

Informant: John Remsen Sr.
Date: March 9, 2016
Interviewer: Nancy Solomon
Location: Freeport, NY

Excerpts

:46 – 2:52 Born in Freeport. Built house with locals, carpenters, and friends. Born Feb. 5th, 1933.
4 – 4:58 Haul seining near Jones Beach. Early adventures in fishing. 1938. Surf net with dories. Work all day. Row home. Story of great grandfather Orlanson Ellison on 92 birthday rode from Freeport Creek to Jones' Inlet and back. Told them he was proving to be a man.

5:25 – Earliest memories fishing for fun. Grew up St. John's place. 15-18 kids lived there. Always together. Would go to the Oyster House – where the old men hung out, fishermen, clam diggers. Would go with father in boat to watch him doing things and how he learned.

5:50 – 6:51 Winter – ice skate on ice. Fishing as a kid – hanging out at oyster house with great grandfather, father, all the old fishermen. Fishing was their business.

6:59 – 7:35 Oystermen and fish that the kids sold

7:37 – 8:18 Jacking at night with dad. Crabs, conks, eels.

9:00 – Around fishing entire life. Only thing he knew – choice to do fishing for a living.

10:10 – 11:25 How got into commercial fishing. Great grandfather lived with them and was a net mender.

11:52 – 12:14 Went fishing with his father near the Wantagh Parkway. Hauling in the bay. Flounder.

13: 17 – 14:30 At 16 years old. Working with the nets and catching 1400 lbs. of striped bass all in a day. Shipped to Fulton fish market

16:15 – 17:30 Served in Korea War. Infantry. Did not go to Vietnam. Just did the two years.

17:35- 18:02 Returned to fishing after the war with his father. Clammed during the summer.

18:03 – 19:25 Build garvey as project in H.S. Have all the lumber. Use everything in the shop. Built a garvey – came out well. Started building garveys.

19:45- 20:51 Went to work on land at father's suggestion for the phone company as draftsman but also worked on the bay part time.

21:10 – 22:25 Working in the mussel business. Gray mussels for flounder fishing. Father retired from Village. Deliver mussels as far as Montauk. Mussels for bait on sign on truck.

22:25 – 23:15 Starting the killey business. 14 or 15 years old. Built six pots. 100 quarts on the garvey and delivered killey to fishing station at Atlantic Beach bridge.

23:16 – 24:49 Selling to row boat rental businesses. Jones' Beach had 100 row boats. Had that covered. Ended up with 16 pots that summer. Family did killeying. All did bait. Worked with Jack Combs. Horse's creek. Sold bait there. Some had seven or eight quarts. Killies were plentiful.

24:52 – 26:22 Sold the bay house and building a new one. Paid \$25. Picked a spot on bay. End of Woodcleft, across from Guy Lombardo's restaurant. Learned to shingle roof. Built in about four months March - July. Opened July 4th.

26:49 – 27:33 Catching killies – his record catch. Involved in bait business. Could not carry what he had. Had to go home and get another boat. Used horseshoe crabs for bait for killies and killey pots.

27:37 – 28:27 Building pots and teaching his kids.

28:53 – 29:27 Hard to catch killies after storms that came during high tide because got scattered out but they recovered. A lot got killed that way.

29:40 - 30:02 Hurricane Gloria – slow the year after but then they recovered.

30:27 – 33:23 Bay house was okay after Gloria, but old bay house was a houseboat. Towed it to Haunts Creek in the late 1940s for another storm. Haunts Creek had a speakeasy out on bay. John's nickname Hike. Sold five room bay house to brother-in-law in 1949/1950.

33:25 – Everyone good friends, respected each other. Would not go to spot someone else was working that day. Several baymen six or seven working full time.

34:08 - Storms did damage but always recycled.

35:17 - To protect the bay house used anchors from Theodore Bedell. Brought boats home. Anchors used for floating docks. Pulled everything out of water. Never lost anything. Tie across dock and neighbor tie to us. Never lost a boat.

38:00 – Worked part time as a bayman and full time at the phone company.

39:42 – How much money he made before Sandy annually. \$1,000 a week, worked seven days. \$800/\$900 a week for the summer. Fall – flounder and mussels.

41:20 – After Sandy. Mussels hit with blight. Became scarce. Not even half of what they used to make.

42:54 – A fraction of what it used to be. Glad he kept the phone company job.

43:50 – 46:00 - Son John took over killey mussel business. Turned business over when he was still working at phone company. Still goes out on bay with son.

46:00 – Red garvey. Now in Museum in Freeport – gave to man in Sayville, he restored it.

46:45 – 48:47 Before and after Sandy – catch statistics are drastically different. Changed the whole bay. Every ditch filled with sand. Tied was tremendous for that to happen. Skimmers died off. Starting to rebuild now. Devastated the fishing industry.

48:47 – 49:30 Last year son, John Jr., did not sell a quarter killies. People getting away from live bait. Hook and line fishermen still use killies. But 90% of bait is spearing and squid. Killies is a thing of the past. Devastated the bay.

49:30 – 52:10 Lost the house. House was in perfect shape, very solid, but got knocked off piling and collapsed. Will rebuilt. State funding for rebuilding. Have to build in same location and same footprint. Will raise house higher than it was.

53:19 – 56:55 Goes fishing for fun. Two stories. Bass fishing with Grace. Jacking at night with spear.

57:05 – Town of Hempstead passed a law – not allowed to go jacking.

58:00 – Sold horseshoe crabs used to catch killies. EPA let people take them during mating season. Do not protect them. Close down on a number. Should close down when spawning. John takes them after the mating season and freezes them.

59:36 – After Sandy in the bay - not seeing fish and wild life no longer there.

1:02:08 – Other changes in the bay - birds. More people not fishing. Worst business to get into right now is bay business. And boats – in boat yards – still covered. People lost them. Others auctioning them off.

1:03:00 – Looking at boatyards –several are closed, 99% are not full. Before did not have room for you. It has disappeared.

1:04:10 – Still building boats. A lot of the large power tools went under water. Built two boats since Sandy. Good because can work on his own.

1:06:19 – Bay has change. More than half is empty. That is how bad it is. Dock spaces are empty. Going to take time.

END