

John Remsen Sr. part 2
November 17, 2003
Interview by Nancy Solomon

John Remsen Sr. was born in Freeport in 1933, the son and grandson of fishermen and baymen. As a young boy he helped his great grandfather Alanson Ellison go haul-seining on the ocean, before it was outlawed in 1942. He would go clamming as a young boy. It was easy to harvest clams in earlier years. Father went for chowder clams which were more popular at the time. Sold to Al Swanson – a wholesale buyer in Freeport and others. Andy Jergensen had a bay house. He would buy their clams. Bay House was on Crow Island. Father stayed out there year round and guarded the clam beds. Started selling clams when he was 12 years old. Sold to local families. He had a row boat. Then he bought a motor boat. Allowed him to go to more places and to clam longer. There were about 30 – 40 full time clam diggers in Freeport, Baldwin, Seaford and other nearby towns.

Other old time clammers – “Old Wink Carman.” Matthews in Freeport were considered good. Harvested mussels, steamers, crabs. There were fellows who harvested one thing only. Some went clamming, musseling, steamers. Most people did a few things. Late 1940s and early 1950s most baymen started doing a few things.

IF they could afford a skiff they could go gil netting. Could make more money with a skiff. Peeks and valleys in what was around. If you didn't change you would go broke. In the 1950s things began to change. Remsens went for bait – customer was Jones Beach fishing station. Killey season was from June – Mid-September.

Methods – used jerk rake. Made by Theodore Bedell. Also bought at Island Fish in Sayville. Bedells made anchors. He was on Church Street in Freeport. Lived until the 1950s. Bedell had brothers who also worked there. Did not continue the business.

Boats – dory. Rowed to Jones Inlet. Hauled all day or night. Used a cotton seine net. Made by them in winter. 1000-foot net. Had two boats, with one man throwing the net. Made a half circle. Did it in the ocean and bay. Went with his father and Herb Muller in the 1950s. Father bought net in New York City. Took the Long Island Rail Road. Lasted a year. Made of cotton. Design elements.

John was slow because he did not do it very often. Caught flounder in spring (late March), weakfish in April, bluefish in June, fluke and bluefish in September. Bluefish had to be brought in quickly because they would bite the net. Striped bass in fall. Bluefish were ferocious. Caught stripers in Zachs Bay. Took 2 hours to row to inlet by rowboat. When he went with his father you were gone for the day, maybe the night too.

Started killeying with his father. Had a skimmer boat. Would tie it up at the Atlantic Beach bridge – fishing station there – also rented row boats. Father was asked where the owner could get killies. They started making wire pots and caught them. Put cement in pots to make them sink – wood frame was heavy. Caught 100 quarts in 1-2 hours. Had no license. Paid a nickel a quart for delivery. John got paid 20 cents a quart in 1947.

Sometimes had trouble getting under the bridge (larger boat). Jack Burke built him a garvey to make it easier. Dropping the cars in the bay to keep the killies alive. Customers in Long Beach, Jones Beach, and Captree state parks. Spent the summer at the bay house. John got a job. Then got a truck for deliveries in 1956-57. Later received 50 cents a quart.

Other customers – father retired and spent his time killeying. Limited customers so that they could supply all of them. July 4 – needed 400 quarts. Took time off from work to catch killeys. Eventually killeying was all they did. 1950s – also went musseling. Drove all over the island – Montauk, Moriches, Northport. Bait mussels could live a week if they were out of the sun. Sold to Silly Lilly's, Cerillo Brothers, in Moriches. Had customers in Hewlett and other communities. "The softer the mud the bigger the mussels." Locations were noted in their trip books. Harvested mussels using hands covered with cloth gloves. How chum works as bait. "Chum buckets." Party boats took a half a bushel. Father would grind mussels for Jones Beach fishing pier.

Also sold to charter boat captains.

Boat building started in 1950s. Cedar planked. 1957 – worked for the phone company. Father made him – predicted that baymen would be a part-time job. Haul seining was prohibited, closures started, clamming was restricted. Said he could work on the bay part-time, which he did. Went jacking at night. Needed benefits for his family.

