

TAPE 008:
LENNY NILSON
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Lenny was born in Bay Shore 1947, and has lived in the area for most of his life. He has also spent some time in Florida where he was involved in off shore commercial fishing. He spent the first five years of his life on West Island, West Fire Island, where his dad had a live shrimp and killie business. Lenny's family emigrated from Sweden in 1929 and had a commercial fishing background—dating back about 300 years. In 1952 the family moved to the mainland to continue the bait business. Lenny recalls an early experience on Fire Island when his father left him in the boat only to come back and find him walking on the jetty. He helped his father quite a bit during his youth. Around the age of 16 he began working regularly on the bay. Lenny attended Suffolk community college and received a degree in Marine Biology. After his return from Viet Nam, around 1971, he began working full time as a fisherman. Primarily worked in the bay but ended up working in the ocean from mid 1970s to 1986 where he worked as a pound fisherman with the Sunrise Fish companies—one of the last of its kind. Discusses the preparation needed to do pound fishing—establishing site, setting hickory poles, beginning in March, framing and setting of nets. This was done in about 40 feet of water and the nets would fish off the bottom and this type of fishing relies on the migration of fish. Describes the pound trap as a big cereal bowl. The advantage of pound fishing was that fish were coming in 24 hours a day and you were able to harvest live fish, which then brought the best prices. However, this type of fishing puts you at the mercy of the weather and you are not mobile so the fish must come to you. After 1986, Lenny returned to the bait business because this is what he knew. He specializes in the northern silverside and is caught with a haul seine out of a sharpie using a two-man crew. Further describes the process of this type of fishing and states there is a spring and fall run. Also seines for menhaden during May and June by going to the rivers and in the bay if the fish are close to shore. Speaks about the legal ramifications doing this type of fishing and have basically given up the menhaden aspect and goes to say that people do not want them around. It takes a keen eye to bait fish and you have to be able to read the water—looking for small ripples in the water. Also speaks about setting a blind set. Lenny states he has been fortunate in having good people with a lot of knowledge to help him in the business. He also explains how it is important to study the fish by keeping records. The discussion turn to the over fishing of the Japanese, who almost bought out Lenny's company, and now to survive in commercial fishing they must make their equipment better and look to other area. Lenny insists in order to stay alive they must become more effective in how they fish. He makes his own nets along with a few others in his company and goes on to state how the immigrants made a lot of the nets especially Italians. Discusses the making of nets and the concept of double salvaging—double needling the ends of the net. Sometimes the pocket or the bunt are tapered or in a square box. In the early 1960s synthetics became the dominant material in net making. The nets must also be stretched and hung. "Any good fishermen who knows what he is doing makes his own nets" and Lenny continues to make his own.

There is an art to it, there is a lot of knowledge in making a catch. In the beginning Lenny had his father and other older fishermen help him to get started. Fishermen, due to competition, do not readily give advice to other fishermen but in Lenny's case he has helped others because he is also buying from the fishermen. Out of respect they usually do not fish on other people's area.

Speaks about a code of ethics, a common respect, and a common bond but at the same time it is very competitive and imaginary boundaries are set. There will always be that one fisherman who will go into someone else's area but they will hold no respect with the other fishermen. Does not want to see commercial fishing to become a lost art to become extinct and derives some satisfaction from teaching helping others in the industry but don't really want to see family members enter the business because of the hardships that will be face. Most commercial fishermen depend on a spouse who works and has benefits. Speaks of the ethnic diversity and of the rivalry between the Scandinavians. Were divided between Swedes and Norwegians and to each other you might as well been Greek or Dutch because of the rivalry. Recalls shouting, fistfights, and attempted strangulations and drownings among the different groups—also a lot of fights on the shore at the packing houses. Speaks of the different families involved in commercial fishing who made an important impact in the community and in the industry. Speaks about the importance of freezers for the commercial fishing industry. When asked about how the bay has shaped his life Lenny responds “you only get out of it what you put into it.” Honesty is also important to him and has learned that the body needs a spiritual rest as well as physical rest. Independence is the other reward that is valued because you don't have to answer to anyone and you don't have to punch a clock. Lenny expresses that he “loves being on the water and can't wait till that first spring thaw”. Lenny needs to be on the water for therapy and needs to be on the water to see firsthand what is going on in the water. Does not like the term baymen because of the connotation of just being a clammer. Would like people to realize that fishermen were there first and that they are willing to share but would like a little respect and to understand they are not the bad guy, and that fishermen are just out there making a living.