

Date: June 9, 2015
Interviewer: Nancy Solomon
Informant: Michael Combs
Location: Baldwin, NY

AUDIO LOG

(clip 1)

0:25 – First memories of family's bay house. Take to bay house. 2 weeks old. Playing in marshlands. Sinking in mud. Learned to fish. Watersports.
1:48 – Teach kids your traditions and ways.
2:20 – Started commercial fishing and clamming.
2:44 – Taught future of bay houses. Taught carpentry and dock work.
3:19 – Taught up keep of bay houses. Need many skills for upkeep. Elements are harsh.
5:07 – Traps and tools.
7:22 – Commercial clamming fall to winter. Had to break the ice to clam.
8:10 – Clamming the hardest. Brutal winters. Heated cabins on boats.
9:09 – Variety of boats. Started out with garvies. Damaged first garvey.
10:47 – 1990s turned to skiff. Low maintenance.
11:18 – Clamming with different types of boats in bay.
12:05 – Crabbing different types of crabs. Process of metamorphosis.
14:32 – Packing and storing the crabs. Preparing for sale.
15:00 – Another way to catch to catch crabs.
15:45 – Baiting pots. Also caught crabs at bay house. Mostly caught in marshes.

(clip 2)

1:05 – Clamming as kids. Memories as kids.
2:25 – Cooking and steaming clams.
2:27 – Used propane refrigerator and stove.
3:02 – Food they ate. Jacking with grandfather.
3:58 – Caught thousands of eels. Cooked and ate eels.
6:17 – Duck hunting. Very cold. Needed the right gear.
7:17 – What they caught. Need to know species.
8:02 – Learning about the habitat.
8: 53 – Grandfather made a lot of cork decoys. Now plastic decoys.
9:51 – Grew up with handmade decoys.
10:08 – Made own supplies back then. Grandfather can build anything.
11:30 – Grandfather Market hunted. Back then sold ducks.
11:45 – Shoot into flocks. Mini canon strapped to bow of boat.
13:08 – Made own pot belly stove.
13:38 – Learned a lot of little tricks, jacking eels and crabbing. Stories of catching crabs.
14:30 – Sold crabs to neighbors.
15:00 – Jacking with his grandfather. When tide went out, did not get many crabs.
15:15 – When tide change, crabs came from under seaweed.
15:58 – Dad told stories of going to school with soft crab sandwiches.

(clip 3)

0:28 – Kids got tired after a while. Kids traded lunches.

0:46 – How bay house was built. Originally floated out on barrels. Milt on mud sills.

1:32 – Everything was carted or floated. Could not drive. Towed garage on barrels.

1:48 – Stories from baymen and old timers. Houses were used by rum runners.

2:00 – Rum runners went into Freeport. No taxes. That is why it is called Freeport.

2:35 – Would think yes but not sure any family were involved with rum running.

2:57 – Story of Lizzy D – rum runner. Captain of Lizzy D was William McCoy.

3:15 – Known for his liquor not being cut as much. Real McCoy saying comes from.

3:36 – Boat sank. Someone dove for the ship and found bottle of rum off the ship. Still has it till this day.

4:40 – Many different bay houses through the years.

5:10 – Water for bay houses was brought water out in containers or from artisanal wells. 67-69 feet into the marsh until hit gravel. Pipe it and hand pump water into sink. High sulfur content so good for washing and cleaning. Boiled it to drink it. Drinking water was brought in. Back in the day all they did was boil it to drink it.

6:51 – Outhouse. Small building off the house. 5 gallon bucket. Bring back to shore to get rid of waste.

7:55 – Chores – set up coolers, open windows, setup screens, walk the docks to clean clam shells off. Seagulls dropped clams to break them open. Sweep docks off. After that was play time.

8:55 – Children expected to get the clams for dinner.

9:45 – What people don't know about bay houses – the history behind it. Way of life.

11:00 – Most important things to know to have a bay house – have to respect environment. If you do not, you'll ruin the habitat. Need to know some craftsmanship. Basic carpentry.

11:50 – Seagull dropped clam at an angle and broke window. Found clam in sill. Have to be somewhat handy.