Charlie Wertz went to work for Sperry, but he was laid off and began working full time again. Other fishers moved east. Freeport is confined. 1960s bay became more polluted so that areas were closed off. Sewage treatment plants, runoff, pollution affected this.

How Nancy Solomon saved the bay houses. Closing the bay during rain storms. Why the bay houses were burned down – does not know. Fish populations remained stable. Signs of stress in the bay. A good day – 25 bushels. Mussels died. 1960s – the whole bay collapsed. Lived at the bay house for the summer. Nassau County had mosquito control – sprayed the ponds. Used DDT in 5-gallon squirt cans. County told them it was harmless. Mussels died – told it was natural. Duck family. Mosquito fleet tied up at their dock. Wiped out $\frac{3}{4}$ of the little ducks. Father was upset. Told them he would shoot them if they came back. You could not find mussels, ducks anything. Finally they stopped the spraying.

For years when he was smaller he saw a lot of striped bass. Then they disappeared, and reappeared. Cycles. If you have bass you don't have fluke, and visa versa. That's nature. DDT- no fluke, stripers, weak fish. The bay is back now. Blue claws, clams, etc. Sewage treatment plants have affected the bay. Long Beach and Bay Park plants. Does not know how bad they are. Helped water sample officials collect. Were paid \$20/day for travel. Plants were built in late 1950s or early 1960s. Sand dredging projects for the landfill, developments. No regulations originally.

Clamming methods are the same – used to tread but now they use rakes. Killeying – had 12 pots originally, now they have 24 pots. Some use more – 75 or 80. Can set them faster now. 2002 – no killeys – John thinks it is because of the spraying. Put 24 pots out and got 2-3 quarts –

unheard of. Story of being sprayed on. Called DEC – did not know who did it. Called Board of Health – talked to head of department – said they did not spray. Called Jones Beach – they said they had sprayed the beach. Complained. Spraying stopped. Closures started in 1970s. Praises Town of Hempstead.

Story of guys musseling in Shinnecock. Not too many people working on the bay. Says the bay is dead there. Our bay is in good shape. Today – 25 full time baymen today. Used to be around 40. Blames rules and regulations.

Dragger fishermen. John had a dragger. There was always respect among fishermen. In Maine the lobstermen and dragger men don't like each other. People get along here and always have. Fewer draggers now – as a teenager there were 8 – 10. 1970s – 20 to 25 boats. Fishing was good. Larger boats went offshore. Today – only 2-3 people. Baldwin also had draggers. Point Lookout has 8 – 10. When he started you just fished and you sold what you caught. Could make a good living. Got his boat in the 1980s – 3000 lbs of fluke. Price was 60-70 cents a pound. Fuel was cheap – 15-20 cents a gallon. Now you cannot make money. Too many restrictions. 1985 – needed federal permits for every species. Limits on days you can fish. Still has permits. Bad investment.

Hard time finding a crew. Had a wooden boat – 50 foot. Day boat – spent a few nights out. Nice boat. Had to report to National Fisheries Service where you went, what you caught, no longer mom and pop operation. Reports. It's a nightmare the paperwork. \$600 for the permits.

Shipped fish to Fulton Fish Market. Cost of shipping. Boats could not afford the rates. Nephew had 50 lbs of bluefish – the return was \$11. It's tough. Clams – should be 23-24 cents. Now it's 18 cents. Tuna fishers – were getting \$10/pound and now it's \$3/pound.

Some solutions – congressmen should not made decisions. Should be local decisions and someone to help the local fishers. Story about North Sea boat. Son decided to work on tug boat. Cannot make money. Boats are being sold. Lobster boats. Need a commercial dock. Community cooperation is essential. Woodcleft canal is “honky tonk.” Prefers developing another area for commercial fishers. Woodcleft is narrow. Too many boats in a confining space. No plans to do anything. Prices should be affordable for fish. There used to be 7 fish markets. Now there are three – Fiores, Captain Bens, and Two Cousins. People buy packaged fish.

End.