—I've got an eight-foot, I've got a six-foot, an eight-foot and a six-foot shrimp net and buckets right now ready for the lead. And I'm just putting it off. **[*Laughs*]** Go out there and make them darned sinkers, that lead is hot and I'm waiting on my grandson. He's—right now he's over at the University of Florida and his last test I think was yesterday. And he'll be home and—and anyway I'll get him to help me make these darned things because it's a pain. You got to melt the lead and lead melts at 400-degrees but you've got to heat it more than that for it to freely flow into these molds. You pour the lead into a mold and then you know you got a rod that goes through it and you pull it out and you've got the sinker.

01:04:27

Anna Hamilton: Do you mind if I pause one more time?

01:04:28

Mike Usina: Yeah. Two—three hours is as long about as I work on a net and I really enjoy the knitting part. My least favorite would be making the sinkers. I don't mind putting them on it; that—that's—that's fun and I don't have any issues with putting the tucks in it and—and the—all the other stuff you know, your—just your horn and your swivel and your hand line. That's all part of it—no issues with that but melting that lead and pouring them sinkers I do not like. But it's—it's part of it.

01:05:04

But yeah; I—I enjoy sitting down and just knitting on the thing. And it takes a long time. If you don't—if you don't get proficient at it you know you're going to be awfully slow. And that's why I think a lot of people get discouraged and quit because they start working on it you know and they're so slow and it just seems like it's taking forever. And—and I've taught quite a few different people. I only know of one person that I ever taught that made a net and this was a guy that I worked for at Fairchild who—he fluidly spoke and wrote seven different languages. He was a very smart man. And—and he watched me. I used to knit at lunchtime. You know we got forty-five minutes for lunch and I'd sneak off and eat my lunch early you know and I'd knit for that forty-five minutes. And—and he come by one day and saw me and said 'what in the world are you doing?' So I explained it to him, you know and he said 'my, I'd like to learn how to do that.'

01:06:11

And so—and so I taught him and went over and tutored him and he and me drank a lot of rum and Coke but anyway he was very persistent, and he actually—he actually made a net and—and I rigged it for him. And but he—he was very persistent and it took him forever it seemed like you know. It must have took him months you know to make that thing. **[*Laughs*]** But he finally did, but yeah; a lot of folks I've showed they just you know it's just not their—. I tried to get my—my grandson and I couldn't teach him because he's left-handed. So it's very difficult for me being right-handed to show somebody—how in the world would you show them, left-handed? But believe it or not he was—he was doing fairly well right-handed but he just—it just wasn't his thing. And—and of course my granddaughter, she picked it up pretty quick. She's right-handed, but again it's the modern-day internet and the—and the phones you know this—all the things that they get their self wrapped up in that they just won't stick with it.

01:07:18

Anna Hamilton: Now I'm curious; was knitting the cast nets is that—I mean is that usually something the men would do or would the women—?

01:07:25

Mike Usina: No; women did it also. Not—not nearly to the extreme; I only know of a few women that—that actually worked—made nets and I don't—I don't know if—how far they got with it. And I had a sister-in-law that used to knit. But there was a lady and you will find her on—if you do a Google search on—on cast nets, hand-made, you will find her, Ada Masters I think was her name.

01:07:54

Theresa Usina: Mickler.

01:07:55

Mike Usina: Mickler—Mickler; Ada Mickler. She was a lady that was very proficient at making nets and she's been gone for quite a few years. Yeah; but she made nets and she—she's the only one that I really know of that was—you would call a net-maker. I don't know of any others but there were other women that—you know I've talked to people you know that knew—knew different ones that made nets. But as far as me knowing them I didn't know them. I didn't know Ada. I didn't know she existed until her not too many years ago. **[*Laughs*]** You know I started doing some research on the subject and that's when I run across her.

01:08:36

There was also a—and this—this gentleman, this fellow was kin to Stuart Pacetti and his last name was Canova and Canova was an old Minorcan family and the story goes and I can't remember his first name—do you Theresa?

01:08:57

Theresa Usina: I'm not sure; it might have been Carl but I'm not 100-percent.

