

Tom Kuhner Log
June 11, 2001
Interview by Mary Lee
Tape 1 of 1

SIDE A

005 I was born in Freeport. We lived on a canal. I used to go crabbing and clamming. When I was seven or eight years old, I started selling bait. I had a small bait business. For a kid, it was a pretty lucrative business. You could make three or four dollars a week delivering newspapers. I could make that in a day sometimes. I sold them from the house. I had a sign up and there was a boatyard across the street. I had some pretty good customers. That's how I started. I did a lot of clamming and eeling. I lived in Freeport until I was about eighteen or nineteen, and they closed the bay. Because of pollution or whatever the reason was. I was about twenty years old, and I just got married. And we moved out east here to Patchogue. I lived there for five or six years. It was mostly clamming in those years out there. We moved from Patchogue in '75 or '76 to here. Then I started eeling again and eeling was very good.

028 My father was not a fisherman. But I grew up with fishermen. We rented a room to a commercial fisherman. He used to take me with him when I was a kid. He taught me a lot of stuff. His son is a baymen out east. He lived with us four or five year, from probably about nine until twelve or thirteen. His name was George Parry. His son's name is also George Parry. Once in a while I'll see the son or talk to him. I learned mostly from his father and worked for him/his bait business, catching bait. Every day I went out on the boat with him. I learned how to catch shiners and killeys from him.

043 You have to know how to do everything/lots of things, to be able to make a living. Like I was saying with eeling. Eeling was very good from 1976 to '86. I fished for the European market. For some reason, the market went bad. I still go eeling, but it's not half as good as it used to be. They're not really worth that much. And for a local market, it's just not worth it.

055 Right now I'm only crabbing. All I'm doing now is crabbing. I'll probably stay crabbing June, July, and August, maybe September. Sometimes after Labor Day the price goes way down. If that happens I go back to eeling or clamming, whatever is the best price at the time.

063 They destroyed all the wetlands on the north side of the bay here. They built houses. I don't think it is just here either. It is up and down the coast.

066 When I was a kid in Freeport, if you lived on the water, you came from the wrong side of the tracks. Now it is just the complete opposite.

070 We would stay in bay houses in Freeport. They were houses that the older fellows owned. It was a nice way to grow up. We'd stay down there two or three days. During hunting season. I don't go anymore. "I must have lost the killer instinct." You used to be able to do what you wanted to. You could kill a lot of ducks. They enforce the duck hunting. It comes under federal regulations.

088 Once in awhile, the coast guard will stop you. As long as you have all your stuff, you are okay. The main problem here is the DEC, New York control. They have size limits on the clams. They have to be over an inch thick. And certain areas are closed because of possible pollution. Sometimes they give you a hard time. They are not like the coast guard or marine police. They might treat you different. The DEC is tuff. They are New York state.

104 If they catch you doing something wrong, they will write you a summons. I've already been arrested for clamming in illegal water. I'm not the only one. A couple of times I've paid a fine. A couple of times I've been found not guilty. It used to be worth the risk, but not any more.

112 This area right here (Babylon, Islip area), 80% of all clams consumed in the country used to come right from here. And it wasn't that long ago. It was overfished so bad, and it just hasn't come back. There were a lot of clams here and a lot of clam diggers. There were 3,000 guys here at one time. Now, I'm 57 years old, and I'm the youngest full time guy. All that's left here is the old guys. A friend of mine has two sons. They are the last young fishermen and the two youngest guys I know. My friend's name is Jack Verity. His sons are Billy, around 30, and Jason, 24. My son (Peter) was also a fisherman and he got offered a job on Long Island Rail Road. He fished until he was over 30. It was hard for him to leave. He didn't like the job at first, but now he likes it. It's like the real world, you know. If you are sick, you get off, and you get paid.

138 I'm self-employed. My wife has a job now that pays the benefits, but for years we paid our own. And you've got to be very careful not to get hurt. If you get hurt, too bad. "I wouldn't want to do anything else. This is a great life. I don't even consider this work...but I can't recommend this for any young guy. They're just regulating you right out of business. They make it tough you know.

151 Always fish alone. Crabbing might be easier with more than one person and catch a few more fish. But I'm so used to going alone. Sometimes in the winter, I'll take my friend alone.

162 Does ocean and bay fishing. I worked for a few years on a friend's big trawler. About three or four people worked on that. "That's a big headache. You know what I mean? This here, these little boats, they're little headache. You got the big boat, well, you know, you got big headaches, too." You have to worry about a crew. It's hard to keep a crew. The money is not what it used to be. To go out for four or five days, you've really got to love it. The financial rewards are not as great.

