

TAPE 010:
BOB SLAGER
JULY 16, 2000

Bob has lived in the West Sayville area of Long Island all of his life. Bob quit High School when he was sixteen and began working full time in the bay. He was the youngest captain out on the bay. While growing up Bob remembers that commercial boats were dominant on the bay as opposed to recreational boats. Bob states that the Bay became his blood as opposed to it being in his blood. When he began working with his father on the family dredge boat he realized that this was his niche. He also states that after getting back into the clamming business the product is no longer there. From 1965 to 1970 there was a tremendous amount of seed clams in the bay but due to over fishing or pollution times have changed. Explains what is required in running a dredge boat. They are now working on the hard bottom of the bay because the clams in the other areas of the bay are no longer there. Bob states "if you want to run the boat you better be able to build that boat." "It's a city on the water." Bob runs the boat by himself but remember when they had two or three deck hand because the clams were so plentiful. Bob dredges on the land owned by the Bluepoints company on a grant given to them by King Charles dating back to the 1800s. While working with his father they dredged on ground leased through Islip Town and continued to 1972 and held the ground until 1982. Presently there are five dredge boats working on the Great South Bay down from a fleet of a dozen. Bob looks for an area of the bay where it hasn't been worked because it is undesirable—he looks for a natural edge. Recalls an experience when he worked on Manhasset Bay. Bob states you can always find clams on the edge no matter where it is. He also expresses that some of the other captains don't look for the edge. Bob's son Mike has followed him into dredge clamming—Bob told him he would have to the best of the last. Speaks about how a new inlet may improve the clamming and states that the bay needs a flush. He further states that there have been so many changes that you really can't tell what would work. Bob was absolutely proud when his son followed him into the bay. Speaks about growing up in a Dutch dominated community and how it was somewhat restricted. Although he is not as strict about his Dutch heritage he has only worked on Sundays a few times and has hated himself for doing it. He recalls that in the 1970s there was a change in who was working the bay and the Dutch were no longer in the majority of those working on the bay. Speaks of the resentment among the people who worked the bay and those who came in when the times were good. Talks about the disputes between dredge boats and others working on the bay and many enemies were created which still exist today. These rivalries also extend to the family. Bob speaks about the times when everyone would help other in need out on the water. He does not see this as much anymore. The conflict between those who run dredges goes back to the 1940s and those who work with their hands have looked down on those who use mechanical equipment. The overhead on running a dredge boat is about 30,000 dollars a year and in the end you may wind up making 30,000 dollars in wages. Bob believes the decline in clams was somewhat rapid and it coincides with the advent of the Southwest Sewer district. While out on the bay Bob thinks of how things were and hopes for a better future. He loves being on the bay because it is his life and it represents freedom. In the past he has worked regular shifts but now enjoys the chance of working his own hours. Although the names have changed for the sizes of clams Bob still sees a top neck as a top neck. Discusses how the dredge boats work during the winter months when the bay is frozen. Discusses the impact that fog has on navigating the bay and how the Loran will go down many times on a foggy day. Bob states that you have to rely on

your instruments and not on your instincts. He does not foresee the same future with clam farming as what has been done in the oyster business. The bay is the only place he wants to be—relates that the bay has shape his life staying at a little slower speed than the rest of the area. Bob states he could not work upland and needs to be near the water. He will continue to work on the bay as long as it is possible.