01:09:01

Mike Usina: It might have been Carl you know; it might have been his first name, Carl Canova. But anyway as the story goes he was down in the Slave Market at the time you know where the

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

old Slave Market is downtown and that was a favorite meeting place. Now for the—for the early Minorcans they would go—they would play checkers and—and talk about the—the fishing trips. I never did but the older fellows did. I know they played checkers down there every day.

01:09:30

But as the story goes there was a water fountain and supposedly Canova bent over to get a drink of water and when he stood up, he was blind—now that's a fact. That did happen. How—whatever it caused it you know bending over getting a drink of water certainly didn't do it; something led up to it. Supposedly he was pulling on this heavy anchor on a boat or something you know and really strained his self, I don't know but you know medicine was so poor back then. I'm probably talking in the—in the '40s I would say that it was probably—. But he supposedly—and I know for a fact and I don't know how he could have done it—he continued making nets blind. I would find that very difficult. I know he did it because the person who told me that he did used to—used to go over and put the sinkers on the foot lines for him. And he said that he was making nets blind.

01:10:31

And I would find that very, very difficult. But if Jack Usina told me he did it, he did it. And—and Stuart will tell you about that if you ask him about Canova making the nets blind. And of course he just continued you know. I mean that's what he did. You know he made nets and sold them and then you know after he become blind he had to continue I guess you know to support his self. To, you know to what extent I would think that you would make a lot of mistakes, you know that—I mean when you can't see because you have to see what you're doing. I mean I've tried closing my eyes you know and—and but you got to pick up those meshes as

they're coming up to you because you're knitting in a circle, continuous circle and—and you know you pick up the mesh and when you tie your knot then you pick up the next one and so on.

01:11:27

So being able to do that I guess he probably figured a way to take his finger probably and catch that mesh with his finger where he couldn't miss it. You know and then after he pulled it down to make the knot if he used the old knot you had to go in between that mesh you just pulled down and the previous one that you tied to tie that one. If he used a new knot that's the one that goes around your little finger and you make a circle and you got to come through that loop and pick up the mesh and stay inside that circle to tie it. So this is difficult if you can't see.

01:11:59

But however he did it and from what I understand he was quite good at it. I—I couldn't elaborate because I don't—I didn't know him. He was well before my time and so but supposedly that's the—he continued that as a blind person.

01:12:16

Anna Hamilton: That's fascinating. I'll see if I can find out about that.

01:12:16

Mike Usina: It is. Yeah; you can—you will find that fact and I tell you who—I tell you another one. Stuart would know. Stuart could tell you because he's kin to him.

Anna Hamilton: OK.

©Southern Foodways Alliance | www.southernfoodways.org

Mike Usina: Stuart—ask him about—about Canova who made nets blind and he can tell you all about it. And like I said, they spoke highly of him and he was—did it very well. And you know I just—my personal thing I find it—he was good. If you can do something like that blind he was good. I got to tell you. **[*Laughs*]**

01:12:50

Anna Hamilton: Do any of his nets still—?

01:12:51

Mike Usina: No, no, no; they're long gone. They're long gone.

01:12:56

Anna Hamilton: And how many nets do you think you've made over—?

01:12:57

Mike Usina: Hundreds. Hundreds. **[*Phone Rings*]** Hmm; yeah.

01:13:04

Anna Hamilton: And how many do you have right now?

01:13:05

Mike Usina: What I got right now? I don't know; I probably got six or eight around here. **[*Laughs*]** You know that I've made here in the last—we got the darnedest phone call. But yeah; yeah I've—I've got—I can show you. I've got a cotton net. It's—I estimated it's over seventy-

five years old, brand new. Never been in the water. I bought it off the internet. It came from the West Coast; totally different made than the way we make them here.

01:13:42

Anna Hamilton: Really?

01:13:42

Mike Usina: Yeah; it's fascinating to look—I've got it there. I can show you. It is—and it's eight-feet; that's a big net. And but I can look at it and tell you it's never been in the water. I mean it's just like it was made—I mean for cotton, you know. It's—it's the—it's strong and there's no damage to it whatsoever so it tells me it's never been in the water.

