



# Carol Fitzgerald

Carol Fitzgerald:

My name is Carol Fitzgerald, and I am going to tell you a story about my childhood. And this took place roughly in 1950. I was a child about maybe 12, 13 years old, and I had a penchant for visiting old buildings, and I used to prowl around all these old, mostly deserted buildings in the Whaley Museum area, the historic area. My father was a builder. I was the daughter of Italian immigrants who were builders and stonemasons. So they were doing a lot of building in the city, and I helped. I was on the jobs and so on. But in the meantime, I prowled around all these buildings because I enjoyed going through them, and I thought they were utterly fascinating and beautiful.

Well, one fine day I was walking outside and I ran into two very strange looking characters. They were older and they looked like they had seen better days. So I was looking at them and they were sitting outside the museum, and I walked over to them and I was looking at their boots. And so they said, "You like these boots?" And I said, "Yeah, where did you get them?" And they said, "We got these a long time ago." Their boots were actually beer paws that came up to their knees with the fur still on them and you could see the little claws at the bottom, what was left of the little claws on the bottom. They had pretty shaggy hair. They had beards and so on. And they were pretty rough-looking characters. Nonetheless... And they said that they were... I said, "Are you staying over at the Mariner's home? And they said, "Yeah, we're doing that." And they said, "We're waiting to ship out." So I said, "Where you going to go?" And they said, "Any place that'll hire us." They said, "That's been the story of our life."

So I said, "Where have you been?" And so anyway, they started talking and they said, "Well, we'll tell you a story." And they proceeded to tell me about many years before. It was back in 1917 and Russia was falling apart, and the Bolsheviks were on the march, and they were tearing around Russia beating up people and burning villages and terrorizing people. So America decided quietly to get into this thing and support the native, the Russian people. So they sailed. He said, "We've been together for years." He said, "We were adventurers." And he said, "We have known each other all our lives." So he said, "We signed on to a ship that was destined to have quite an adventure. It was sealed orders, so we didn't know where we were going. Nonetheless, when we were loading up the boat, because they said we were supposed to be helping to load it as well, we saw these long wooden boxes and we knew perfectly well they were guns. So we didn't ask any questions. We were told not to ask any questions and just do what you're told to do because now you're on the payroll."

So okay, they did, and they got out beyond the 12 mile limit or whatever. And all of a sudden the captain announced they had gone quite a bit father. And he said, "We're going to go to Russia." And they were going to deliver some supplies for partisans who were being badly treated by Bolsheviks, and they defined them as being communism. At that point, everybody was pretty much ambivalent because most people didn't even know what communism was back in 1917.

So they said, "Okay." This was going to be a big lag for them, and they thought it was going to be a great adventure. So they were happy as could be. He said, "Well, we got there. We went up to Archangel. We went all the way up and around into Archangel, and when we got there, we were waiting for partisans to come to get the guns. And we were told that we had to stay there until they got there. Well, as it turned out, we thought they were going to be there immediately, but as it turned out, could we wait because we might have some other things that we could pick up and take elsewhere. So the captain said, "Okay, we'll stay here for a little while." Well, the Reds were coming up and fighting with the partisans, but the partisans were well ahead of them, and so they thought they would be able to meet them and distribute all the guns and then take off."

However, horror upon horror, all of a sudden all the Eskimos disappeared because there were Eskimos over there as well. And they disappeared and they said, "What's going on?" And they said, "Well, because we're going to have an early winter." "What does that mean?" "Well, it means you better get out of here." So anyway, it sounds



like the active fleet that got destroyed. As it turns out, almost overnight, they said they had never seen anything like it. And even the people in Russia said this was pretty unique. Everything iced up and they couldn't leave. And it was creeping closer and closer. But anyway, there was a surrounding ice pack that they couldn't get through, so they said, "It looks like you're going to be here for a while." So anyway, they said, "What happens when the partisans come?" They said, "We don't know, but you're not going to be very happy, I'm sure, but we aren't either."

