



Tuna Industry Pioneers of San Pedro and Terminal Island, California

Mary Misetich

Wife of a U.S. West Coast Tuna Fisherman, and
Worked in the Family Tuna Fishing Business

Interviewed on January 18, 2013



Mary Misetich was born in 1912 in Washington. Her family later moved to San Pedro, where she lived for 90 years. In 1932, she married Dominick Misetich, a tuna fisherman. Both of their families came from the island of Brac, Yugoslavia.

Dominick was part of a prominent San Pedro fishing family. He and his brother, Anton, sons of Jakov Misetich, owned the fishing vessels Ronny M, Lucky Star, Liberator, Dolores M, and the Anthony M. Jakov purchased the Lucky Star from Starkist. He paid it off in fish, repeating the process with his sons until the family owned a fleet of fishing vessels. The F/V Anthony M, run by Anton, was an industry legend for being the first to use nylon seine netting in 1956; and the brothers continued to pioneer this technology. The net was made with 10,000 lbs. of DuPont filament nylon by A. M. Starr Net Company. Anton is also credited with developing the “back-down” procedure, which along with the Medina Panel developed by San Diego Captain Harold Medina, greatly reduced dolphin deaths in tuna purse seine nets.

Mary worked in a tuna cannery for a short time. Later, she became financial officer in the family business. She was bookkeeper and accountant, wrote paychecks and checks for supplies, bought food for fishing trips, and managed the boats. The Misetich’s business had numerous employees; they were responsible for the livelihoods of many San Pedro families.

Mary had three children. With the men at sea so often, Mary and her two sisters and sister-in-law raised their children as single parents, for the most part. They lived on the same small block so their children were raised together and remain close to this day.

Mary was also active in the community. She was involved in charitable works through the San Pedro Fisherman’s Women’s Auxiliary and Friends of Brac, and volunteered many years at the San Pedro Peninsula Hospital gift shop. She was very involved in her church, Mary Star of the Sea, where a statue of the Virgin Mary holds a tuna boat safely in her arms.

Mary passed away in San Pedro, the town she loved, at age 100 in February 2013. When asked her secret to a long life, dancing was a part. Her accounts of dancing with Dominick at the recreation club at Royal Palms beach under a full moon that lit up the sea are romantic recollections of San Pedro’s colorful past.

Interview Abstract: Mary discusses what it was like for the wives of the tuna fishermen in San Pedro. She notes that the wives took care of family duties when the fishermen were at sea, and some balanced this while also working in the tuna canneries. She discusses her concerns for her husband’s safety when he was at sea and a fun tradition they had when the boats departed. She explains that many of the fishermen, who were of Croatian descent, brought their wives over from Croatia.

Mary also talks about what she did as the business manager for her husband’s fishing business and what she enjoyed about working in the cannery.



NOAA FISHERIES
West Coast Region



Interview Transcript:

So what was the typical role of a woman in San Pedro, in the fishery?

You know when the men would go out fishing, wives would be home, taking care of the children, sending them to school and all. You know, family duties. And they worked; [...] a lot of them worked in the canneries, a lot of them went to school and worked in town.

When Dominic would go out to sea, what was that like when you would see him go? How long would he be gone?

Sometimes it would only be a week or two weeks. One time it was three months; that was the longest. And we had KOU¹, like you have the radios now. We used to talk on the radio KOU.

When he was out at sea, would you worry?

Well, you worry especially if you heard there were storms. Otherwise, you took it for granted because it was a livelihood and so you just took it for granted.

So when the men would arrive back at the docks...

Oh we would be there waiting. Same way as when they would leave. They had [on the Anthony M²] a record when they'd leave: *So Long it's Been Good to Know You*. They'd put the loudspeaker on as the boat would leave. So, there was a lot of fun along with it.

A lot of women in the community, was it, were they happy to marry a fisherman?

Oh yea, and a lot of them came from Croatia married to fisherman, or came over here to marry a fisherman. That's how the industry got started. So many of them, either they brought their girlfriend from Croatia and then got married here and started a family. That's how the industry got started.

So what did you do as the business manager?

Took care of the books. When the fish came in ...how much fish, and then the crew... divided the amount of money that was made with the fish. They would have to pay off their expense and then divide the money they made.

What did you like about working in the cannery?

Oh, I liked the friendship. Everybody was everybody's friend.

Filmed by John Dutton Media.

¹ KOU was a commercial radio station that provided a service for people on shore to communicate with vessels at sea.

² The San Pedro-based tuna purse seine vessel

Family Photos Provided by Cat Spydell and Mary Misetich's family.



F/V Anthony M. Anton Misetich, Mary's brother-in-law, first used a nylon purse seine net on this tuna seiner.



F/V Lucky Star.



Mary and Dominic Misetich.



Mary and her sister, Anne.



Mary and Dominic Misetich, and their wedding party.



Dominic and Mary Misetich.



Mary Star of the Sea Church, San Pedro. This was the fishermen's church. It incorporated fishing themes and many traditions from the Croatian and Italian immigrants to San Pedro. When the fishing and canning industry was thriving, the church conducted an annual blessing of the fleet. It held mass in several languages for its ethnically diverse congregation; to this day it carries on many ethnic/social ministries for San Pedro's culturally diverse community. The bronze Mary statue atop the bell tower faces the Port to bless and guide the fishermen. Mary Missetich was an active parishioner at this church.



Virgin Mary statue inside Mary Star of the Sea Church, San Pedro. She holds a tuna seiner in her arms.



Mary and three generations of her nieces. 2012.



Mary and her great-grandsons. 2012.



Mary and granddaughter-in-law, Cat Spydell, during the interview. 2013. (Photo by: John Dutton)



Mary recounting colorful memories of San Pedro and her family. 2013. (Photo by: John Dutton)



Mary being interviewed about her life as the wife of a tuna fisherman and her role in the family fishing business. 2013. (Photo by: John Dutton)



Mary looking at a photo of the Anthony M tuna seiner and recounting memories of her brother-in-law pioneering the nylon purse seine from it. 2013. (Photo by: John Dutton)