01:14:05

Anna Hamilton: Wow. How many people still make cast nets in the way that you do today here?

01:14:12

Mike Usina: Hmm; that's—that's a tough question. Stuart Pacetti would be the only one that I know that is still proficient. Stuart would be. But anyone else I really don't know. My cousin is gone and he did of course ***[Interviewer's note: Mike's cousin Jack Usina]***. Now there was a lady and—oh this is a good one for you if you want to research something: Colonial Quarter. We went down there; I had a—a cousin that was—she volunteered down there and she would be in period dress. And she—and we would go down. Theresa and I would go down. We loved to go

down on St. George Street and walk around. Now they charge you to go into the Colonial Quarter but it used to be it didn't cost you anything.

01:14:57

And after Jack was unable to—to go down there because he did it for years, he would just sit down there and knit all day. I don't know; they paid him a little bit I think. But he didn't need it. The guy was you know well off; he didn't—he didn't—he just did it for a hobby to stay active in it.

01:15:13

And after he got where he couldn't do it there was a lady. And we walked in there one day, Theresa and I, we walked in and making our old tour of the Colonial Quarters and low and behold here is this lady sitting in there knitting. And I didn't question her; I just saw who—what she was doing and—and you know we left. I should have questioned her as to what her name was and—but I didn't. I planned on going back but we went back here not too long ago and I went with full intentions of seeing if she was still there but they've done away with that part of the—of things that they're doing in there. And she was—she was no longer there. They've changed the layout of the building and got—they got a bar or something in there, a little sandwich shop or a bar or something that's in the area where she was at.

01:16:07

There was a little room off to the side that is where they used to—is where my cousin used to—. I loved him; we'd go down and visit and talk you know but then after—like I said we quit going and—and his sister. She was the lady that was—she's no longer able to do anything, so that pretty much ends that. But there is—there is another lady around that—that makes nets

and you could probably you know if you go down to the—contact the people down at the Colonial Quarter you may find out just exactly who it is.

01:16:38

Anna Hamilton: That's a good tip.

01:16:38

Mike Usina: Yeah; I would be interested in knowing myself.

01:16:41

Anna Hamilton: Well I'll let you know what I find. I haven't been to the Colonial Quarter probably since I was in grade school.

01:16:46

Mike Usina: Is that right? Yeah; it's still there but they charge now. But it—they've expanded it quite a bit. It's a lot more to it. It's a lot more interesting. And now if you're not doing anything tonight, changing the subject for just a minute, down at the old schoolhouse we're having a—a social. Minorcan social where we're going to have I think clam chowder and Theresa has got some Datil pepper jelly and crackers and some of the other ones are bringing something. But it—those folks down there, Elaine Fraser has really gotten interested in Minorcan stuff and has kind of opened up to us so if you're out and about or if you want—if you can get out and about I think it starts at 6 o'clock, 6:00 to 8:00 or something like that. You're welcome to come down.

01:17:39

Anna Hamilton: Okay; thank you.

01:17:39

Mike Usina: You're welcome to come down and—and I'll introduce you to a lady who could probably tell you a little bit about Canova because it's—it was her uncle I think he was.

01:17:52

Theresa Usina: Her great-uncle or something.

01:17:53

Mike Usina: Yeah; he was definitely kin to her.

01:17:55

Theresa Usina: Now that's Friday night.

01:17:57

Mike Usina: That's Friday night, not tonight; Friday night I'm sorry. Here I am—not—woo, I'm getting lost in my time. I'd throw you a curve for sure. That's Friday night. But you're welcome to come down and see us. We will be down there from 6:00 to 8:00.

01:18:10

Anna Hamilton: I appreciate the invitation. Thank you. I just have a few more questions and then we can wrap up. I am curios why you think this tradition is important, the cast-net making?

01:18:24

Mike Usina: Why? Well it's an art. It's—it's keeping the—our heritage alive really because Minorcans were—were so much more than Datil peppers. I'm telling you; Datil peppers was—is more a modern-day thing. I'm telling you because I grew up here. You didn't—you know Minorcans kept that stuff to their self. It wasn't nothing like today. There weren't any hot sauces. There weren't nothing. Any hot sauces you made yourself and we've got a recipe that's very old that Theresa picked up from I think her brother's wife that's very old.