12:00 – Getting to the bay house mostly by boat. As kids, went out there on styrofoam. Built boats out of that and would swim – called it a bayathalon.

13:21 – Wrote a story about it. Who can get back to the mainland first. Swam across the channels, Run across the marsh. Run the bars but waist deep.

14:20 – Varied how many people would go out to the bay house. 6-8 people. Sometimes ten.

14:30 – Had a lot of local firemen that used the bay house for their annual party. Stayed overnight. Had their cookouts. Something they did every year. Then it would be 30-40 people at the house.

15:00 – Biggest problem was mooring all the boats. Had hunting parties in the winter. 6-8 guys.

15:40 – Also had a gun club. Scout Creek Gun club. Still in existence. Stayed couples days out there. Our fathers taught us how to hunt.

(clip 4)

0:11 – Learned everything about the water.

0:12 – Memories of storms that hit bay house before Sandy. No name storm - early 90s storm knocked down the house off mud sills and cradle. Down for one year. Tried a lot of techniques to raise it.

0:55 – Jacked up house slowly over months. Like Lincoln logs. Describes rebuilding.

1:49 – That is where it stayed until Sandy – which took everything away. No one saw anything like that before. Even upland houses got damaged.

2:25 – Things done differently for this house. Sinking poles instead of mud sills. Built higher. Six feet up in height from base of the house.

2:58 – Permits. 2-3 year process at least to rebuild. Everything has to be brought in by boat.

3:35 – Other changes. Telephone poles. Bolts. Back in the day, everything was nailed. Enough tide, nails pull out. Heavy duty lumber.

4:00 – Piers lifted up by ice but they are out in water. But bay houses are in marsh so ice gets stuck.

5:20 – Built a little further back from original location. After foundation a lot easier.

6:28 – Jet skiing accident.

9:00 – No major accidents while fishing.

9:52 – Warning signs that storm was going to be really bad. ‘Red sky at night, Sailor’s delight. Red sky in morning, sailor take warning.’

10:12 – Never went by what weather people said. Were never right back in the day.

10:25 – Hazy moon – will not be a nice day. Felt the weather get damn. See fog roll in.

10:49 – Didn’t matter the weather. Worked rain, shine, snow or ice. Had to have right equipment or you could get seriously hurt. Had to be prepared for everything.

11:11 – Poured hot water on gloves to warm up hands after working. Before propane heaters. Also used warm water from water pump from engine to warm up hands until got home.

11:40 – Ride home that was very brutal. Older got smarter - built mini cabins. Tough guys when young.

11:54 – Worked offshore. ET dragger. Worked with Tony several times for year and half. Interesting. Learned a lot about dragging. A lot of different species. Tough living.

12:33 – A lot of regulations. Had to know what quotas were what. Tony knew that. Only worked deck but learned a lot.

13:09 – Dangerous job. Decks got icy. Very slippery. Enjoyed it. You looked forward to it. Never knew what would come up. Saw every kind of fish. Saw first monk fish.

14:15 – Changes in bay after sandy. Couldn’t work. Devastated area. Bay filled with timber and things from mainland. Didn’t know what could hit your boat.

15:10 – Boat didn’t suffer any damage. Hauled it out. Tied it to fence. Most equipment was upland. Lost some gear, traps.

15:59 – But problem was bay wasn’t the same. Things moved out. Species know when storms are coming – they move out.

(clip 5)

00:21 – Next few seasons were not the same. Changed everything. Tough to make a living.

00:22 – Started doing real estate on the side as a result of Sandy. Missed the bay. Tinkers now. Have to subsidize to survive.

00:52 – A lot of regulations. Hard to make living out there. Could do long hours when young. Worked 3:30 am – 9 pm. Still handful of guys go.

2:47 – Born July 3, 1968

3:54 – Combs family first came to Baldwin and Freeport. Grew up in Freeport half of life. Combs trace back to the Mayflower. A lot of baymen in this area were like the Combs, the Verities, the Carmans – a lot of bay names.

4:50 – Been a very good life. The beauty out there of the nature and the environment, you can't ask for better life than that. Just growing up out there. Just go for boat rides sometimes. Even though you work out there, you would think it's the last place you want to go to but it isn't – something about the fresh air and salt air.

END