So anyway, the snow came and they said mountains of snow, mountains of ice, everything was totally frozen. So we ended up sharing what goods we had on the boat, and they didn't have time to get many more stores in for themselves for the winter. So we all pooled everything. They said it was too cold on the boat, so they distributed us among the villages. And so we were mingling with the villagers. We started picking up Russian words and so on, and they informed me that they taught the men how to swear in English, and they learned some obscenities in Russian.

Interviewer:

So Carol, these were two fellas that you met on the streets in New Bedford?

Carol Fitzgerald:

On the street, yes.

Interviewer:

Right. So did they come back or what?

Carol Fitzgerald:

Well, they were hobos basically, they were basically ocean-going hobos. And they had had this great adventurous life, and they said they just loved the sea. Every time they got on land they got in trouble. And so they continued just shipping out. They'd come back just enough to get paid, blow their money, and then ship out again.

Interviewer:

But whalemens?

Carol Fitzgerald:

Well, this is the whole point. They had been whalemens, I should have explained that to you. They had been whalemens and they had shipped out of New Bedford at one point or another. He said, "Everybody did. So we've been here before. That's why when we had the opportunity to come here on a freighter we came and we wanted to see everything and so on." And then they said, "But we have to get out of here because we are going to be running out of money." And I said, "So in other words, basically you ran out of bar money and yeah. So fine. So I said, "Where are you whaling now, because we don't whale anymore." And they said, "No, no, no. We're whaling out of Norway."

And they said, "The only places that are whaling are Russia and Japan and Norway." So they said, "The Norwegians hired us right off the bat because they said we knew what we were doing and we've been with them ever since. So we come home and so on." And then that's about it. If you ever saw them with their little beer paws on their feet. And I said, "Where did you get those?" And they said, "Well, they made them for us during that winter. And so then they also gave us jackets."

And so they had these shaggy jackets on. And I said, "All this time, from 1917 to 1950," whatever it was. And they said, "Oh yeah, these things last a lifetime." And they were a little dirty, he said, "But they do last." And then they showed me how the Russians fold... They use foot claws. They don't use socks. And foot claws are much better



than socks, as I learned. And I often wondered why we didn't use them as well in our army. But anyway, so they showed me how they folded them and because they were just sitting around, it was a beautiful day. And I was utterly fascinated with it because it was all true. You couldn't deny that they had bear paws on their feet and their jackets are pretty raggedy.

And they said that they kept all their things at the Whalers house, the Whalers home. And then they were waiting to go. And I said, "When are you going to go?" And they said they were going to be leaving the next day or so. So that was my story with them. And they told me about how they spent the winter, they learned to dance and that they had the Russian balalaikas and they would dance. And they said it was absolutely fascinating. They sang and they did all kinds of things, and then they ate all the Russian food. But all of a sudden, they said, "We have to be careful because once all of a sudden the ice is going to break up. And some people had managed to come in from other villages and passing messages from village to village. And they said that there were some Russian gun bolts that got wind of the fact that there was an American ship. They would hopefully blow us out of the water."

Interviewer:

Oh, Carol, thank you for sharing that really interesting story. And this is a story told to you by two men around 1950.

Carol Fitzgerald:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Who had been wintered-over on this voyager you talked about. So this was a story you learned. You were right outside the Whaling Museum when you heard this story?

Carol Fitzgerald:

Absolutely. And then the funny part of it was they said that the Eskimos made their appearance again, and they said that they had better get going because they said, "We'll make you a path. We can find a path through this." And the captain apparently was very, very doubtful because he said what he could see was just some of the ice with cracks here and there. And the Eskimos said, "No, no, no, don't worry about it. We'll lead you through." And so anyway, they did, and gradually they made their way out. As they were leaving, they said in the distance they could see Russian gun bolts heading right up to Archangel.

Interviewer:

They made it just in time.