01:19:07

But yeah; it's just part of keeping a dying art—. There was an old gentleman. I wish I would have went up and met him at Mayport. His last name was Brown and he—he operated—he had a net shop. That's what he did. He made nets for the commercial fishermen there at Mayport. Basically gill nets and—and hoop nets and seines and things of that sort, cast nets. And he passed away here a couple of years ago. I forget; his son's name is Buster.

[Portion Redacted]

01:20:01

Mike Usina: But Buster could tell you anything you want to know about Mayport and his father which I went up there. After he had passed, Buster called me and invited me to come up and go through the net shop and I could have anything that was in there. And I picked up a few needles and things but it's all modern stuff; stuff I was hoping to find was—was long-gone. And—and he hadn't—his name was—Buster's—I forget what his father's name was but very well-thought of. In fact you will see a picture of him on my video because I put a picture of him because I was kind of fascinated with—with the story that Buster told me about him, you know. And that he

operated that shop for sixty years or sixty plus years I guess. So, he would have made nets by hand, but I'm sure once the—after '52 I'm sure that he went on to the—making the nets. They take the flat mono-filament and they cut it into sections to make a circle and they sew it together. That's the way all your nets are made today that you buy are all—I call them handmade nets. They call them—I mean I call them machine-made nets. They call them handmade nets. You know but they're not.

01:21:57

And but yeah; I think you would find your chat with Buster interesting.

01:22:02

Anna Hamilton: Okay; good.

01:22:03

Mike Usina: I found him to be a very nice person.

01:22:06

Anna Hamilton: Okay; good. I'll ask him. I just have one more thing and then I'll ask you if you want to add anything. What do you think the future is for handmade cast nets here?

01:22:14

Mike Usina: Oh I think that it's pretty much going to die unless—Stuart has got nobody. Stuart tried to train somebody and you know and he got—he was working the guy—a young fellow. I think that was his—probably a mistake because you know kids are going to grow up and they're

going to go to school. They go to college and you know this and that and first thing you know—but I'm sure that this guy, a young fellow that probably maybe twenty years from now he'll probably get back in it but for now—but Stuart tried to get somebody to follow him but it didn't work out.

01:22:51

And I've been asked to you know to try to find somebody to—to work up an apprenticeship with, you know for the State and which I'm going to try to do. Hopefully my son is going to do it. I think I've got him talked into it. But if—if someone doesn't follow us then what's left? There's nobody left. And on this—I'm sure there's people around St. Augustine that—that know how to knit. I'm sure there's probably you know a few left but you know I talked to people at this festival I mean gobs of them that come up; you know they enjoy seeing the stuff, the displays that I have and they—they love to see it. And they—'oh my uncle used to do that' or 'my grandfather did that.' You know that's what you hear. You don't hear 'oh my brother is doing that now'; you don't—very little of that. You know there's like I said there's a few of them that—that—that probably know how to knit. But as far as doing it complete I don't know. Other than Stuart, I don't know of anybody.

01:23:57

Anna Hamilton: That's amazing because you remember when it was really widespread, when everyone did it.

01:24:01

Mike Usina: Oh yeah absolutely; back in—back in the '50s you know that's—back when you know well, when was I ten? I was born in '41—'51, about '54 I guess when I was from you know all through my teens and right on through the '60s and the '70s. It started fizzling out you know as the mono-filament came along. I don't—I don't like to knit mono-filament. The knots don't stay tight. Stuart takes and makes the net and then he hangs an eighty-pound weight and then he gets a heat gun and dries the—you know heats the knots. And you know this to me is—Minorcans didn't make mono-filament. There were no mono-filament—was no mono-filament for Minorcans to make a net out of. The old clan it was—it was linen and cotton. And then more you know—my generation it went—it went to nylon. And then it just kind of fizzled out with the onset of mono-filament.

