Capt. Joe Novello
Innovating Gloucester’s Fishing Industry
by Peter Novello
FOREWORD

My father, Capt. Joseph (Joe) Novello, was the oldest son of Sicilian immigrants Vincenza (Parisi) Novello and Bonaventure Novello. Joe is known as the husband of Lena Novello, who contributed greatly to Gloucester’s history; Lena’s story is also included in the Gloucester400+ Stories Project. I am the youngest son of Joe and Lena and aim to summarize my father’s contributions to Gloucester’s fishing history.
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BY PETER NOVELLO

Capt. Joe grew up in a fishing family, followed his father’s lead, and skippered the Benjamin C, North Star, Bonaventure. He highlighted his career as the captain of the Vincie N.

While his wife Lena was in the public limelight, Capt. Joe was working behind the scenes helping many on the waterfront and modernizing Gloucester’s fishing industry. Today, we would call Joe an entrepreneur: it was said he introduced the Gloucester fleet to the shrimping market and was believed to be the first to bring stern trawling into the fleet. He was known for his creative fishing net designs that aimed to preserve and enhance the fisheries, as well as gear to enhance safety while complying with regulatory requirements. In today’s high-tech world, one would say Capt. Joe had great engineering skills. His abilities with advanced electronics, diesel engine mechanics, plumbing, and electrical challenges were impressive. The Vincie N was one of the first vessels in the harbor to have a Loran, a Navy surplus unit.

Capt. Joe was known as one of the best-ever skippers in Gloucester; he knew the fishing grounds and was a master at net-making. His boats did very well and were recognized as “Highliners,” a Gloucester fisherman term for boats that continually delivered profitable trips and rarely had “brokers” (trips with expenses greater than sales of fish). At the Fish Expo in Boston in 1980, Capt. Joe was recognized at an awards dinner as a Highliner “for his personal success, his advancements in fisheries technology and his political and civic action.”

1 LORAN: a type of long-range navigation radio developed during World War II.
He was a demanding skipper, and his crew understood their roles; they performed or were let go. In the fishing business, a good barometer of a captain was the tenure of crew members. In this business, with the sale of the catch typically between the captain and the fish dealer, dishonest dealings could transpire where captains didn’t always give crews their fair share of the profits. Capt. Joe was known as one of the most honest captains in the harbor; it was a prize to be a crew member on his boats.

**Early Years**

Joe was the oldest of six sons, all who eventually became fishermen, and most eventually as captains. In the 1940s, the Novello family had two fishing vessels (F/V), the seiner/dragger *North Star* and the newly built dragger, *Bonaventure*. Joe’s father, Bonaventure Novello, was the captain of the *North Star*, and Joe, at a young age, became captain of the newly launched F/V *Bonaventure*.

The Novello family was cash poor and in debt after purchasing the F/V *Bonaventure* and a house in Fort Square adjacent to and including “Skull Mountain,” the highest point in the Fort
neighborhood. Family meals consisted mainly of seafood, vegetables from the garden, eggs from their own chickens, an occasional chicken, and milk from the two goats. Using everything, sharing, and wasting nothing was a way of life for the entire Novello family.

Three of the Novello sons enlisted in the Navy during World War II, leaving the burden of operating the two Novello fishing vessels and paying off the family debt to Capt. Joe, and his brother, Nick. His brother Dominic (nicknamed Scrod) was too young to help full-time.

Capt. Joe thrived, quickly becoming a Highliner among Gloucester’s Red Fish Fisheries. Their successful fishing allowed the F/V Bonaventure’s loan to be paid off in two years.

Memories From Capt. Joe’s Oldest Son, Joe

“In 1990, I met the owner’s son of the Cape Ann Fish processor who, after learning my name was Joe Novello, could not stop telling me how grateful he was of my Dad for the redfish catches from the F/V Bonaventure and dealing with Dad. When other boats stayed in, the Bonaventure always delivered catches needed to keep his plant operating to provide the fish needed to feed the military.

“When our grandfather Bonaventure retired, Joe captained the F/V North Star, and his brother Nick captained the F/V Bonaventure. During these years, the horror of a fisherman’s life occurred: the North Star caught fire and sunk. Capt. Joe, his father (Bonaventure), were onboard the boat. Fortunately, all were saved.

After this incident, the Novello family decided to buy more boats and limit the number of family members on one boat. Soon after, the F/V Vincie N (named after the family’s matriarch) was purchased, followed by the F/V JBN, F/V Doris Amero, and F/V Mia Madre, with Capt. Joe’s younger brothers now running their own fishing vessels.”

