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Interviewed by Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions

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00:00 -05:00

Freeport, local fishermen and bayman

Grew up in Freeport, NY. My father always loved fishing. Used to go out with my father when I was a little kid. It would be dark out, he'd walk me up, on weekends mostly. He worked in construction. We fished every single weekend. That's how it all got started. Striped bass most fish caught then.

Father always kept really nice care of his boats. Wooden boats. Always looked beautiful – did a lot of work to them. Remember catching big striped bass. If it was in the ocean, it was on this long red tube. If it was in the bay, it was on big clams under the bridge. Remember some of the fish were so big and I was so small and they would swim under the boat and I couldn't even reel them in. my arms felt like they were falling off. I couldn't even pull them. That was usually a few days before 4th of July. Used to go to the bridge ever morning.

We'd catch blue fish too. And some week fish. Back then used to catch these fish that I only see once in a while. I think they come out of the freshwater rivers into the saltwater. They're like white birch. Really pretty fish. We would take them home. First line them up on dock. Take pictures of them. Clean them. Give them away to the neighbors. We'd eat fish for weeks. Flounders, fluke, striped bass, black fish, blue fish. It was all good.

My mom used to cut up a lot of vegetables and tomatoes and cook the fish in a soup. That was always really good. If it wasn't that it was broiled. Breaded and broiled. Flounder was always breaded and fried. But black fish and striped brass mostly broiled. When it became a little cooler that's when they would make the soups. My grandmother used to take blue fish meat and used to make meatballs with it. 50% chopped meat and 50% blue fish meat and make meatballs out of it and put it in the sauce. That was pretty good.

My father's name was Joe. My mother's name was Loretta. My grandmother's name to this day I'm still not sure. Everyone called her Josephine but always lied about her age and her name. I don't really know what her name was. I don't know when her birthday was. But she could cook.

What were some of your tasks as young boy growing up and going fishing?

05:00 -10:00

I guess scooping the chum over the side. If we would yank it up or tie it to the bridge. I would have to dump the chum over. Every day after school I would have to pump out the boat. Wooden

boats leaked. My dad would be at work. First thing I'd have to do when I got home is go on the boat and check it and make sure it didn't need to be pumped out. There weren't really a whole lot of chores.

When I became a teenager – had more responsibilities. Making sure the batteries were always up, things worked, making sure all the equipment was good. Life jackets get old after a while. Boats sink so you want to keep on that stuff. Not like getting a flat tire on your car and walking away. Want to make sure everything works right. I was always big on that.

When the boat was out of the water – had to learn sanding, striping, digging out the caulking, putting in new caulking, painting it. Whether it was paint or varnish, or scrubbing the teak with coco-cola. The acid in the coco-cola was good to clean the wood with. There was a lot of work. Then as the years went on and fiberglass boats came around, you compound them and you wax them, just paint the bottom. The upkeep wasn't like the wooden boats. Wooden boats are a lot of work. My father taught me mostly. Was always with my father.

He had a lot of boats. I was a race boat. Came in 2nd place around LI in a race they call the marathon. The boat that came in 1st that beat him was a fiberglass boat. When they first came out with Gonzi. Then he went on with bigger boats as I got a little older. The biggest boat was 36 feet. Double planked boat built in Mass. It was called an Outer Gloucester. What a beautiful boat that was. If my parents let me, I wouldn't even come in the house, I'd sleep on the boat. I just wanted to stay on the boat all the time.

That's all I did. After school I'd be on the back of the boats snapper fishing. And on the weekends, we'd go out on them fishing.

Used to fish right off of Freeport. Swift Creek, Fundy Creek Bridge, Long Creek. Used to catch so many flounders and eels. We'd catch the eels with little flounder hooks, blood worms or clams. While you were fishing for flounders, eel would bite the hook. Sometimes at night, right in my own backyard, I'd have 1 of those wooden fishing poles, bamboo fishing pole, used to just put a piece of bait on the hook. And jam the pole in the fence and just leave it. Next morning would check it. So many times in morning there would be a big eel on that hook.

10:00 – 15:00

One time, my uncle loved eel, so I called him and told him I had an eel. Had to cut the line. Because the eel swallowed the hook. After he cleaned and ate it, he mailed me back a letter with the hook in it telling me know how good the eel was. Sent me back my hook.

Family lived on the water. Little canal in the backyard. So the boats right behind the house. In Sept you could catch flounders and flukes right in the backyard. Eels. Certain times a year you could catch fish right in the backyard. You could always catch killies, snappers. Caught a lot right in the backyard.

Killies we would catch in traps. Put some bread in the trap. They would just swim into the trap. We'd catch enough to go out fishing with them. Use them for bait. Catch fluke, occasionally

striped bass would take the killey. It's really amazing how many different things will eat a killey. Never saw People eat them, but a lot of fish will eat them.

Killey traps were just a round cylindrical shaped wire trap. That was 2 halves. That you could buy in any local bait store. Has a hole on each end. The holes were small so that killies wouldn't go back out. Sometimes you catch small eels in the same killey trap. Striped bass would also be good bait. If you put the trap all the way at the bottom, you catch baby black fish in the trap. But most of the time we'd keep the traps off the bottom, so that we could catch the killies. They were up higher.