01:25:15

The early mono-filament nets were terrible. They—you—they—actually they made machine-made nets in the—in the late '50s **[*Phone Rings*]** and they were—they were—you'd sit it on the ground. It was like a big basket of wire. You know it was so stiff. You couldn't knit it; forget it. You couldn't tie a knot in it but then after '59 when—when they came out—DuPont came out with the [saran]—I've already told you about that, you could—that's when they started really making the—the nets. And they made them—they made them better and better. The last one—I bought one here a while back and it's a piece of junk. The lead has plastic sinkers on it; they just loosely hang on the—around the bottom. I've got one in here that was the same way. I cut it all off and re-rigged it. I use it for show and tell. I've made a good net out of a piece of junk. But there are some people out there—there's some people in St. Augustine here—here very recently. I had a brother-in-law up 'til about five years ago; he passed away here in the last

couple of years, but up ‘til about five years ago he made nets and sold them out of mono-filament. He would cut the panels out of the webbing and rig them and—and in fact I went out and picked up probably oh, 100—gosh, well over 100 pounds of lead that—that he had left behind you know that—that his—that his widow gave me, sinkers. They’re still on old foot lines. But yeah; he did that for years.

01:26:53

And then there was another gentleman by the name of—I’m trying to think of his name—Donald Burchfield. That’s another name that made machine—well I call them machine-made, mono-filament, cut them out of—had a formula for cutting the webbing and then you would sew it together. And he would have made a good net. These guys they took pride on what they did. They didn’t—this stuff now is made probably in Korea or China or someplace. It’s just thrown together. The quality is very poor.

01:27:28

Anna Hamilton: So for you from your point of view what makes a good cast net?

01:27:32

Mike Usina: A good cast net? Well I mean a mono-filament net made properly is a good cast net. You got people that you know locals that make them and there’s a lot of people that make them. You can find good nets if you look on the internet. But if you—if you buy a net from someplace like Memphis Net and Twine or Johnson or some of those they’re going to be cheap. Johnson, by the way, makes—still makes a-Spanish net. They call it a bag net. They make it anywhere from seven to eleven-feet. I hate to think of what a—an eleven-foot bag net would

look like when you add about four-foot of bag hanging down and you had to throw this—this thing. You know I never cared for throwing—the biggest mullet net I ever made is ten-foot.

01:28:18

And I use that for roe mullet fishing off—off the dock out there at North Beach. But yeah; normally I always fish with a seven and a half foot; that was—I figured—that's I could handle because you got to stand this thing up, you know, to keep it straight and you'd get a net that's—that's tall—you know taller than you can reach and it becomes you know—it just takes you longer because you got to keep that lead line straight or it will tangle. No use of throwing one that's tangled because it's going out there like a banana or a—we used to call them cannon balls. You know you'd throw that thing and it would go out there and instead of opening up pretty, you'd go out there and about half of it would open. **[*Laughs*]**

01:28:56

But so you learn how to get away from that. Did that pretty well—? Yeah; I would think there's nothing wrong with the mono-filament made properly. There's absolutely, basically, no maintenance to them other than they don't sew the lead line on with mono-filament. It won't stay tight. They use—they use some type of a—golly, nylon thread it looks like to me on the store-bought ones. I'm sure that the guys that—like Stuart I think he probably still makes some of those nets. He would make a good net and—and do it properly. I don't know; he may not mess with those—with those kinds of nets. He may be like me, strictly hand—hand-made. To my knowledge that's probably all he does. I just never cared to make them. I mean I'm just from the old school I guess trying to keep up our heritage going.

01:29:59

Anna Hamilton: Well I don't have any more questions. Is there anything that I should have asked you that you want to end on, or you want to mention before we wrap up?

01:30:06

Mike Usina: Not really. I think you've—I've given you the handouts you know. Unless you want to see some of this stuff—

01:30:14

Anna Hamilton: I'd love to.

01:30:14

Mike Usina: You know if you want to see some of it then we can—we can just go from there.

01:30:17

Anna Hamilton: Great; thank you so much. I appreciate it.

01:30:20

Mike Usina: All right; I enjoyed it.

01:30:22

[End Mike Usina Interview]