Days of the Vincie N

Capt. Joe captained the Vincie N and soon was noted as a Highliner of Gloucester’s ground fishing fleet. Joe’s innate skills and hard work made him a successful and productive skipper.
He didn’t follow the fishing fleet to standard fishing grounds. He was an explorer, researcher, data collector and had a lot of “street smarts” out in the ocean.

On many trips, the Vincie N would explore un-fished areas to find new fishing grounds and learn how different fish migrated to identify the best-catching fishing grounds and time periods. Capt. Joe would record everything: locations, dates, best time to catch, weather, water temperature, weather pattern over the last few days, tides, and the type of birds in the area. He used this data to help plan future fishing trips, only sharing his “secrets” with family or close allies (Lena’s brothers, Mike and Charlie Parisi, were a part of Capt. Joe’s network that also shared information).

Finding the fish was only part of Capt. Joe’s skills; he also figured out how to catch the most fish per tow (the length of time the net was dragged before retrieval). He was an expert on making/repairing nets and testing how well a net fished. He always kept a keen eye on how the wires dragging the net behaved as he steered the net over different bottoms. With this information and noticing the final catch on each tow, as well as the wear/shine on hauling gear, he would then make changes to the net and hauling gear. On trips near other vessels, it would be rare that his catch was not the biggest. If it was not, the cycle of changing the net would start until his catch was the biggest. Capt. Joe was always working to “improve the process,” as we would say today in our high-tech world.

More Memories From Capt. Joe’s Oldest Son, Joe

“Another learned skill was how to maintain the equipment and engines. There was always something breaking down and needing repair to keep fishing. There are no mechanics, electricians, carpenters, or technicians at sea. You fix a problem, work around it, or go home with a broker. Many times, I saw my Dad apply his street smarts to fix problems on the boat to avoid a broker.

“The most memorable case of showing Dad’s incredible talents is when the F/V JBN and F/V Vincie N were fishing in a challenging fishing ground. This was a miserable area to fish because of the hard bottom, lots of hang-ups (nets getting caught on the bottom), always being foggy, and seldom charm, but it was a productive groundfish area to fish in the fall. My dad was
captain of Vincie N, but my Uncle Scrod hired a novice to captain the JBN for this trip because he was sick. So, the JBN fished together with the Vincie N so Dad could guide the novice captain.

“After three days (1/2 of the planned trip), the JBN’s engine quit. After the JBN’s crew could not get the engine going again, Dad got into the dory and rowed over to JBN in 6-foot foggy seas. He discovered the piston rod on one of JBN’s diesel engine cylinders broke. Going home meant the loss of two Novello boat trips and a very costly endeavor.

“While Dad worked to fix the engine, the novice captain would fish on Vincie N. During this period, Dad was on VHF radio to the novice captain guiding him through the fishing grounds. The next morning, we saw smoke coming from the JBN smokestack, and they set out their nets. Dad was now fishing two Novello boats and repairing the JBN’s engine. When we got to Gloucester, I heard Dad tell Uncle Scrod what he did to get JBN fishing again. He stated he just disassembled the engine, removed the broken piston rod, and shut down the broken cylinder so the engine could run on good pistons to finish the trip.”

The 1970s and Beyond

The Vincie N was thought to be the first Gloucester fishing vessel to fish for shrimp with Capt. Joe’s creative net design being the key to success. This effort allowed many of the members of the fleet that were fishing for whiting, which was becoming less productive, to convert to shrimp fishing, providing a great opportunity to those Gloucester vessels.

Another major accomplishment of Capt. Joe was the introduction of mid-water trawling using the eastern rigged Vincie N. The addition of a port side gallus allowed fishing the middle of the water column for herring. Again, the Vincie N was said to have pioneered this type of fishing for the fleet.

Capt. Joe worked with the Sea Grant Program at MIT, and Cliff Goudey, a graduate student at the time, to try to make gear improvements to help with safety on the draggers. Goudey worked with Capt. Joe to develop an improved hook-up block that held the cables together at the stern of the boat. This was a very successful endeavor and became commonplace in
the fleet. Goudey and Capt. Joe also worked on improvements in hooking up the “door to the
gallus.” Goudey talks today about the interesting relationship he had with Capt. Joe— he, an
MIT student with no fishing experience, and Joe, a seasoned fishing captain with no class-
room experience beyond the 8th grade. Goudey remembers Capt. Joe as a gentleman, a very
easygoing and understanding individual who respected Cliff’s ability. And, of course, Goudey
fondly recalls their great meetings at Lena’s dinner or lunch table— “she always had something
cooking.”

