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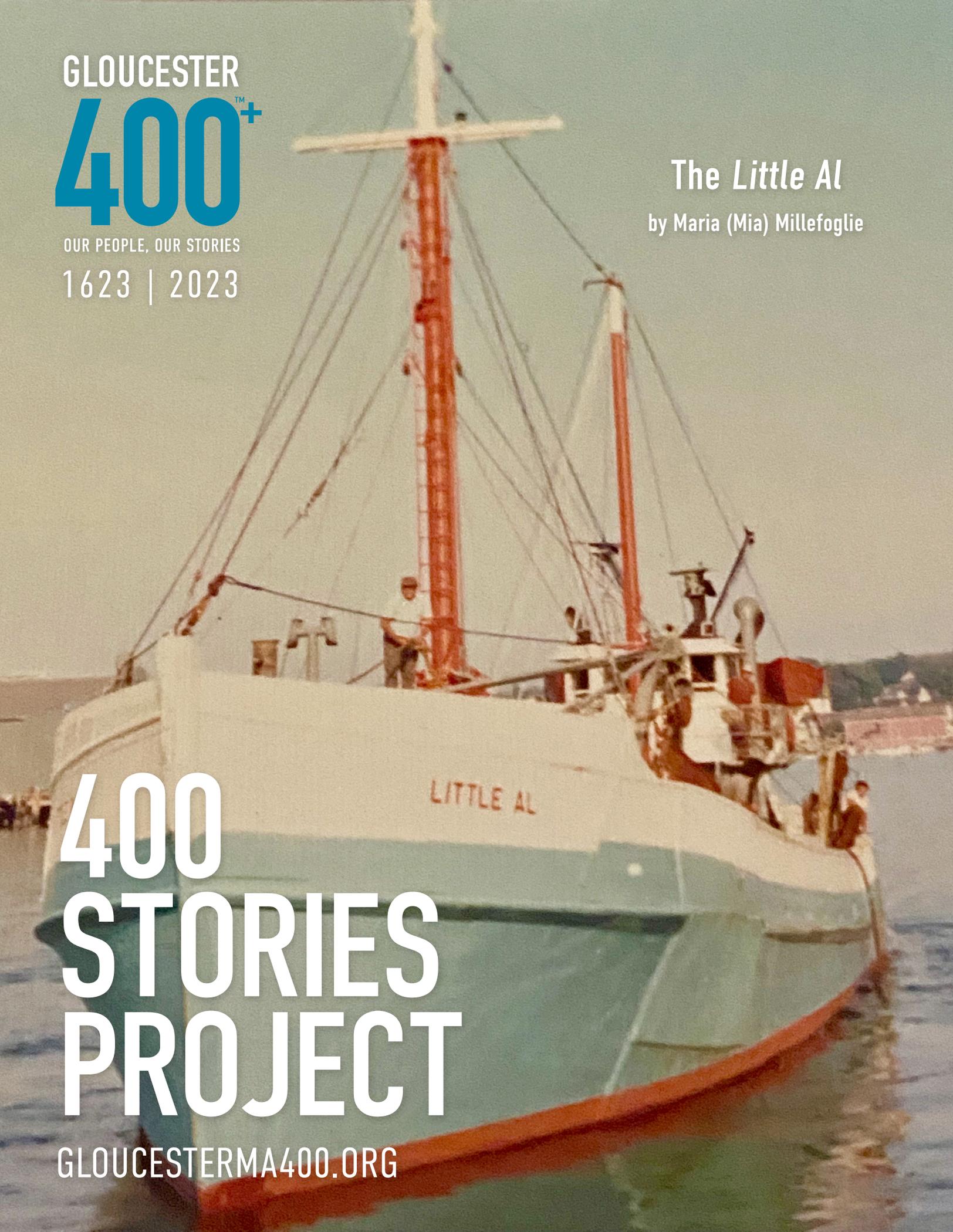
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*The Little Al*

by Maria (Mia) Millefogie

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# The *Little Al*

BY MARIA (MIA) MILLEFOGLIE

January 12, 1976

5:00 AM

A gray haze rose from the sea of darkness. Without the grace of warning, the weather turned fierce and a Nor'easter unleashed her fury on the *Little Al*—the 115-foot dragger ground fishing eighty-three miles out at sea. The national weather band issued a high sea alert with gale-force winds as heavy snow thundered down on the captain and his seven-man crew. Too far from Gloucester's shore to change course, my father, Captain Alfonso Millefoglio's only option was to ride out the storm and battle the angry sea. There was no turning back.



The crew onboard the *Little Al*.

