

Bill Tunney  
Interviewed by Nancy Solomon  
November 8, 2007

44 years old. Grew up in Bellport village. Clamming was big and learned to do it. 13 years old bought first boat and started to clam. Liked to do it. Had friends who also clammed on Great South Bay. Learned from John German, president of lobster association. Was a mentor. Half of the marina was clam boats – quite a few of us. Now he's the only one.

Dredge crabs in Moriches Bay. Used to dredge scallops but there are not any more. Goes gil netting. Harvests blue claw crabs. Potted blue claws from mid 20s til 30s. Began working on the ocean. Has been on the ocean for 12-15 years. Worked on surf clam boats and gil net boats out of Shinnecock. Richie LaRocca was a mentor – 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. Was respected. Other boat captains were distrustful. Eventually fit in.

Ground rules – when he first started you could not be aggressive and found his own spots. When things happen, like when you break down, you get to know each other. Some intimidation.

38 foot built in Maine. 35 foot before. Built to order – lobster boat. Mastic seafood is customer. When he was on the bay, clamming was hard on his body. Needed something easier. Worked on lobster boats, very territorial. Surf Clamming – expensive. Gil netting is cheaper. Put together the nets and worked together for 3 years – Ed Schifoli – father owned Mastic Seafood. Dad suggested they work together.

He and Ed still fish together. Working with a partner – like being married. Has a good work ethic but Bill works harder because he has a family. Now he experiments. Fishing can be frustrating. Tried new things and became a better fisherman. Made nets differently, weights on led lines, webbing thickness. Likes to experiment. Used a bigger net reel. Tried all kinds of things.

Stopped at Blue water distributors – conch fishermen come here.

13 minutes

Typical day – early start around 3-3:30 am. Spends 5-6 hours. No towing. Gil nets are not dragging. Sets it from reel. 1200 feet long – sinks to ocean floor with float line – opens 10-15 feet, depending on target species. Has two nets – 1½ hours for each net. How net stays open. Float line and lead line. Small anchors – 25 lbs. “High flyers” – 12-14 foot high flags. Net does not move.

Nets get ripped. Might be a wreck when they set the net. Draggings might go through it. Does avoid loose material from rip. Okay to have a few holes in the net. How fish get caught. Must be moving.

Species caught – in April catches flounder, fluke, sundials, May – monkfish, summer switches to bluefish, Spanish mackerel, weakfish, Fall – monkfish, striped bass. Regulations – quotas, state

regs, have affected him. What it does is it puts you on your heels because the regulations come out, you just constantly have to change your gear. Takes 6-8 months to special order a net, and then a new regulation comes in the mail. Uncertain what you can and cannot catch. No predictable income. Is pro conservation, thinks most regulations are good, but it's scary.

Used to catch sturgeon which we cannot touch anymore. Used to have tags. Not allowed to catch. Successfully fought effort to declare striped bass a game fish. Limited fishery. Believes there should be some regulation, as with fluke. Bass used to be a "free for all" which was not good. Sturgeon is the only species they can no longer catch.

25 minutes

Memories – so many lessons. Need to stay focused and motivated. When he was a teenager he loved to clam on the bay – probably the most simple and fun thing that I've done. Had a 20-foot garvey which he still has. First boat bought from a rental outfit – Silly Lilly's. Leaked like a sieve. Every year had to caulk. Had it for 5-6 years. Clammed in Bellport Bay and Patchogue Bay. Harvested little necks and cherrystones. Some worked with their feet and scratch rakes. He used a clam rake. Lot of crabbing. Attended school – studied engineering. College – wanted to stay and fish but parents said he should go to school. Did return to fishing. Crabbing was good. Used to have a 20-foot garvey. Had a teenager who picked the crabs for him. Was after high school and college. Had 175 pots. 150-175. Used to catch between 10 and 20 bushel per day. Bunker for bait. Gil net used to catch bait. Set the net for 4-5 hours or overnight. Froze bait.