As the availability of various fish species declined, Capt. Joe was always exploring new oppor-
tunities. Redfish, Groundfish (Haddock, Cod, Flounder), Whiting, Shrimp, and Herring were all
species he targeted over the years using different techniques and fishing various areas.

Capt. Joe Giacalone, who captained the Frances D, St. Peter, and Natalie III over the years,
claims that besides being an accomplished captain, Joe Novello was the best “twine man”
in the area. Capt. Joe helped Giacalone with net designs and “took him under his wing,” per
Giacalone, to enhance his fishing skills as a captain. Giacalone tells the story of an Irish Wing
Trawler Net, an innovative net brought to Cape May, NJ, by a Swedish fisherman. The boat that used this net
design in Cape May outfished everyone, and eventu-
ally, Giacalone got a hold of the design. Giacalone’s
crew worked on this net at Capt. Joe’s brother Sam’s
net business, Ollevon Net and Marine (Novello spelled
backward!), and Capt. Joe proceeded to measure
the entire net and redesign it for fishing on the Vincie
N. Giacalone and Novello fished together for years,
including a stint in the early 1950s, fishing for shrimp
in Mobile, Alabama. Capt. Giacalone has high praise
for Capt. Joe’s worth ethic, diverse skills, and amazing
generosity in helping fellow fishermen.

Capt. Joe eventually ended his career as a captain in
1978, with his son Sam taking over and captaining the
Vincie N.
The Trip to Honduras

According to a Gloucester Daily Times (GDT) article from February, 1994: One of Capt. Joe’s memorable contributions was to sail the Gloucester fishing dragger, Lady of Good Voyage, to the Honduras Islands in 1974 to train a crew to fish the vessel. He successfully brought the technology to the islands, where the Hondurans eventually fished the dragger.

The crew of the “Lady” included long-time Vincie N crew member Louie Benson, and Marblehead native, then living in Lanesville, Arnie Jarmak. The trip to Honduras with Joe Novello changed Arnie’s life, as he tells in this story:

“One day, I was riding my bike with my camera and saw two nuns and a priest walking down a pier. I took photos as the priest was blessing the boat. A woman asked me if she could buy some of the photos. I asked her what was happening, and she told me the boat was leaving for Honduras. The woman, unknown to me, was Lena Novello. When I said, ‘Boy, I would love to go on this boat to Honduras,’ she said, ‘Go ask that man, he’s my husband, and he’s the captain.’ When the boat left the next day at high tide, I was on it. In a matter of minutes,
Captain Joe Novello made a decision that changed my life.

“Capt. Joe brought me into the wheelhouse and showed me how to pick out a spot on the horizon that coincided with the compass heading and to steer for it instead of chasing the needle on the compass and zig-zagging to Honduras. Capt. Joe patiently and kindly taught me how to do things like that for the entire trip. I couldn’t believe I was at the wheel of a 1940s wooden fishing boat motoring down the East Coast.

“I am forever thankful to Capt. Joe for the kindness and opportunity he gave me. That voyage opened my eyes to new worlds. After being at sea, I never had a desk job and fulfilled my dream of becoming a photographer. Thank you, Lena and Capt. Joe, for giving a young man the chance of a lifetime.”

Reflections From Joe’s Eldest Grandson, Neil Marttila

“To this day, when I smell the morning air mixed with the exhaust of a diesel fuel engine, I think about the early mornings at around 2 am when Grampa and I would walk the quiet streets of Gloucester from the house to the docks and ready for us to ‘steam’ out on a week’s fishing journey. On the walk, there was always some anticipation about what we would be fishing for, and Grampa would tell a story or two about the time of year and various locations where he had luck fishing for various types of catch over his many years. He always amazed me with how he could remember—to almost the time of day—where he had fished and what he had luck catching, who else was fishing at the same time, what the sea conditions were like, and even what the cook had made for dinner—and, of course, whether or not he liked it; he was a fan of pasta, a good sauce, and meatballs.

“I remember Grampa took being the captain of the boat very seriously and would go from ‘Grampa’ to ‘Captain Joe’ as soon as we got on the boat. Initially, it took a little getting accustomed to, but I came to understand his responsibilities and reasons for needing to act that way
to oversee a safe and successful trip. Once out fishing, I enjoyed when the nets were set, and we would be ‘dragging,’ sitting in the pilot house with Grampa. There he would try and explain the area, what we were fishing, what he was seeing on the fish finder, the type of seafloor we were going over, what he was expecting to catch, and various other intricacies of our trip.