At the helm, the captain gripped the wheel with all his force; his legs, solid as ship masts, stood firm on the deck. He jogged his dragger as her bow mounted the face of each wave and plummeted down its backside. Under the speed of five knots, the *Little Al* slogged into an endless series of twenty-foot waves. With each wave, he heard the shudder of the boat's wooden hull and prayed that his ship would be seaworthy in this storm.

It was critical to keep his ship from turning broadside into the seas—a risk heightened by 80,000 pounds of cod and haddock in its hold. Crashing waves transformed the masts, gear, and nets into ice sculptures. The crew, faces cloaked with frost and hands numbed by bitter cold, had set and hauled nets for the last seven days and nights. Each one had risked everything for what was now a ‘broken trip.’ Forces worked against them as winds increased and visibility worsened. The captain radioed a distress call to the Coast Guard. The station master replied: “Storm conditions unsafe for a Coast Guard rescue.”

5:15 AM

The ship’s alarm, sensitive to heat and high-water levels in the bilge, blasted a warning siren. The captain yelled out for a deckhand to man the helm while he raced down to the engine room. At the threshold of the engine room, he gasped seeing that the watertight door, the ship’s critical seal, was open to the elements. Air and wind swept into the engine room as thousands of gallons of diesel fuel were at the flashpoint of ignition. Within seconds, a treacherous triangle of fuel, heat, and oxygen ignited a fire. The captain and the engineer seized fire extinguishers and blasted carbon dioxide to quell the flames, but it was useless against the raging fire. Black smoke and flames engulfed them.

Up on deck, men fastened lines and secured gear against the howling winds. The storm showed no mercy. Suddenly, a rogue wave of frothing water swelled out of the ocean and smashed through the pilothouse windows. Shards of glass, a broken compass, and radar equipment swam in its wake. The navigational equipment was destroyed. A burning ship with no way to steer its course defaults to only one option: it is time to abandon ship.



Captain Millefogle in the pilothouse.

Captain Millefogle ordered his crew to unlatch the life raft. Two of the younger men climbed to the top of the pilothouse and unleashed their one hope for survival. Their bodies swayed with the turbulence of the sea. Frozen hands, a tossing ship, and life raft instructions written only in English hampered the efforts of this Sicilian-speaking crew. A deckhand secured a wooden

ladder to the raft and tied it to the forward gallous frame. This steel structure that once lowered the dragger's massive trawl doors was now their escape plan. They flung the raft overboard into the crashing waves. But precious time was lost as the fire erupted from the engine room.

"Go up to the whaleback; it will be safe up forward," Captain Millefogle ordered and then raced toward a smoke-filled pilothouse and radioed a distress call to the *Sandra Jane*: "Please come save us: the boat's on fire." Seconds later, the vessel lost electrical power and radio contact. The pilothouse darkened, and silence filled the space.

6:00 AM

Within seconds of the distress call, Co-captains Sam Militello and Joe Ciolino of the *Sandra Jane*—ground fishing several miles from the eye of the storm—took a radar fix on the *Little Al*'s position. The six-man crew hauled back their trawl doors and threw their fishing gear on deck. Co-captain Militello opened up the engine and pushed his 93-foot wooden dragger full-speed into high winds and rough seas. The *Sandra Jane* and her 480-horsepower engine were pushed to their limits.

From a distance, the crew of the *Sandra Jane* watched as the flames from the *Little Al* blazed into dark, snow-filled skies. The *Sandra Jane* used no compass; she was guided only by fire.

The *Sandra Jane* steered close to the burning ship. The crew threw a lifeline across to the men of the *Little Al* as high waves tossed the vessel back and forth as if she had no weight. Captain Millefogle tied a hauling line to a cleat for his men to climb down the ladder to the raft's safety. With the men ready to descend, a life raft compartment deflated, punctured from the abrasion of rubber against the rolling, wooden ship. A raft that should have brought seven men to safety would now only hold four. The men needed to find a solution fast. Crew members from each ship devised a two-way pulley system and secured



The *Sandra Jane*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MILITELLO FAMILY

control lines to the raft. Four men descended into the lifeboat. Fighting against the blasting winds, the crew gripped their lines and steered the swirling raft toward the *Sandra Jane* and pulled the first four men aboard its deck.

But as the *Little Al* dipped and rose in the high seas, the raft strap tore off, and now the ladder dangled in mid-air. Captain Millefogie ordered his two men to leap twenty feet with him from the bow down into the swirling raft. In the chaos of this desperate leap, one man remained on deck--unable to take the risk. Once the men in the raft were pulled to safety, the *Sandra Jane* steered closer to the burning vessel to rescue the one remaining man. Co-captain Militello navigated cautiously, taking several sweeps to move closer to the burning ship. It was critical to protect the *Sandra Jane's* hull. The co-captains understood that any damage to the *Sandra Jane* would defeat an already perilous rescue effort. As the *Sandra Jane* steered within twenty feet of the *Little Al*, Co-captain Ciolino threw a line across the waves and rescued the stranded man.