178 That was an 85 foot modern boat. I'm too old to be rolling around in the ocean all the time. I like to be home at night. I'm basically, really, truly a bayman now. If I have to, I can go. But I prefer to catch my eels and crabs. I consider myself to be basically an eeler. The bottom fell out of the market. The last twelve years, I've been filling in with the crabs.

192 Certain times, we fish at night. We used to go eeling at night. If you are fishing for striped bass or something, you go at night. If it calls for going at night, I go. With crabbing, I

leave the dock at 4:30 or 5:00 and by eleven, I'm all done. You go out early, you get in early. There is a lot of boat traffic around here, especially on the weekends.

203 I make my eel traps and buy my crab traps. Everybody thinks I have the best eel traps. Everyone basically has the same. They are called a kitchen-and-parlor trap. Put the bait in the front part and they try to escape out the back. I use horseshoe crabs and sometimes surf clams as bait for eels. They have put a lot of regulations on horseshoe crabs. Every week I have to send in a report of how many I've used. And even if you're crabbing and not using the horseshoe crabs, you still have to send in the report. If you miss one of those reports, they'll take your license. You gotta be like a bookkeeper. And if you are really busy and tired, you forget. You don't want to forget. I think Corey had some problems. Some states you're not even allowed to take them anymore. There's about 1/5 of the horseshoe crabs left. Everything is overfished. If you take something faster than it can grow back, you don't have to be real smart to figure out that it is not going to grow back.

240 Mostly over fishing and not pollution. And filling in of the wetlands. What they did twenty-five or thirty years ago, you are seeing the results now.

253 Other tools include clam rakes and scallop dredges and crab dredges. Sometimes in the winter time I dredge crabs. Most of the time I repair my own stuff. Ray Schultz makes most of the tools for the clambers and fisherman. He makes lots of stuff and is a good guy.

276 The fishermen don't get together that much. We used to years ago, used to hang out in Freeport and Baldwin. At Dick Abbott, a fisherman's house. He had a nice big porch on the canal and we used to head there if you wanted to find out what was going on. When he passed away, it was like the end of an era. I haven't seen some guys in five years just because of that.

294 I sell to a wholesaler. I don't go store to store. You could probably make a few dollars more if you wanted to peddle around, but I've got enough work. I want to get rid of them, and I'm done.

306 Eeling is more of a spring and fall activity. Summer is crabbing or clamming. Winter is mostly clamming. In the winter you've got to have good gloves and you can't let them get wet. I can't wear many clothes in the winter, because with clamming, you'll start perspiring and then get real cold. So, most important is your hands and good boots.

326 I've had these boats a long time. One is fifteen years old and one is ten years old. I used to build my own, but not anymore. If you take care of your boat, it'll last a long time. The ones that I made, we sold or gave them to people. I learned how to make boats from the old guys when I was a kid. I hung out and watched. Tried a couple on my own. They turned out pretty good. "I learned everything from other people." My boats don't have names. "I've call 'em names sometimes [laugh]."

355 Boats and fishing is an expensive investment. To get rigged up to go crabbing would be about 30 grand. To replace it. I didn't pay that much when I bought it. Boats and motors are very high. It is an expensive business to get into any more.

365 We have a problem with part-timers. That was why the clams got cleaned up so fast. The guys were firemen and cops and school teachers and people with a lot of free time. They went clamming. They changed a lot of laws now, especailly for the crabbing and fishing. You can not get a license unless you can prove that you make at least 50% of your income from the water. They should have done that years ago, but better late than never.

379 The DEC doesn't have a clue. They knew nothing about the horseshoe crabs until they had a meeting and the baymen filled them in. They don't have a clue. It's a shame. When they are thinking about passing legislation, they have a public hearing, and we go and voice our opinion. They don't show me much, to be honest. They went from no regulations at all to now you can hardly move. Now there are hardly any boats left and those poor guys are regulated. There is no happy medium.

416 There aren't as many big boats. My friend still has a boat at Point Lookout, but maybe there are two or three boats left down there. There used to be seven, eight, or nine. Same in Freeport. There are only one or two boats going out into the ocean from Freeport. Some of the guys didn't have much of a choice and you had a small boat and couldn't go far off-shore, you were limited. It's a shame. It went from no regulations to putting the stops. They also regulate the sports fishermen. You can't say they are just picking on the commercial fishermen, because they are not.

443 The problems in New York between sports fishermen and commercial fishermen were never really that bad, especially compared to other states. There were some frictions, but it never got out of hand.