“Overall, I learned about the fisherman’s way of life and the business of fishing. Just as any good company needs good leadership, committed employees, and an understanding of all aspects of its business, the same holds true for a good and successful fishing boat.”

After Leaving the Wheel

After Capt. Joe left the pilothouse of the Vincie N, his work on the waterfront did not end. He was a valuable resource to many fishermen, young and old. His incredible abilities with twine (a reference commonly made about net making) were shared with so many in Gloucester and beyond.

Ralph Mineo, who fished with Capt. Joe for years, and then with son Sam, recalls returning after an unfortunate trip where the net was “rim-racked,” or badly torn apart, after meeting a bad bottom. The net was spread across the wharf, and Joe carefully examined the various sections of the net. He then proceeded to give specific instructions to the crew on exactly what each needed to do. Mineo stated he could not believe the net was completely reassembled with a variation on only one mesh when they all finished their tasks. Typically, a net with this much damage would be put aside and just pieces salvaged. The Vincie N was able to resume fishing the next day, and Capt. Sam Novello had his repaired net ready to go.

Capt. Ollie Palazola, who also fished with Capt. Joe for years and shared the many successes of being a crew member on the Vincie N, wanted to be a captain. Palazola said Capt. Joe taught him “how to be a captain” and all that was needed to be successful. Palazola states to this day that Capt. Joe was the best skipper in the Gloucester fleet!

Capt. Steve Driscoll and his brother, Wayne, were gill netters fishing out of Rye Harbor, New Hampshire, who needed help landing reliable catches. Capt. Joe met the brothers and taught them how to modify their nets to improve their catch. Capt. Steve Driscoll comments that Novello
was incredible at configuring and repairing damaged nets. Capt. Joe just wanted to help and, even at age 83, was there to provide support. Driscoll said Capt. Joe never wanted to be paid a cent but gladly accepted fish or shrimp to be delivered to Capt. Joe’s daughter who lived nearby. Driscoll looked up to Capt. Joe as a mentor and has fond memories of their working and personal relationship. Driscoll recalls the amazing meals he had in Lena’s kitchen. While working together on his nets in the Novello’s Middle Street yard, Driscoll felt “he saw the best of Lena and Joe!”

A Few More Comments From Capt. Joe’s Oldest Son

“Fishing gave me funds for college and taught me the value of street smarts. You can learn more from all the knowledge around us than from books alone.

“I worked with MIT, Harvard, and many other notable educated professionals with many book smarts. But, the smartest, most creative people I ever met were Gloucester fishermen, with Dad being ‘the finest kind.’”

Sunset on voyage to Honduras, 1974.
AUTHOR’S AFTERWORD

As one of the younger of Lena and Joe’s six children, I really did not know my Dad well growing up; he was always fishing. When I was 10, I started my summer fishing career with the Vincie N and met my first boss, (my father) Capt. Joe. He was demanding to all—even his sons—and taught me work ethic, leadership skills, and the importance of honesty. Since my Dad did not want us to become fishermen, he would take us on fishing trips in the most miserable weather conditions, demonstrating how difficult a life fishing could be. Brother Joe and I went to engineering school, and Sam continued his fishing career on the Vincie N. Sam, of course, was a very successful captain gaining great expertise from his mentor.

In writing this story, I learned that my Dad had immense talents and was a real contributor to Gloucester’s fishing industry. My Mom was in the public eye, recognized for all she did for Gloucester, and my Dad was as incredible a “giver” to so many on the waterfront. My Dad was very humble and just showed up to help anyone who needed his support, both during his career behind the wheel and after he was ashore. He never wanted to be paid a cent and just wanted to help those in need.

Lena’s legacies included the Fishermen’s Wives’ Statue, the formation of the Fishermen’s Wives Association, and the creation of their cookbook The Taste of Gloucester. Capt. Joe’s contributions to fishermen, captains, and fishing families didn’t result in the visible legacy that Lena has. But, Joe’s expertise helped fishing community members earn a good living, providing a foundation for future generations.

I am proud to cement my Dad into Gloucester’s history with this story. My siblings and I had incredible parents who gave us the foundation of life and showed how much they loved their city through their enormous contributions to Gloucester. Joe and Lena were a “power couple” that both made an impact on Gloucester’s history.

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