Used bunker and bluefish for bait. Crabs might eat blue fish. Scalloping – small dredges – 24 inch. Moriches was good. Also went to Sag Harbor, Bay Shore. Bought dredges – John German helped get them for Bill. A lot of people were scalloping. All baymen looked forward to it. 10 bag limit. It was a nice break from the routine. Fond memories. Recharged your batteries. Remembers 20 – 30 boats. Articles about it in Newsday. Dredging crabs is fun too – not common. Similar to scallop dredge, cross with a clam rake. 6-7 inch teeth spread wide. Fairly heavy.

As a fisherman we looked forward to change. Worked on the water every month. When bay froze cut holes in the ice and went clamming. Ocean water froze and would dredge for crabs.

35 minutes

Spend 80 – 90% time on the ocean. Bay is not as lucrative as it used to be. It's very tough. Clamming is pretty much over. A few guys are hanging on. The clams are not spawning. Moved to the ocean out of necessity. Crabbing is okay. Dredges crabs and scallops. Does not clam anymore.

Ocean fishing – fishes in state waters inside 3 miles. Travels east and west. Sometimes goes to Bridgehampton and Montauk. ½ hour to 45 minutes off shore. Stays in Moriches area, Fire Island. Used to set gil net in the bay. Used to be able set net at end of May. 1980s regulation

stopped it. Midnight legislation hurt us real bad. April – bunker fishing. Sell bunkers to lobstermen. Weakfish and bluefish. Would switch from catching bait to catching fish.

Shut the bay off to gillnetters because of politics. A lot of people did not want to see them, sports fishermen. Crabs are active in early June which makes gillnetting difficult. Stays within 3 miles. 10 minutes to inlet. 40 minutes to ocean nets.

Some fish are plentiful – there is more fluke than I can ever remember, more bass. Monkfish are returning. Bluefish stocks are healthy, not an overabundance. In summer he gets a decent price. Regulations have helped the price. 60 - 90¢ a pound. 1500 pound limit per day.

45 minutes

Bill's customers – Mastic Seafood – wholesaler who goes to New Bedford stops there. Learned how to get customers. Hard to get reliable customers. Some fish are sold on consignment. Younger – get lower prices. You can get burned. Blue Water distributors – ships to west coast. Other fish goes to New York City. Local fish markets.

Fisherman – Richie Larocca – always a phone call away. Other gillnetters gave him a hard time. For the most part it's been okay. Hardest things to learn – how to make the gillnets. I stunk when I first started. Learning curve is tough. Took 4 years before he made a profit. Still changes designs. A good net that will catch fish and will pick easy. Earlier nets – hard to pick fish out. Can catch grass and mud. Needs to be clean. Need right size webbing. Story about bluefishing. Different size meshes. Weight matters. It's an art. Must be strong enough.

53 minutes

Only has used monofilament. Tried different colors. Some colors don't work – too dark. Which colors work. Light green for everything.

Dock space. Likes Moriches instead of Shinnecock. People are nice and receptive. Offers fish to other boat owners. Some people are negative. Down to earth people. Needs to work on his nets at home in his backyard. When season is over. Takes 4-5 weeks. Strip the nets. Describes process. Makes new monk nets every year. Costs , lead line again. Has someone who makes the nets today. Used to spend 10 weeks making nets in the winter. One monk net can cost, 1200 foot, \$15,000 for his nets every year. Monk net could be \$500, bluefish could be \$1000-1500. Uses monk nets mostly. Lose nets to storms, draggers, scallopers. Bad year in 2005. Squid harvesters. Describes damage.

1 hour

Monk nets he fishes overnight. Blue fish net will sit ½ hour to 1 hour. Other nets sit ½ hour. Uses anchors and lead lines. Gill netters – 4 in Moriches who fish in the ocean, 4 out of Fire Island, 6 out of Shinnecock, 3 or 4 in Montauk. Rockaways – some boats – maybe 4 or 5. 15-20 guys in bay.  
End.