We'd keep the killies alive by putting in a bucket in salt water. Bringing them on the boat with us. Had other plastic containers that you can tie a line to them and throw in the water. Have constant circulating in the water. So you can use them with these spring operating doors. So can reach your hand in and grab one and put it on the hook. Then put it back over board. Let it just float around in the water. They're pretty hardy. You don't even need water. You could put them on ice and they would stay alive. They would flop around all day long on ice.

As a teenager, any of your friends fish and did you go fishing with them?

Some of my friends fished. Not many. When we got our first row boat. Used to go around the canal crabbing, catching blue claw crabs, spend afternoon eating them, but most of my friends weren't into going out on the water, catching fish and stuff. You either liked it or you didn't.

As you get a little older, when you see that you could get money for crabs, fish, clams, that made you more ambitious. It was a lot more money than a paper route. I guess that's kind of what starts it. You go fishing for fun for a bunch of years, then all of a sudden you learn that you can make money doing it. That's how all commercial fishermen get started. You start seeing money. What am I going to catch tomorrow? The night isn't fast enough. You can't wait to get up in the morning. Figure out what you going to do.

15:00 – 20:00

My first memory of catching a lot of fish was on a gillnet boat. Which is a boat that handles a lot of net. The toughest part was unloading the boat at the end of the day at the fish dock. That was the hardest part. That was back breaking work. Maybe cuz some of us started too young.

Remember 1 time reaching down for a basket and my back locked. I was bent over in L shape. I couldn't stand up for about a ½ hour in a position. It can be pretty tough work.

I worked on a guy's boat named Al. Boat was named after his wife – Johanna. He's the 1 who got me started gillnetting. He used to let me and his son take out his boat. So we were both the captains. We were these little kids taking out this big commercial fishing boat. Felt like were on top of the world.

When the guy let us start taking out the boat, I was about 15. My buddy was about 13. We always had to be together. He wouldn't let us take the boat out unless there were 2 of us. We'd

go off of Long Beach, Jones Beach. Sometimes on the way out, we'd drag a net right through the bay and catch a bunch of flounders 1st. Once it was so full, we had to tow the net back to the dock. We had a Freeport police officer help us lift it because we couldn't lift it out. Then we went back out into the ocean fishing. 1976, 1977. Maybe 1975. I think I started gillnetting in 1975. It was before the bicentennial. I remember that.

I didn't really decide that I wanted to be a commercial fisherman. It was just something you started doing and kept doing it. There was no decision in it. I guess 1 deciding thing was I couldn't seem to do good in school so I knew I wasn't getting a good job. Between clamming and fishing and kept doing it.

What were some of the hardest things you had to learn to be a good fishermen especially the gillnet?

Not to be a hero and go out in bad weather. It's always better to be safe than sorry. Then as you grow up you learned where to fish and when not to fish for certain reasons.

Could be when there were too many spider crabs around, too many dog fish around, too much seaweed. Sometimes during the summer, you'd go through a 2 week low with no fish at all. It took a few years to learn when not to fish.

20:00 -25:00

Dog fish season always started in the beginning of hunting season so you knew when hunting season was coming, it was time to lay off fishing for a month. Because it was nothing but dog fish. You could sell some of them, but no one really wanted them much. There was plenty of other fish around.

The amounts are limited now by the state of NY, by any state up and down the coast. Everybody is limited in what you're allowed to have. Open season, closed season, what month it is, how many you can have for that month. Sometimes it can be 100 pds, sometimes 1,000 pds.

Flounder what was it like and what is it like now?

Well there def used to be a lot more flounder. Not sure the reason why there's less now. I do believe it's the water being warmer than it used to be. A lot of our fish go further north instead of staying here. Our water is just warming up. It seems like the water used to be a lot colder. And then there's other variables – like cycles of fish. Fish go in 30 year cycles. Not old enough to see the 2nd cycle. Saw 1 of them. Where we used to catch a lot of blues and we went thru period where there weren't any. Then we caught a lot again. Now up again. When it comes to blues, week fish, striped bass, fluke, even flounders. There's a lot of flounder in the bay People don't even know about. Because for the last 10 years nobody's been fishing for them. But if you go out there now, there's spots where you can catch them. Best thing about it nobody really knows.

What were favorite fishing spots when you were younger?

By the bridge. Certain pilings good for Sea bass, certain good for black fish, some you catch flounder. Depends on the tides –tides come out – tides coming in. You can be right here, drop a line and catch a fish. Move over 5 feet and not catch anything. You have to be right on the spot. Fish always seem to be on those spots. You can go to places year after year and never catch fish and you never will. And place where you catch fish and you always will. I like to fish of Long Beach, Lido Beach, Jones beach. Really don't go too far out. Stay within a mile of the beach.

When I was younger Jones Beach was my favorite spot because they used to have rock n' roll concerts and I could listen to music while I was fishing.

25:00 – 30:00

Nowadays my worst spot is Jones Beach – when the air show comes because it's too noisy with all those jets. That only lasts a few days. Then it's back to Jones Beach.

Can you describe the different seasons for fishing?

When it comes to gillnetting, end of March, you start catching bunker. Next what I call 'mixed bag season'. Beginning of April start to catch couple of blues, weeks, black fish – start to catch a little bit of everything. Last us – hard to tell with summers getting warmer – lasts us a little longer – until end of May, beginning June. By that time it's mainly Blues and bunkers. The Black fish last only a couple of weeks. Even the week fish move on. 3rd week in May is usually good for striped bass, blues, bunker, herring, even a few butter fish. Most of those fish pass by, those summer dog fish move in. Start catching those for a while – they usually gone by end of July. This year they just finally left us about 2 weeks ago (mid Sept. 2011) where I only catch a couple a day now.

