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In 1987, I began working at the Arts Council at Freeport, New York, as a folklorist documenting maritime culture. At the time, Tony Sougstad was a Freeport dragger fisherman who grew up in Flushing, Queens, but had lived in Freeport since the 1960s. He was 50 years old when I first met him. Like most fishermen that I met, it took some time before I could get him to agree to an interview, especially since I had only begun working in Freeport in the spring of that year. When I offered to help him pack up his fish for the market, he began to trust me, a trust that lasted for decades.

Tony became a dragger boat captain in 1970, after working as an engineer, because he didn’t like working on land. Using his understanding of geometry, Tony captained a dragger boat, the E.T., named after his wife (Eleanor) and himself (Tony). Although there were Norwegian fishermen among Tony’s ancestors, his family were farmers in the Dakotas. Tony learned to catch fish from Frank Cona and his brother Charlie Cona, longtime commercial fishermen who shared a dock with Tony, until they retired in 1988. Tony learned to make nets originally of cotton from Frank Cona, using “4-seam Italian nets” and “Yankee” fluke nets. In 1987, there were a variety of nets used, including a small mesh net to catch whiting and a larger net for flounder and other “bottom” fish that live on the ocean bottom. All nets have a tapered seam which works the best for catching fish, according to dragger fishermen. Tony also learned a great deal from Billy Granau of Freeport, a longtime commercial clammer, who retired in the late 1990s. He harvested a variety of species including fluke, flounder, squid, and whiting.

Most fishermen have had their share of close calls on the water. Here is an important story told by Tony in 1987:

We got up in the morning, and we could see in the sky little puffs of smoke—that signals bad weather. So, we said we’ll make another couple of tows, and we’ll get out of here. So, we started home, and on the way home, the wind came out of the east, then it came out of the southeast, northeast, and pretty soon, it was blowing pretty good. The ocean was fairly white. There was also a leak in the boat that sprung open again. About five o’clock in the evening, it was raining and blowing so hard, the rain slanted across the deck; it hurt my face it hit so hard. So, about 8:30, 9 at night, we decided we couldn’t make any more headway, because the boat was filling up with water, and she was sloshing around so violently, there was no way we could pump it out. I was pumping like mad and saying ‘Hail Mary’ like mad, I figured we’d had it. The boat was going down.

We called Chatham Coast Guard, and they sent a helicopter out, but they went to the wrong boat. We’re so tiny out there, who would expect to look for a tiny little boat all the way out there? So, they hovered over a Russian ship that was maybe five miles from us, and they said no, we’re not the ones who are in trouble. It’s the little guy over there. So, they came around and dropped us three pumps. And, the boat got dried out. And then, he left, the helicopter left. I thought, “Oh my god, where is he going?” So, the Russian came alongside, and he yells, “Hey, cap-i-tan, you need assistance?” That’s the only English that he knew. I said yes, yes. So, they threw us
During the past 10 years, the dragger boat remained at dock with rare exceptions. Tony explained that the government restrictions on what could legally be caught and sold made it extremely difficult to make any profit. As a result, he was clamming in the bay, and at times, operated a gill net.

Tony was a master storyteller and fishing net maker. He was very knowledgeable about the ocean's ecology and how regulations have affected fishermen. He had a number of excellent narratives about danger on the ocean. He worked with Long Island Traditions' adult and children's programs for 30 years. For many years, Tony attended regulatory meetings and in 1989, successfully fought the Village of Freeport's plan to remove the dragger boats from Woodcleft Canal. He was beloved by many fishermen and baymen, where he worked the last few years. We lost Tony on October 7, 2019. As a folklorist, he taught me the value of preserving stories and traditions, so that we may all learn from them.

As more and more fishermen are retiring or working part-time, I urge you to document and listen to them, so that we can remember them for future generations. There are many threats to this livelihood, including regulations, climate change, and the development of our working waterfronts. Through the years I’ve met many fishermen, both recreational and commercial, who have taught me a world of knowledge. If you know someone like Tony, introduce them to your local library or arts council, where others can learn from them. And, if you need help, let the great people at New York Folklore, the publishers of this magazine, know: Thank you!
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