456 People in the fall, when I set my eel traps in the canals, you run into some unfriendly people. I've been going in those canals before the houses were there. You gotta go real early in the morning and never on the weekends. They don't want you in the canal. People call up the police. Some of these areas I've been going into for thirty-five or forty years, before the houses were there.

478 It's terrible with people taking traps. This is one of the worst areas around here. That is my absolute biggest expense in fishing, replacing the traps that are stolen.

SIDE B

004 It's gotten so bad and the crabbing is so limited, that I've packed it in. You lose a trap and the your rope and buoy and lead and zinc and it's twenty-five dollars. It adds up. This year I'll lose at least, a minimum, of 100.

011 I still get 100% of income from fishing. I've had terrible years. Some of the younger guys, it's always been pretty good. I've seen when it's real, real hard to make money. Ask my wife, she'll tell you. The last ten or fifteen years have been all right. You never know what's going to happen. I've seen years before I was crabbing. Almost every crab in the bay died. It

was some disease. Everything is going along great and something happens. You must be versatile.

025 Doesn't make decoys. Some are worth a lot of money. Don't know anybody who makes good decoys anymore. Wink Carmen used to make good decoys. He passed away years ago. He's the only fellow I knew.

033 We always went duck hunting with the same guys and stayed down at the bay when we went. We usually went with four or six guys. They were all friends and fishermen. It was cold and wet. The best time to go is with wind and nasty weather because they try to get closer to the water. One season I went just about day after work. But most of the guys I went with are gone, and I just lost interest in it. Corey and those guys go, but there are too many regulations.

054 I go in all weather. It's got to be pretty bad for me not to go. This is a big bay, and it gets pretty rough. If you stay home because of the weather, you can't. You're not going to be very successful if you do that. I try not to let the weather bother me at all, especially when you are crabbing. "You've got to try to empty the traps every day, or somebody will empty them for you." I basically go in any type of weather, short of a hurricane. There was a hurricane Gloria about 15 years ago and the water was up to where you are sitting. It never came into the house, but it was close. That was bad. The whole canal flooded. We stayed here during the hurricane. "If I didn't work on the water, I would never live on the water. It's not worth the aggravation."

080 A friend of mine, a fellow I used to be partners with, fell overboard. It was the brother of Jack Verity, Ellwood Verity. He was a real good baymen, and one slip. We really don't know what happened. A propeller hit his head. We had to go down to Montauk and identify the body. It wasn't fun. You gotta be careful. But even if you are careful, something can happen. That was a shock to everybody, because he was well-known.

097 I don't have insurance on the boat. It's not worth what they charge. It's hard to get life insurance. It's one of the most dangerous professions, with trawling and fellows on boats in Alaska. With the trawling, there is a lot of machinery involved. You have more of a chance of getting hurt. It is very rough. And if you get hurt, that's too bad.

120 One time, for a couple of weeks, I got hurt. I was combing eels. You pull a rig through the mud that has big ice picks on it. I hit a big wreck, and I fell down in the boat. And my foot came down and the ice pick went almost through it. I was laid up for a couple of weeks. That's the only time I've lost any time.

133 A couple of guys go clamming, but they have night jobs too. You have to know how to do everything, and you have to know how to do it good. I plan to retire at some point, maybe on the St. Johns River in Florida. I have to be on the water. I could never be off the water. We kinda like it down there. Hopefully, that's where I'll end up.

150 It's hard, especially, for the trawler fishermen's wives. You're gone away from home a lot. It's not good for the family life. Fishermen tend to be hard workers and hard drinkers too. It's all part of the camaraderie.

171 The fishermen--the trawlers--today have to be very intelligent. There is a lot of high tech stuff. They came out with all these electronics.

179 Jack Verity joins us. Jack says that he likes eeling the most because you don't lose as many eel traps, because they don't have buoys. Jack talks about traps being stolen.

213 They have caught lots of bottles in the water.

221 Clamming/tonging is hard work. You can feel the clams when you close it. We used to do a lot of raking. Between Babylon and Islip, there used to be 3,000 baymen in the early 70's. Now, there are probably not even a hundred. Now, they all have other jobs.

245 Jack had an anchor on the front lawn. His wife wanted him to paint it and put it on the lawn (it was in the garage), so he did and after four days someone stole it. It weighed about 80 pounds and was probably taken in the middle of the night. The Amityville police laughed and said you've got to chain it down.

267 Superstitions/Bad luck: to hurt a seagull; never turn a hatch cover upside down; never whistle on a boat; my boats are pointed the wrong way, you should never point it in the direction you are headed the next morning, but instead make a circle to leave. Jack's father said to never go out fishing on Christmas and holidays. Learn these superstitions from the old timers.

END INTERVIEW