

Interview with Mike & Helen Van Essendelft by Nancy Solomon
February 3, 2004

001 Born in West Sayville. Grandfather was first settler in West Sayville – took train and had to walk from Ronkonkoma. Bought property from Samuel Greene – had a grocery store. Built the first house in West Sayville on Atlantic Avenue.

012 Grandfather was William Tucker – changed name when he came to US. People had gardens and went clamming and oystering in summer. Knew everyone. Many people only spoke Dutch including his parents.

035 Didn't know Van Essendelft grandparents. Mother was Nell E. Tucker. Father came to West Sayville because of Dutch population. Sam Greene extended credit to Dutch folks because "he always knew their credit was good." Sold them land too. Owned most of West Sayville – got grant from Queen of England.

059 Store was on Cherry Street & Montauk Highway – no longer standing. Across from the Firehouse. Small houses.

065 Newcomers took boat to NYC, took train to Ronkonkoma – the end of the line. Neighbors and relatives took them in until they got houses.

070 Dutch families – Beebe, Vanryan. Bought land in center of town. Grandfather's house was "right near the water." Had to go through Bluepoints land to "get to his boat." Some like clamming but others didn't.

085 Beveleyer was a good clammer. Small boats. In 1911 his father was foreman at Jake Ocker's oyster houses where LaSalle academy once was. Moved to West Sayville and quit. 8 oyster houses – Rudolph, Vandenberg, Vanryan, Beebe, Fred Ockers (Jake Ockers brother). Each had a small building – sheds on the road. Kept dredges and equipment. Atlantic Avenue came down – mom swam there before Jake Ockers came. All moved. Converged into 1 firm.

129 Bos Brewer had an oyster house. In the winter local baymen worked for Bluepoints and oyster houses. Mike worked for them. Started in sales department at Bluepoints and became sales manager. Replaced Bob Schotts. Went to Kansas City, St. Louis, Montreal.

147 People tonged clams and dredged oysters. Bluepoints had lease on Great South Bay. Local baymen had to have Bluepoints permission. Oysters came in clumps, made singles out of them, replant in the bay, and hopefully next summer harvested them. Local people shucked the oysters and clams. 20 people shucked. All men. "It's a rough job."

180 Shucking diagram. Given a copy. Culled oysters – separating the oysters. Shells went out on a heap – two heaps – taller than the building. Had so many shells some were redeposited in the bay to catch "spat" – young "seed oysters". Some were put in roads –

cars crushed them into small pieces – rain hardened them into a “nice strong road.” Chickens pecked on the broken oyster shells – eggs from chicken in those days had hard shells – not like today. Complains about soft shells on eggs.

212 Oysters brought into one room – washed and put into cans and sent to NYC. Grandfather brought cans to train by a team of horses. Conductor stopped train while they loaded the cans. Restaurants bought oysters – not many restaurants. Started working at Bluepoints when he was 28 years old. Born in 1908 – April 16, 1908. Had a secretary that everyone loved – Sophie Long – lived in Bayport. Mike’s first job was as a waiter – worked at snapper inn. Took job – worked at nights and Saturdays. Made good money. Helen – he went from one thing to another – made \$\$ at snapper inn and also worked at Bluepoints. Made \$22 a week at Bluepoints. Worked as a sales assistant. Boss took job on Wall street so Mike was promoted to manager - \$35 a week. Inspected oyster shuckers – how they opened, shipping correctly, sales manager – went to St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland.

294 People wanted oysters all over the country – went to different fish markets who set up the accounts – bob schot – not very long. Paul moser took over. Company founded by Jake Ockers. He died in 1918 and Mike was 10 years old – known as the “oyster king” – funeral at Methodist church in Sayville – thought he would have a crown.

322 Jake lived in W. Sayville. Had one of the first cars in town – drove from Oakdale to West Sayville. Came down Atlantic Avenue in his car. Company workers opened his car doors. Story about stopping car. Didn’t work on the bay.

350 Mike washed oysters and put them in cans. Customers complimented on the oysters’ appearance. Mike went down and learned that Andrew Stiles put the nicest oysters on top. Mike worked there for 4-5 years. Then he was transferred to Rhode Island.

380 Operations in E. Providence, RI – islands called Patience and Prudence. Returned to W. Sayville for vacations. Also worked in Cambridge, MD. Lived there until the end of WWII. Then sent to Milville, NJ. Stayed there and worked at glass works for 8 years. Has old bottles. Frank Wheaton’s son got Mike’s job. Mike went to work at the Snapper Inn in W. Sayville. Mike worked for Bluepoints for 12-13 years.

470 Separated oysters by size. Some were frozen for Birdseye Company. General Foods bought Bluepoints from Paul Mercer. Most things stayed the same – froze some, canned some sold mostly to New York. Had some trucks that went south and to Buffalo.

480 Many people worked for Bluepoints – 1000 people altogether. Some oyster houses sold oysters to Bluepoints. Clammers were always part of the operations – his grandfather clammed. Bluepoints always sold clams. Grew over time. Clams can find their way out of muddy environment. Stakes identified where clams were planted.

Bought clams from other people – had exclusive contracts – clambers couldn't sell to anyone else.

570 About 100 clambers. During the 1940s. Disliked Jim crow rules of the south in Cambridge, MD. Attitudes towards black people.

633 Women shucked oysters and froze them for Birdseye – Helen (Mike's wife) did this. Mike said they took oysters and put them in a package. Had about 20 women working there. Mostly wives of clambers and local girls. Mike was the boss.