So it was a long summer picking dog fish. Nowadays on the food chain. People like it. You can sell it more than you could 30 years ago. So as summer rolls on –by middle of August – end of August might get couple of Spanish macro. Usually once the water changes enough and the dog fish go away and start to catch Spanish macro, you also catch blue fish, some butter fish, some week fish, herring, couple of bunker – not a lot. Then as the season starts to cool down Sept and Oct start catching more blues, now fish start migrating back south and start catching them. More blues, more week fish, more butterfish. Once it cools off a little more you start catching striped bass, then bunker. That lasts about – unless a school of blues come about – they chase striped bass – they chase away everything. Then when it cools down pretty good, it's mainly just striped bass. Then after the striped bass – then it's winter dog fish- spiny dog fish. Sometimes right after that - it's cod fish.

Years ago, 20 – 30 years ago, after the striped bass passed by then it would go to whiting & herring.

30:00 – 35:00

Nowadays you don't see that. You see the herring but you don't see the whiting – don't come in shore like they used to. They stay out in the deep water for some reason – don't know why.

When the oil spills come – fish just swimming away. Haven't been any oil spills in harbor in a while. They don't want to breathe oil, want to breathe clean water so they won't come near.

So after striped bass leave, get winter dogs, spiny dogs, years ago used to be herring and whiting. Catch herring and whiting also on a gillnet. Taking out the herring easy to handle, they don't have teeth, not like handling blue fish with big teeth. No spines on them. Striped bass have those spines - really have to watch it, have to be very careful with striped bass. They can hurt you. Same thing with porgies – have spines on them. After the whiting – its cod fish for the rest of the winter.

With cod fish –used to gillnet them – then ran lines and hooks with them. Put clams on the hooks. Used to wait for a little after Christmas when those spiny dogs would finally leave. And water got cold enough, so when the dog fish would leave, because they would eat up all our bait. We'd fish from turn of the year up until 2nd or 3rd week in March – just stay with cod fish.

The lines were what we call the main line – probably 8 inch twisted line – every 7 or 8 feet we'd have a leader coming off of that main line. Going through cork then another 6 or 8 inches of line going to another hook. Used to put clams on all the hooks. And the cork would keep 18- 20 inches of line from the main line so the cork would float up and keep the line of the bottom so the crabs didn't eat it. Certain times of year had to have cork gear. Then times when you can use 'flat hear' when you use no corks. Just lines, leaders and hooks. That would be around into middle of March when start using that. Because crabs would move away. When crabs were around had to use cork.

Don't know exactly how lines the lines were but used to have about 300-350 hooks on a line. On a good day 2 guys could bait 3 or 4 lines. That would mean going down to the clam boats and buying skinner clams, maybe 6 or 8 bushel, then shucking them, sometimes 10-12 bushel, shucking the clams open and then cutting the clams into 3 pieces and throwing them into plastic tubs – for about an hour. I would shuck and the other guy would cut them.

Once we got ahead a little bit, either me myself or my buddy would start baiting the lines. We would mean all the lines were coiled in a tub.

35:00 – 40:00

Meaning taking the line out till you get to a hook, put a clam on it. Then have to coil the line. Used have what we call 2 coilers. Take 2 coils and the hook would lay in the front of the box – an open end box. Then you do 2 more coils and the next hook with the cork would lie next to the last – it all had to be laid out in order so when you set out into the water, it would all peel off without getting tangled up or stuck. You couldn't just throw it in there – it had to really be laid out good so that it wouldn't get messed up. Sometimes in the winter it would get so cold, we'd put wax paper on top a row of corks. Used to use open end boxes –where it would hold about 21 corks and hooks across from one side to the other. Then cover with wax paper. Then put the next layer on top of that. So that in the winter when clams would freeze, when you go to set it out, clam on top wouldn't stick to the clam on the bottom. You'd have about it would be about 5 rows back from forward to back, then layer of wax paper, then another layer. So you'd have 20,

21 corks and hooks going across side to side and 5 rows back – so we would put about 100 corks. Maybe only 4 rows – but would have about 75 corks and hooks on 1 layer. So we would wind up with only 5 layers which came out to about 350 hooks.

If you figure each hook is 8 feet apart, then 300 hook line would be 2400 ft. So a 300 hook line would be a good half a mile. And sometimes in the ocean, while 1 guy was pulling the lines in, taking the fish off, I would be shucking more clams and re-baiting at least 2 lines so that we can send them back out and always had gear in the water. Then we'd come in with our catch, and in the winter it's very hard to get out more than 2 days a week because the weather – cold, windy, big waves.

We always had gear in the water which is great because if you didn't bait anything when you're out there, you came in and you didn't have anything in the water so we always had hooks fishing.

How would you set the lines and how long would they be sitting before you pulled them in? We would take a buoy and an anchor to the end of the line – buoy line would be about 100-125 ft of buoy line and anchor them down. Then run it out. Put the boat in forward and watch the hooks peel out, then when you got to opposite end would tie an anchor on it with another buoy line – sometimes 150 ft of line depending how far off we were – off 30 miles sometimes.