With all men now safe on deck, Co-captain Militello broke down in tears watching the rescued men cough black soot from their lungs. Cold and shivering, the saved men huddled on the deck of the *Sandra Jane* and observed in stunned silence as the *Little Al* disappeared into the coffin of the sea.

\* \* \*

## RECOLLECTIONS FROM A FISHERMAN'S DAUGHTER

January 12, 1976

5:00 AM

A howling wind rattled the windows of my bedroom. I bolted upright and lifted the dark green window shade to a moonless night. The city was blanketed in gray, solemn and motionless. A yellow lamplight flickered on the sign for Brighton Station, the last stop for Boston's Green Line. Trolley cables hung heavily under the weight of sleet, almost at their breaking point. A cold chill ran through me, knowing that my father was out at sea.

I recalled a vivid memory of the *Little Al*, the last time I had boarded her. It was late October, a day filled with brilliant light where the sea vacillated from transparent green to turquoise blue. Dad and I went to Felicia's Wharf, where the *Little Al* nestled between the *Joseph & Lucia* and the *Sandra Jane* with her bow rising slightly above the others. To board her, we had played a game of leapfrog, jumping on the rails of the *Joseph & Lucia*, balancing ourselves, and then leaping onto the *Little Al*. From the deck, I could see the statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage looking down protectively at this motley fleet of draggers, each one painted in primary colors boasting the names of a saint, a child, or most often, the name of the captain's wife. But my mother refused to have her name on a boat. She feared the sea and all that it represented in her life.

Once on board his ship, Dad always transformed into captain. He had pulled his cap a bit further down, took long strides toward the starboard side of his vessel, and launched into a monologue about the nuances of his Eastern-rig dragger. He loved the *Little Al* and had earned bragging rights for owning the largest dragger in the harbor. From the deck, we went up to the pilothouse: the ship's command center equipped with a large wooden wheel, electronics, radars, and a single band radio. Dad replaced some electrical parts while I scanned a stack of nautical charts. Then, we went down to the engine room. A single, watertight door sealed it off from the rest of the vessel. Dad pointed to the door, "In a storm, you got to keep this door closed, or it will be all over." He waved two fingers in the air and released a huge sigh.

6:30 AM

Now the image of my father pointing to the engine room's white steel door haunted me, and I called home.

"Mom, where's Dad?"

"Maria, who told you?" She spoke in the frustrated tone she used when she didn't want truth to find me.

"I just felt something was wrong." My voice rose to a scream. "Mom, where's Dad?"

"The marine operator called; they're caught in a storm." She paused for what seemed like an eternity. "It's too rough for the Coast Guard to rescue them. It's in God's hands now," she said and hung up the phone.

We were powerless. I visualized "God's hands" calming the storm and Our Lady of Good Voyage cradling our ship in her arms. I said a short prayer to the Madonna but knew that my mother had this covered; her faith was stronger than mine. Then, I bolted from my Boston apartment and boarded the train to Gloucester.

9:30 AM

From the Gloucester station, I rushed to our house on the eastern side of town. Mom opened the door dressed in a faded pink robe, her short, black hair uncombed, and her face drained of color. She wore the look of a fisherman's wife: stoic and resigned to her fate. My younger brother Al sat at the kitchen table, his face pale with dark eyes searching for an answer. Tomorrow would be his sixteenth birthday, but we didn't talk about that this day. In fact, we didn't talk much. It felt like we were in a hospital's waiting room, each with our own thoughts, hoping the doors would swing open and a doctor would deliver good news.

My mother broke the silence with words that spat into the air, "Why did he have to buy another boat?" Three years ago, our previous boat, the *Mary Rose*, went aground as she returned from a fishing trip. We still hadn't received the insurance settlement, and now, my family had everything invested in the *Little Al*. The commitment to our boats felt like family: we were loyal and gave everything in both good times and in bad.

Mom rose from her chair, "Can't your father do something else?" She already knew the answer, as we did. The fishermen's life was rooted in their souls: the sea was their calling.

10:30 AM

The phone rang and broke the tension in our space. Ann Grace, Sammy Militello's wife, brought news of relief, "The men are safe and on their way home." Those words spared us from the unspeakable. My shoulders eased, and my breathing returned to normal while Mom resorted to

preparing her long-simmering chicken soup. I fantasized the *Little Al* being towed to Gloucester and then docked on the railways. Precious fishing months would be lost with engine and hull repairs. All of it would be costly, but Dad and his crew were safe. Nothing else mattered.