Carol Fitzgerald:

They made it just in time. Anyway, and the guns all had been offloaded and everybody was... Anyway, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah, thank you so much for doing that. Well, we're at 11 minutes. That's a wonderful story. Thank you so much for sharing it. I mean, you were saying, the gentlemen that you were talking about from the 1950s with the beer claw shoes were here and looking for what kind of voyage and what was happening at the waterfront in that time? And just if you could do it in a couple of minutes, that'd be great.

Carol Fitzgerald:

Should I continue now?





Interviewer:

Yeah, please.

Carol Fitzgerald:

The fellows that I talked to, were looking for a berth on a ship. As they said, there was plenty of work on small freighters with a bulk break cargo, which meant that it was stevedores lifting cases and boxes and bags and things like that. Carver, we could not have container shipping over here because our ground is too soft for the kind of equipment that they would need to lift off the box cars and the other things that a bigger port would carry, because this was also 1950.

However, this would be what is so important for our port today. If they could ever get that spur back down to the harbor, we could take, we can't believe the cargo we could get in here. And these fellows were doing this shipping on small, small freighters, differently flagged. They were gypsies, they were sea gypsies.

And so what they would do is pick up a freighter and go to Morocco or something, or go off to all kinds of places and sign on. And then they would come, and many times they would come to New Bedford or some other where they were going. But New Bedford right now is at that crossroad where we are going to get passenger freight. But more important, because our money has always come from the sea. And this is the tragedy here, is that after whaling, we did do long line fishing, cod fishing and they would go, the codfish fleet would go up to Alaska, they go through Panama, and they would go to Alaska and spend the summer there.

Interviewer:

You're talking again, you're talking about 1950s?

Carol Fitzgerald:

Yes. And our kids would sometimes drop out of school. They'd miss the last month or so of school, and they would go along with their fathers and so on, and they'd go up to Alaska and they would fish off Kodiak and put into Kodiak. And when they came back, they were bigger and stronger and tougher looking kids and they really had great adventures to tell us. Anyway, the long line fishing, quad fishing, was actually a pretty risky thing. It was not as easy as it sounds. And it was a dangerous life because sometimes they would drift off and get lost and sometimes not to be heard again. I had a friend who died up there and they got lost and he was a young, young fella.

Interviewer:

Dangerous work.

Carol Fitzgerald:

Yeah. But anyway, we should be, what we should really do honestly, is get that spur down to the harbor, get the train in, have the one freight car go down and do what they used to do a hundred years ago. When William Swain got the train in, he did the solicitation, that was all donated money. It was all investor money, no taxes were raised to get the train in in the first place. He did it in one year. He managed to get a train all the way to Boston in a year. We've been waiting since 1958 when they took it out. They were going to repair the tracks, and we've been waiting ever since. Anyway, meantime we have lost incredible amounts of money because we don't have a spur.

When they used to offload right off the boat, put it on the train, the train would then go from the spur pick up and go into Boston, New York and Washington. And we could be doing that right now. And we are losing all kinds of money because I don't know why people won't do it, but that would be, we could be the biggest port, one of the biggest ports on the east coast. We already are. But we could be the leading port because we do have deep



water, sufficiently deep water, and they are going to put up a pier going out again, which is absolutely necessary. And we have all the mechanical things here. You've got the railroad lift over there on the rails that you can, the marine rails that you can haul boats over in Fairhaven. And of course we have cargo things that you could offload here on the New Bedford side. And if we don't do it, we are just losing money hand over fist and jobs because we have a population here right now that is still seafaring minded.

We still have fishermen, we still have longshoremen, we still have all the things that you need. And the best part of it is that we have the only real long shoreline, 10 miles of it, committed to ocean work. We don't have a whole bunch of silly condominiums for people to amuse themselves with and then sell and waste the whole shoreline. So nobody can swim, but nobody can enjoy it either. And they can't make any money. We don't need condominiums on the waterfront. We need hard-working piers. We need money. And that's where our money has always come from. And God willing, it will come from there again. If somebody wakes up and flies right.