I remember days when coming back when the wind started blowing out of the northwest and the water would spray up on the boat and turn into ice. This 1 day we had to come in early. Because the ice was 4 inches thick we couldn't see our boat. That day was so so cold. As the cod fish as big as 40 pounders, would come out of the water and by the time they came over the gunwale of the boat, before they hit the deck, they were frozen. They would freeze in a curve. We would put them inside the cabin – laid out this big blue tarp. Had heater in the cabin and we never put fish in the cabin. We came with about 500 – 700 pds of cod that day.

Because you could have freeze when you go and cell fish – the sign in the fish market says 'fresh fish'. You can't have freeze, unfreeze.

40:00 – 45:00

Let's say they decide to clean and freeze it again – so we would throw everything in the cabin. We had a kerosene heater. Which is to fog up the windows. Esp. with 4 inches of ice on the outside – the boat got so so heavy that I'm just glad we made it home that day.

Since we go in so early we were 12- 1pm that afternoon, we asked a friend if we could bait hooks at his house. Because he had long breezeway in the back of his house where it was warmer – it was a cement hallway where the wind couldn't get you. We're in there baiting hooks and about 4:30 in afternoon, just as it was starting to get dark, you could hear the wind from about a ½ mile straight up whistling. Remember looking at my buddy, never forget it, about March 8th or 10th, 1988. Wind blowing so hard, must be blowing 70 mph. Said to my buddy I'm really glad that we're in Because anybody who's out now aren't going to make it in. Next day we found out that a guy we know, that his boat went down.

Luckily they called the coast guard. Coast guard sent out a helicopter and lowered a basket and at least 3 or 4 guys made it home safely. But their boat went down – just so heavy with ice. That boat was about 20 miles south of Fire Island. Never forget that day – how windy and how cold.

How old were you when you first went cod fishing? Don't remember exactly the age. Remember we had a battery operated TV and we had a stove and we would go out, 16 or 17 years old. We go way out. Leave at midnight, get there at 3 or 4 in the morning. Who knows where we would go, it was so far out. We'd catch, on fishing poles, after we'd put out our gear about 40 or 50 cod fish by 8:30 in the morning. Then the bite would slow down, they wouldn't be biting as much. We'd be eating cereal and all kinds of breakfasts that little kids would eat watching cartoons as we're catching cod fish.

I guess not that little but 15, 16 years old, we used to go way out there. We did it every winter. I think I stopped doing it about 1989. Stopped doing it for a while, then back in 1993 went out 1 winter in small 18 ft boat catching then but not that far, only 5 miles off the beach. And really haven't done much of it since. But sure do have some corks – have bags of it. Everyone I know drinks wine I ask them to save their corks. Have bags and bags of corks – just waiting to make new lines.

How you come out stopped?

I think we had a bunch of warm years where the cod fish wouldn't come anymore. Last 3 years, they're starting to come back. They must have stayed more by RI and Mass. They're spawned in Arctic Circle. When you some of these TV shows, think ice, couple of feet of thick, all the little baby cod fish are swimming under that layer of ice. They are all in that really cold ice water. They won't come here unless it's cold.

45:00 – 50:06

They like it cold. To meet that always meant you were getting a good fresh fish. When you're eating a cod fish, you're eating something that's living in really cold water. It just seems to me that it got to be good for you.

Are there regulations that also affect the cod fishing?

There's a size limit. 21 inches. Anyone who would keep a cod fish any less than 24-25 inches, they should be put in prison because that's a small fish, any fish. If everyone would throw back small fish, we wouldn't have any of these laws. People just like to keep everything and not even eat it. Seen a guy catch a 5 gallon pail of blowfish and throw it back in the water. Then a week later, read it in the paper, there happen to be guy down by the dock that does these newspaper articles and guy actually saw it happen. Ok we can throw all these blowfish back cuz they're all dead. And I saw it happen. And I didn't know that guy watching from the newspaper and then I heard other People talking about it and I said I saw that happen.

Now I mainly go clamming in the wintertime. That's about it. I might do a little cod fishing this winter. But my boat is a wide open boat with no heat and if I figure out a way to put heat on it, then I think I would.

Can you talk about how you go clamming, how kinds of tools you use and what kinds of clams you get?

We get chowders – those are the really big clams, cherry stone clams – those are the mediums, then goes down to a smaller size which is a top neck, then goes down to very little 1 – a little neck. But in the winter time, the little necks seem to disappear – they seem to go deep. Get mostly big clams in the winter.

Couples ways you can catch them. You can go on the sandbars, or mud bars with a handheld fork, digging to the bottom with a fork when the tide goes out.

What kinds of clams would you get doing it that way? Those would be what you call hard clams – chowders, littlenecks, cherry stones. All the same clams. It's just that the littleneck clam is a baby and the chowder is a granddad, cherry stone a teenager. As long as you can find where they live you can dig them up.

That's one way. What are some of the other ways? Then there's another way, which is a little tougher – that's pulling a rake. And that's at the end of a long pole or a couple of poles joined together with clamps with telescopes longer or shorter depends on the depth of the water. Clam rake looks like a basket with an opening on 1 side and it's got teeth that dig into the bottom, and you have the long tooth rake which is good for digging in mud, then have short tooth rake which is good for digging in hard bottom like sand. Some of the hard bottom rakes have smaller opening because in the hard bottom there's also gravel and rocks.

