

TAPE SUMMARY INDEX FOR  
LONG ISLAND TRADITIONS FIELDWORK PROJECT:  
BAYSHORE TO PATCHOGUE

TAPE 005:  
JERRY COLLINS  
JULY 10, 2000

Jerry Collins was born in Bay Shore and except for his years in the military has spent his entire life in the Sayville area. His father was a fisherman, clammer and oysterman. Everything in Sayville centered on the schools, churches and firehouses. He use to go into the bay with his father and probably got in his way more than anything. He began going into the bay full time in 1946--he has always been a tonger. Describes the method of tonging and explains you do not have to be really big to do it and you need to face the elements. His father use to say, "the student is suppose to get smarter than the teacher otherwise you haven't done a good job." No longer goes out in the bay full time but still tries to go at least twice a week. Has worked mostly out of Islip town but has worked out of the other surrounding towns. He like Islip because the area was fairly productive. for the most part he has worked alone although on occasion he has taken on partners when they need the money. although only part time he approaches it in a serious manner because he is out there to work. He use to work six days a week--although in the past there were no restriction but now you can't clam on Sundays. Speaks about other clammers labeling one another and even though there was some personal rivalry but nothing malicious. The younger guys use to tell him he could catch them on the main road. Mentions that in the past most everyone had a nickname. Jerry speaks about the importance of a good boat and that you need to have a good engine. He use to use a WWII landing craft that he turned into a clam boat. the landing craft was a heavy, flat 36-foot boat that worked really well for clamming. Now he uses a wooden boat that he had built because he is old fashioned but most of the boats now are fiberglass. the advantage of his boat now is that it is comfortable. You usually don't tong in much more than 10 feet of water. Discusses the type and sizes of tongs he uses. He never got into raking because he was a little too old by the time people began switching to this method. Does tonging in all of the different bottoms--wherever they can find clams. Remembers that from the 1950 until 1985 the clamming was very good. Jerry also recalls that people would stay in their own area but when the clamming was good everyone was trying to make a few bucks--he respects ambition. While speaking about the weather Jerry says that "the wet and cold will take you down and rub you out of the game." Safety has never really been an issue and there have been relatively few accidents on the bay. If you work on the water you have an obligation to help someone in trouble and speaks of getting letters from some of the people he has towed. Jerry has never had to stay overnight and has been very lucky out on the bay. He speaks of the winters and the icy conditions. Has "clammed on the ice, went through it with his boat, any way he could clam." Continues the discussion of how you have to cut through the ice in order to clam. It's been a way of life he proclaims when speaking about how working on the bay has shaped his life. He likes the freedom and also could make good money. "You can't do what I did out on the bay and survive, its over." Bulkheading and loss of wetlands, runoff and the population have contributed to the decline of the bay. Discusses the option of aquaculture--trying to replace what Mother Nature does is a pretty hard thing to do. Would like people to think of baymen as hardworking people