650 Lee Sinclair drove the truck – Mike didn't have to drive.

End

Side 2

001 Mike went to fish markets and also stayed in the office – once or twice a year Mike visited customers – boss didn't like to spend money.

010 Offices were upstairs, boats docked behind. On 2nd floor was the boss and Mike's offices. Large building in between – 1 story – was used for packing oysters in barrels. On other side they unloaded them. Shucked oysters in end building. No other buildings.

034 Oyster boats were owned by company – copper bottoms so that you could break the ice and dredge oysters in winter. 4-5 boats. 50-foot long. Heavy bows were curved so that you could crack the ice without breaking the bow. Men on the boat would shove the ice underneath. Wooden boats. Built by local people – sometimes would buy from Connecticut or Rhode Island. Local boat builders – doesn't remember their names. Van Wheels – dutch people – van poppen, westin. Built other things too. Motor boats – small motors. 6 horsepower motor. "Could barely get it through the water".

077 People who raked oysters or tonged for clams had a neighbor make their tools. Worked where water was not muddy – needed sand. Bluepoints leased land from Babylon to Patchogue except for 1000 feet offshore. Started working at 5am and returned by 3 pm. A good catch was 2-3 bushels of clams. Company men worked 2-3 men on a boat – would get 50 bushels a day. 1938 hurricane – 1 million bushels were destroyed – by mud washing over the oysters.

110 Mud smothered clams and oysters – couldn't get the boats out for several days. Whatever they harvested died. Mike had to work – couldn't drive anywhere on the south shore. All buildings were damaged but not too much. Boss sent them home eventually. The boats were tied up in the basin. Posts could hold anything. Smaller boats were destroyed. Clams were okay because they could get out of the mud. "The oysters never recovered."

167 CT & RI oysters were okay and could be sold. Doesn't remember if they laid people off. Some went to work in the clam business.

180 Sometime Bluepoints bought oysters from Flowers and Son in Oyster Bay. Saw each other mostly at conventions. Tried to raise seed oysters – spread on sandy lots and hoped they spawn in May & June. Always did this, beginning in the 1890s. Company didn't pay well. Some men went fishing in the ocean to earn more.

224 Most workers were Dutch. Office was different – Mike was the only Dutch man. Most lived around Sayville – W. Sayville – Greene lent them money until they could find something else. Had backyard gardens – needed veggies for winter. Stores were expensive.

252 End of interview on February 4, 2004

252 Childhood memories – “just nothing” – went to school – at age 14 worked in Uncle's grocery store. Didn't go to the bay very often. No toys – no basketball. Mom didn't like him wondering around. Played with friends next door. Doesn't remember doing much.

284 Helen moved around a lot – lived in Toronto. In E. Islip – had friends – Mike – families from Bohemia came to E. Islip for the summer. Helen wasn't allowed to go to the bay without them often. H: had a lot of friends – played. Went swimming at Great South Bay – beach at end of street in E. Islip – doesn't remember street name. Helen didn't try clamming. Mike tried once or twice – “it was hard work and I had no muscle.” Clammers had muscles. Once a storm came up and came in between him and another boat. “We were in the sun and they were in the storm.”

350 Clam beds marked by posts in Great South Bay. Mike went swimming at end of Atlantic Avenue – open beach next to Bluepoints. Everyone went swimming there because it was shallow. Sailed to Fire Island once or twice a year to go to the ocean – was scared. Mike didn't know how to sail. He could sail if he had to. Family didn't have boat. Some families had clam boats – about half had them. Only a few had pleasure boats. Snapper Inn had a boat.

380 Rum runners brought booze to dock at Bluepoints. Local baymen would meet the ships – 6 did this as a side job. Brought to Great River or W. Sayville – met by trucks that would bring it to the city. No cops in town. Doesn't remember their names. Clammers and oysterers. Heard them at night. People told stories. Clammers made extra money. Many were church going. Nothing else to do on Sundays. Couldn't play baseball on Sunday.

430 No bay houses – small summer homes on islands near Bay Shore. No islands near W. Sayville. Mostly near Fire Island. Not too many duck hunters. Few hunters in W. Sayville. Lots of rabbits – pets. Went to church on Saturdays too. 1912 – Montauk Highway paved. Tire tracks before then.

470 More summer homes in Sayville – not W. Sayville. Took train to Sayville and cars would take them – stay about 2 weeks and then return to city. Foster Avenue had summer homes. Greene Avenue – homeowners rented rooms for a week or two. Hanson Avenue had a hotel. Local people could use their beach. In S. Sayville from Main Street “Every street had someone who took in summer people.”

520 Everyone sold their catch to the markets or Bluepoints. Vanderborg had clammers who harvested off Bay Shore. Not regular business. No oystering in summer – not safe to eat. Bluepoints had watchmen who sailed around at night to make sure no one stole their oysters and clams. Daytime too. Made sure people didn't go on Bluepoints lots. Most people had to work for Bluepoints in the winter.

610 Company truck went from Atlantic Avenue to the train which went to Fulton Fish Market in New York City. Single track. 1930s – uncle drove truck directly to NYC. Other changes – Sunrise Highway built in 1950s – more people moved out there. Most people stayed. Cost of living today. “The bay has been over-clammed.”

680 Oyster business never recovered. Got into clam and chowder business.

End of tape.