50:06 – 55:06

You don't want to catch that stuff. Which also makes it harder for a chowder clam to go in. You really have to know where to use different hard bottom rakes. Got to have different varieties of rakes when you go clamming because the bottom is all different mire. Mud bottom, hard bottom, bottomless seaweed, rocky bottoms, very sticky bottom like clay. I can close my eyes and throw a rake down, and actually tell you where I am - just by the feel of it.

I go clamming anywhere from Freeport to anywhere south of Seaford – which is a big area. Plenty of acres out there I can go clamming. The furthest I'd travel is 7 miles from my dock which is long enough.

I go clamming on a garvey clam boat - wooden boat - which nowadays is prehistoric. Not too many People have garvies. They invented garvies after dugout canoes cuz it not too much different. You put fiberglass on the outside of them which helps them last a little longer. They are a good boat for our kind of bay with the wind chop - tough boat – built with heavy wood. They're good to rake out of in the deep water.

Friend of mine built that boat – homemade boat – boat using now built around 1979. Right now it's got to leaky boats and need to replace them – it's got a very, very slow leak. I like a dry boat. So it's got to come out. Needs "TLC." (tender loving care) Friend John Zuck built the boat. Trying think of nick name – cuz everybody on the water has a nick name. Guys around our

bay call me 'Sleek'. Everyone called him 'Little John'. Little John was Robin hood's right-hand man so I think that's who he was named after.

My gillnet boat is fiberglass, not wood – so a lot less maintenance than a wood boat. Also rides a lot different out in the ocean than a wood boat. An old style heavy wood boat are real comfortable to be on. Fiberglass boats are like – picture yourself in a big eggshell out in the ocean, you're rocking, rolling, not quite like a good old wood boat. But they are a lot less work. You can still buy wood boats but they are a lot of work. Boatyard bills are very expensive nowadays.

55:06 – 1:00:00

Who built your boat, how big it is? Some of things you like about it?

The man who built my boat used to build wooden boats for fishing, even as far back as the rum running days, built boats for rum runners with airplane motors in those boats. My boat is one of his 1st fiberglass boats. He used to build boats for the coast guard, built boats for Freeporters - Nassau county marine bureau - police dept – built those boats. The man is somewhere between 84-88 years old. Right now as we speak, he's restoring 4 sailboats. Man still goes to work every day from 8 – 4 in afternoon. Unbelievable guy.

His name would be Fred Scopinich. Don't know him all that well. Only met him a few times. But I do hear stories about what he's doing. A good friend of mine named John Remsen who built a lot of gravy clam and crabbing boats is good friends with Fred – do hear about all the things he does till this day. I just hope I can do when I'm his age.

Where do you get your nets, what do you have to do in order to go fishing?

Order my nets - mainly come from Tennessee – different size mesh for different size fish.

It's a clear monofilament – webbing is clear - monofilament same that would go on a fishing pole. Woven together by a machine so every mesh is identical – all the same size and I put the net together myself. Order the lead lines, the top line with the floats, and then hang it. You have to hang it – stretch the top line, stretch the bottom line together, start tying this monofilament webbing to these lines. And you put floaters every 4 feet. On bottom line put lead. Every 8 or 9 inches put a small piece of lead. Makes it sink down to the bottom. The floats help keep the net up high. You have tide coming so you need plenty of float to keep the net in upright position, otherwise tide would lay it down and wouldn't catch any fish. Normally put a small float every 4 feet. That seems to do the trick.

You can catch almost any kind of fish in any net – even little fish will get tangled up. Most of them will swim through but occasionally will get in a big mesh net where that fish could have swam right through. Let's say there's a hole in the net and you have pieces that are flopping around in the sea that will help snag a fish.

1:00:00 – 1:05:03

Sometimes the older nets catch better than the new nets.

Usually use nets with 4 inch openings. 5 and 6 inch openings. And never anything bigger than an eight inch. Takes a big fish. 8 inch would be good for cod fish. But normally to catch blues, striped bass, week fish, anywhere from 4 to 6 inch usually does the job – is what we fish with.

Talking about clamming. Do you harvest soft clams?

Not really. Some People do. That's their forte. I'm mostly a hard clammer. I sometimes do some if I want to bring some home for dinner.

Started clamming at a very young age. My dad taught me about clamming. I guess 5 years old because been going on the boat with my parents since I was 1 month old. Had me on boat right away. In the summers we used to go to beach, and like little kids with plastic shovels and buckets. We used to dig down and get the soft clams. We'd get had clams with them too. Don't know how old I was when started with them. Even though you can eat them – I used to bring them as pets. Thinking they could be a pet until we learned that you can eat them. So when we were little kids, we were digging them up.

9 years old - then finally got my 1st row boat. Parents say don't go out of the canal. You can only go so far – we would go a lot further than that. When parents say don't want you going to candy store or off this block – same thing. You'd sneak off with your boat, exploring, everything was an adventure. Come home with buckets of clams. Parents would say 'where did you get that? Where did you get all those clams?' Gave them away to the neighbors. Then start coming home with them every day. Then parents tell you we're running out of neighbors. Been giving them away to everybody.