My brother talked about the day Dad bought the boat in Rockland, Maine. The name on her bow was *Wawenock*, the "People of the Bay," referring to a Native American tribe that once lived in coastal Maine and disappeared from their land. We later christened her the *Little Al*, a tribute to my brother, my father's only son.

"I was with him in the pilothouse when we 'steamed' from Rockland, Maine, to Gloucester Harbor," said Al. "Dad was so excited about his boat."

4:00 PM

It was late afternoon when I heard Dad's footsteps on the back stairs. I rushed to the door to hug him but halted at his sight. His face and clothes were covered with soot; his eyes were vacant, the glimmer of light now gone. I became frightened that something in my father had changed, and he would never be the same man.

"Daddy, where's the boat?" I had imagined tow lines pulling our *Little Al* to the safety of our port. We had repaired our family's ships like this in the past.

He flung a folded American Flag and a manila envelope filled with ship documents on our kitchen table. "Maria, that's it; that's all that is left of the *Little Al*."

My father had owned the *Little Al* for only twenty-eight months. A quote from Sam Nicastro of Felicia Oil captured his commitment: "He loved his boat. I'm with him every day that he's in, and his action as far as taking care of a boat was a thing to adore; no boat was better cared for on this wharf."

In the months ahead, my father, who knew of no other way to make a living, purchased another eastern-rig dragger and named her the *Maria & Al* after my brother and me. I once read that being a fisherman is not what you do; it is who you are.

## GRATITUDE

Our family and the families of the *Little Al's* crew—my uncles Anthony Millefogie and Benedetto Favazza, engineer Salvatore Bologna, John B. Orlando, Matteo Loiacono, and Salvatore Curcuru—will be forever grateful for the bravery and strength of the men of the *Sandra Jane*: Co-captains Sam Militello and Joseph Ciolino, Jim Milone, Joseph Noto, Peter Ciolino, and substitute engineer Pat Guardino. They sealed the fishermen's bond of loyalty, and each of them returned to a life at sea.

They have their own stories of survival and challenge, pride and success, and injury and loss. These men worked all their lives on wooden draggers battered by the forces of time and weather. They endured the challenges of a changing industry, the rise of restrictions and regulations, and the decline of fishing stocks. And the fishermen's wives endured challenges as well. They lived with the constant fear of losing a loved one at sea, assumed the financial risks of the volatile fishing industry, and managed children and households on their own. Everyone sacrificed.

I give tribute to the wives of fishermen and to the men that we call the "Finest Kind" –the brave, hard-working, and unassuming men who shaped the true history of Gloucester, our nation's oldest fishing community.

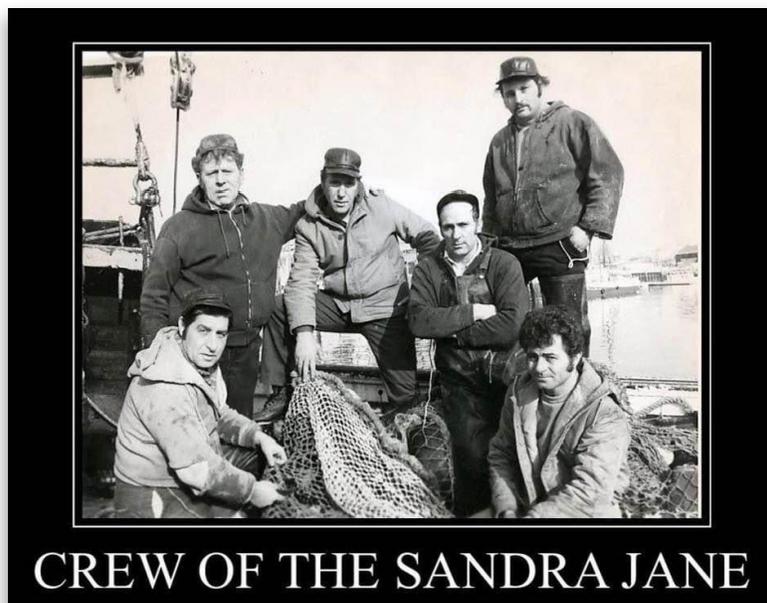


Photo courtesy of the Militello family;  
original photo in *National Fisherman Magazine*, March 1976.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story is formed through memory, conversations with my father and family friends, research, and an article by the late author, Peter K. Prybot in *National Fisherman* in March, 1976. I am forever grateful for being the daughter of the gentlest of men and knowing the special breed of fishermen that circled our lives. A special thank you to Sammy Militello—who left us too early in life—and to Joe Ciolino for leading the effort to save our father and the crew of the *Little Al*.



On left is Sammy Militello and his lifelong friend Alphonso Millefoglie.  
Circa 1990s at the Fiesta.