That's when my dad took me down to Woodcleft and sold them for me. If you get more tomorrow, I'll take you down again to sell them after work. Like any kid once you get a few dollars in your pocket, next thing you know have more money than any of your friends, then want to catch even more clams, cause the more you catch the more you make. That's probably how I really got started.

My 1st customer was Mullers Fish Market which is now a restaurant and clam bar.

1:05:03 – 1:09:57

Actually in last 2 years, I sold clams there. I never realized that. I sell clams at the same place now that I sold my first clams. When I was little there must have been 8 or 10 fish markets on Woodcleft. There were a lot. At least. Nowadays there's only 3 fish markets left. Mostly restaurants now.

Remember how much you got when you first started clamming?

Think used to get \$5 a bushel. Didn't take long, next thing you know they were giving \$8 a bushel. Then it got tricky, they wanted to separate the big ones from the little ones and the medium ones – as you got older. At first it was everything in your basket. Actually they used to weight them. Nowadays they count them. Had to have between 68 and 72 pounds in a basket and that was a bushel.

Then in about 1975 – instead of being poundage, it went where the guy would tell you, when it came to small clams, it had to be between 400 – 500 in a basket. That's what he told you.

Then in the early '80s – changed it to the very small clams – had to be 400 in a basket. The next size up the top necks had to be 250 in a basket. Till this day it's still like that. You put 400 littlenecks in a bag – they call that a bushel. It's not really a bushel – just called a bushel. And in top necks what they call a bushel is 200 clams. Really if you measured them – if you put it in a wooden basket it's really only $\frac{3}{4}$ of a bushel. Nowadays goes by count, not really by volume size.

Who are customers today, both fish and clams?

Now I sell mostly to restaurants. Have a lot of the same customers – have 3 customers for about 1 for 27 years, another guy for 25 years. A lot of other guys for 10 and 15 years. Bringing to same restaurant – since 1984 – for 27 years – is my oldest customer. Local restaurants right here in Freeport, some on the nautical mile. Otto Sea Grille, The Crab Shack, sometimes two Cousins fish Market – if they need stuff. Another place called Land Shark.

1:09:57 – 1:15:00

Then I have pizza type restaurants that are away from the water – on main land where it's a different kind of atmosphere – down by the water is more of summertime thing.

Now I'm waiting for 1 of my customers to reopen his restaurant – burned down a year and half ago. Hopefully will open soon. 1 time, cook I know used to cook at the Waldorf Astoria, saw my tag on a bag of clams with my name on it so I know at least once my clams made it to the Waldorf Astoria. For all I know, the president of the United States might be eating them – clams that I caught.

Do you work with any distributors what used to be the Fulton Fish Market or the other large scale?

Yea I bring clams to the Fulton fish market. I deal mostly with the same guys when I go there. One guy is a fish dealer, 1 guy is a clam dealer. Bring all my fish to one guy and all my clams to the other guy. In the summertime, I can't even catch enough clams for everybody. But in the winter when I'm catching a lot of the big clams. I bring my big clams to the Fulton Fish Market. They take care of you, they pay pretty well for it in the winter. There more than happy to get them there. Most of the time they need them.

Can you tell me how the regulations have affected your fishing over the years?

Most of the regulations started to come out in the early '80s. Think that's when the National Marine Fisheries came into play. I think it was Reagan who started, not positive, with idea that we should have fishing laws. In the beginning it was really tough. They didn't know how to regulate anything. It was a great striped bass cycle then. There were billions and billions of baby striped bass everywhere. For some reason they closed off striped bass which was the weirdest thing. The most striped bass I've ever seen in my life and they just decided to shut it off. So we had to live with that for 5 or 6 years.

Then the funny thing was when they shut off blue fish – remember being at a meeting and said to the guy – do you agree that blue fish are like piranhas. He goes – oh yea. I said have you ever seen Blue fish spit up striped bass. I don't know if it's a good idea to shut off the blue fish because they are eating all the baby striped bass. We couldn't even catch all the fish anyway – there's no way in the world you could catch all the fish. That will never ever happen – it just won't.

I don't know if regulations are a good thing or bad thing. Because the way I see it – it's mainly temperature water where the fish are going to swim to or live or they will want to be where there's bait – where they will feed.

1:15:00- 1:20:00

Have the regulations have affected your ability to make a living?

Yea they made it pretty tough and costly. Everything adds to that price of fuel and all these licenses cost money. Its money you have to come up with. And you have to do in the month of January when it's the toughest month of the whole year for us.

Regulated on what we can catch, when we can catch it, how many we can catch. When it seems that the fish come by our area, we are not allowed to catch them and then when the fish are passed our area, then they tell us we can catch them. It always seems to be like that.

I spend \$1,400 a year on licenses. May not seem like a lot of money, but it is.

Do you use all of those? Yes I use all those licenses. Some of the licenses I gave up because you do so much paper work when you hold all those licenses that there's only so many hours a day being a fishermen, it takes up most of those hours. And now all of a sudden have to do all this paper work on top of it. Have to know the laws, and rules, regulations about whatever you're catching. Any species of fish or clams, crabs...you have to know it's closed on a certain day at midnight and reopened to wee s later. You can't know all these things. If I wanted to do all this paper, I think I would have tried to do better in school. It's not enough time. Alright you try to save some of the paper work for a rainy day. But you can't remember it.

You have to fill out trip reports when you go out in the ocean. You're trip report better be filled out because if you get caught without your log book checked in for that day, you're going to pay a big fine. And they'll confiscate all you're fish. It could be pouring rain out. It could be windy, boat rocking back and forth and they want you to fill out paper work. It's not like sitting at a desk and writing something down, you have to do it when the boat's rocking and the winds blowing? I'm not saying it bad weather all the time, but you're always rocking. You're never just lying, never sitting there – always rocking no matter what.

Paperwork probably started around 15 years ago. Maybe a little bit more. Say about mid 90s I think. Don't really remember. Sometime around then.

How many days you go fishing?

Tough question because every year you have different weather patterns. Last year, this time, was fishing every single day. Had beautiful weather everyday – fishing at least 5 days a week. This year can't seem to catch a break. I'm lucky if I get out once a week. Between hurricanes – whether they are here or not – they bring a big swell. Can be a 1,000 miles away. Makes our water dirty and muddy.

1:20:00 – 1:25:00

Can't catch fish in that kind of water. They don't want to be in it. Just like we don't want to be in the storm – they don't want to be in the storm. I don't know where they go hiding but they find a place. Must find places. A lot of them come into the bay.

In thinking about all the years you've been fishing, are there particular people that you learned things from, and what kinds of things they taught you?

Quite a few old timers that stand out - I was one of those kids who lived to listen to their stories. Sometimes I would go hunt these guys down -just to ask them stuff.

This one guy who's a buoy tender for the Town of Hempstead. His name was Maynard Smith. If he's still alive, he'd be about at least 115. As matter of fact, next to his property used to be Freeport's first firehouse. His daughters were born in that firehouse. I think it was a house before it was a firehouse.

He taught me how to skin eels. He used to tell me stories about bay scallops. Which I never caught bay scallops but back before my time – there were a lot of bay scallops around because I used to see a lot of the bay scallop dredgers hanging in garage and used to ask him – what are those rusty things? See these big chain bags.

And he would look at me – he had some kind of nervous condition - couldn't hold his head steady – that guy used to tell me the best stories about fishing and where to catch fish.

Old Jeff (Blossom) and Doug. They taught me a lot about flounder fishing.

What about other commercial fishermen?

They used like not to tell you much. When I was a kid there were a lot of commercial fishermen around. The guys didn't really tell each other what they were doing. They used to try. It was like a game, race, competition. More like that. If there was a special way to make a net what net caught better. You always had the high liners – the guys that caught the best. Other guys were always trying to figure out what makes them catch better. But those guys were pretty smart, not only catching but in knowing how to keep it hush- hush.

I mainly learned mostly on my own. I started going with a guy and his son on the gillnet boat. Before that I used to go on the 78 ft clam boats – when I was 12 and 13 started going out on ocean clam boats – they were pretty big. If I wasn't clamming, I was fishing.

Nowadays – I do a little ocean clamming – but not much - its mostly clamming in the bay – different kind a clam. The ocean clams are surf clams –

1:25:00 – 1:30:00

So I learned a lot about surf clamming when I was a kid. Then when I as teenager – learned a lot about gillnetting. I've only been out on a few draggers. When I was about 18 and 19 – used to dragging with this 1 guy. Went out with him a few times – catching whiting, squid, sometimes herring. Then sometime in the late 80's was on another fishing boat out in Montauk. Used to catch fluke, whiting, lange, cod fish, porgies, macro. That was a tough boat to work on – 4/5 day boat – no sleep. That took a few months to get used to not sleep. You had to be very head strong with that – that was tough. That's the toughest fishing I've ever done when you can't go to sleep.

But mainly I think I learned a lot mostly on my own. Nobody in my family did it. I'm not a generation, 2nd or 3rd generation. I have relatives in other countries that are fishermen – I never learned anything from them – never even met them before. I just know I have cousins that are overseas that own big fishing boats. So mainly I learned by myself. Through the years that you get the comers and the goers – guys that follow you around – guys that want to try it for a year or 2 then they realize how hard it is. That makes it hard for you too – because most of the time they are following you around.

Right now I'm making another clam boat so that for a year or 2 – used to have 2 clam boats to get around the bay – after a while people see the same clam boat they start to follow it around. You have to have these incognito type boats so that they don't know who you are. Then you have to pick your days, you have other clamors that have good jobs, weekends they come out – so you have to watch out.

On weekends, I would never go in my best spots because you're always afraid these guys are going to fish your good spots – you don't want that happening. Then for the rest of their life they know that's a producing spot. Because same spots always seem to produce. How many commercial bay clamors are in this area now? In the summer, about 12 – 15 guys. In the winter – hard core guys – about 7 or 8. But in the summertime you get guys that come out – warmer out – a lot easier – a lot less clothes to wear. It's a lot easier in summer. Got to worry about just breaking down in the winter.

Nowadays - 5 or 6 bushel good catch for the day. Even on a day of 3, 3.5 bushels sometimes I'm satisfied with that. You go in early sometimes – because you're tired – what I call “clammed out”. Need a little break. You can't catch that many every day.

1:30:00 – 1:35:00

Do you catch the same way you first began?

I think when I first began, I caught more. Hard to say some species I catch more nowadays and some species caught more back then 30- 35 years ago? Every year lately seems to be very different. This year in particular is the weirdest year I've ever seen my whole life. Usually when

you go fishing things are in a pattern. If you caught certain stuff today you figure you're going to catch it tomorrow. This year is the only year that I could remember that every single day being different than the next. I don't remember any year being like that. Which is very strange to me. When I say pattern – you'd get the same fish for almost a week. Then it would taper down. It gradually goes up and gradually goes down.

Every single day this year is different. Even the other day – had about 15 or 18 albacore and then the next day 1. Some days 5 or 6 big sharks and next day none. Yesterday or day before – had 1 albacore, 1 thresher shark, 1 Spanish Marco. Usually those 3 fish swim in around the same water temperature.

How long do you have to set your nets now verse when you were 1st beginning in order to catch the same amount of fish?

Right now when I put my net out I don't let it stay long, because I'm afraid to catch too many fish. Even took 1 off my boat because if I put 3 different nets in the water, by the time I get back to the 3rd net, it's going to be too many fish. So hard to handle. Sometimes you can put out your net fish in the water for 2 hours and not have to worry about catching too many. But lately, typical session, put them out not much more than half hour. Then just start picking them up.

Do you think there's more fish now than there used to be? Certain fish there are more. This year happens to be good for butterfish. There are a small kind of fish – must take 3 of them to make 1 pound.

How much of the fish is for food – how much for bait?

Spring – 75% bait, 25% food.

Fall – (end of summer into fall) 75% or 85% food and 15% bait.

As the fall cools down – then it's 50/50. Half bait, half food. Depends on the season.

Right now as we speak, it's not much bait. Mostly food.

Bait fish are bunker, butterfish, herring. But it depends.

1:35:00 – 1:40:12

There's plenty of times I could get more money I could get selling those fish for food – so won't bother selling them for bait. Then there's other times when it could be worth a lot as bait. So I'll sell it as bait. Bunker is always bait. Know very few People in this whole world that eat bunker. there are a couple. But I don't know why. But there are a few People that do eat it. But Bunker is always bait.

Are there things that you catch that you need bait for?

Yea. I put bunker in my crab traps. I sometimes, when I fillet blue fish for my own dinner, I put the head and the tail and rest of the fish, everything but the meat I put in the crab trap.

What kinds of crabs, when you catch them, what they are used for?

Blue claws I catch a lot of different ways. In the summertime, we go out with nets, night time with lights – we call that ‘jacking’. In the winter - catch them with my clam rake sometimes. They bed down in the mud – not all of them get up and lift off with the tide and head down to the Chesapeake. A lot of them go into the mud. Usually do that when they are together – go down together. Sometimes I can rake up baskets and baskets of crabs that are in the mud. Other times in the summer times, you can be in the water clamming, and they will just walk right up to you and bite you on the toe.

Sell the blue claws for food. Another special license just for that. Reportings. How you caught it? How many? What’s the percent that you catch in traps? There’s 3 ways I catch them. Even 4. Sometimes in the winter I go on boats with dredges that dredge them which is similar to hand raking them. You’re digging Because crabs bed down in the mud.

You have to add all up how many you caught with your clam rake. Just goes for blue claw crabs.

How many crab traps do you have, build them, buy them? Only have a few. I stay pretty busy with clamming and fishing. So crabs I catch, I sell the ones I catch in the winter when I’m raking. In the summer-I catch them in traps for family and friends just to eat because we really like them.

When we’re done – take you to my boat where I have a trap. Put some fresh bait in it yesterday. Give you some crabs.

I just buy the traps because I don’t use many – just use a couple. If I catch 4 or 5 a night – it’s enough for me. In the winter- might catch 3 or 4 bushels in a day which is good. In the summer you can scoop them off the docks with the net or catch in the traps. Or go out at night with the lights. There’s always more than enough to catch them in the summer. Simple to catch. Easy. Basic. Catch them for the fun and eating.

1:40:12 – 1:44:56

Born end of November 1959.

How do you see the future looking for you? See it looking ok. Pretty simple guy. Don’t need much. I don’t go out and spend money. Just basically try and make every day count, whether it’s fishing, clamming or crabbing. As long as the price of fuel doesn’t put us all out of business. It’s tough. You can ask me that question on another day and I’d say the world is coming to the end. Ask me today – everything looks great. I’m not sitting in traffic – 6 hours a day in traffic going back and forth to Manhattan. I’d rather do it this way than that way. That’s for sure.

Regulations – If you went fishing every day and you didn’t catch anything – you’d stop going fishing. Or clamming, crabbing. If you catch a lot every day – you’d keep going. So it seems to me that the a laws are out into effect that you can’t over harvest but it also seems to me that if you’re not catching who could afford to spend all the money on the fuel and keep trying – eventually you’re going to give it up. That’s why I don’t think the regulations are really fair.

Don't know how earth came and got started, but it shouldn't be left to few individuals to make law about what we can take out of the water and what we can't. In a way they turned us into criminals instead of worrying about the real problems they have.

Fish that is too small, you can't go clamming here today, but can go there tomorrow. What's the point in that? It doesn't make any sense. If you go out there and don't get anything, you're not going to keep going. There's no way in the world you're going to catch all the stuff. Never going to happen. You can't out catch all the stuff. You can't catch every clam, you can't catch every fish. It is just not going to happen. We're talking about food – good clean food. Everybody's saying the world is going to end. Well if the world is going to end, let us catch the fish.

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