

Roland Clark
September 11, 1997
Interviewed by Nancy Solomon

Baymen harvested moss bunker. Variety of activities. Brown tide put pressure on the fisheries. Roland is 58 years old. Fished with father and grandfather. Scalloped in fall and winter. Worked in Florida on yachts. Had boat in Montauk. Fishing seasons. "That's one of the missing links of life around here –not having the bay scallops."

Accidents, acting recklessly – was punished. Navigation – "Depended on instinct." Fished at Plum Gut – bluefish. Went hand lining. Took ranges to determine sites.

Grandfather – Albertus Clark, Ed Clark Sr – father. Went scalloping in fall, clamming in winter and spring. Worked on land too – grandfather was overseer at Mashomack Preserve. Harvest hard clams – some soft clams in spring.

Scalloping – grandfather had 50-foot sloop. Came in 1919. 1930s – scallops disappeared. Favorite spots – Rose's Grove for young scallops, Hog Creek, Coecle's Harbor. Father built boat. Dredges were built by Paul "the blacksmith" in Greenport. Fought in German Army during World War I. Dredges last about 40 years. Bags wear out fast when there is a lot of scallops – 1/year. Blades on dredges last 5-6 years. Uses 4 dredges, more if there's a lot of eel grass. More grass when bay was healthier. Would wait until late fall to scallop when there was less grass.

1961 – could use outboard motor boat for scalloping. Before only sailboats allowed. Soft clams – best times is late winter (January – February)– were biggest. Too early for fishing.

Side B

Clammers had 5 – 7 bushels – truck would pick up 12 clammers on Shelter Island: Clarks, Tuthills, Griffings, Lenox, Edwards. Fathers, sons and cousins. Tuthills helped settle Shelter Island – Alfred (bayman) had boatyard.

Scallop beds on Coecles harbor – 10 bushels. 8 boats clammed on a regular basis. 4 -5 bushels of little necks/day. Everett Tuthill – supervisor. Built scallop boat out a blank hull. Sailboats were made of cedars. Made of long leaf yellow pine for clamming boats. Used white oak from Shelter Island. 16 – 18' flat bottom. Used for scalloping too. Centerboard. Warping – put 600' of anchor line attached to anchor, throw dredges overboard and haul on the anchor line from the bow. This would pull the dredges. Boats were next to each other – in creeks. Done during early months of the season.

Best spots – Coecles' Harbor, Menaneck Creek, West Neck. Town law – no Sunday scalloping. Got bunkers instead. Sprinkled drops of bunker oil to see where scallops were. Done on calm days. Boats were close to each other on thick scallop beds – 100 yards. Some areas were 7 – 10 feet of water for scallops. Live in grass. Grasses die in fall – natural cycle. "Sputnik" grass – rubber grass was brought by oyster companies in 1950s to protect oyster beds from starfish.

Imported from Japan. Gets “greener and healthier” in the winter. Dies in summer. Brought when Sputnik was launched.

Went with father mostly. Started at daybreak. Froze in winter. Bulky rubber gloves. Stayed in creek and to Northwest Harbor – 1 hour trip. No motors then. Creeks froze by Christmas. Manila line. Scallops would freeze by the time they hit the culling board. Slush ice. Wave arms to keep warm. Could not wear bulky clothes.

30 full time baymen in 1950s and 60s. 150 when season started. Roland is a middle child – has two brothers. Opened scallops in cellar. By age 10 most kids were fast shuckers. No baywomen. South fork baymen hit hardest in 1980s – striped bass could not be harvested, and brown tide hit.

Tape 2

Shelter Island folks worked on bunker boats. “Bunker City” – “menhaden lane” causeway on Ram Island. Coecles harbor – “eel town” – mostly baymen lived there. Fish factories on Ram Island – open structure. Tar kettle road – fishermen tarred nets there. Other road names. Wetlands were considered useless in 1950s. Valued for salt hay in 1700s. 50% of wetlands destroyed on Long Island. Less on Shelter Island – more bulkheads and marinas. Nichols Patent lands were auctioned off to oyster companies in 1870s. Tax revenues went to schools on Shelter Island – New York State reclaimed money in 1950s.

Flounders ate on oyster grounds that had been worked on the day before. Scallops lived on edge. Oysters were brought over from Connecticut. Used dredges and scapnets for scallops.

Oystering – few tongs, 60-foot boats with dredges. 1960s – mechanization. Shoveled into buckets and baskets – put on conveyor boat. Disease struck in 1960s. Stored shells until summer on waterfront – giant heaps. Natural sets in Peconic. More in Connecticut. Better taste on Long Island.

Rubber grass imported. Beds of Irish moss – red woolly grass – five to six feet – scallops lived, blackfish, eels, flounders, grass shrimp. Scallops lived on surface. Died before brown tide. No grass during brown tide years. No young finfish when scallops died – brown tide. Other areas on Shelter Island – eel grass has overgrown – six feet high. Boat traffic has harmed grass. Density varied over the years. Declined before brown tide. Rubber grass grew over.

Side B

Surf areas and relationship to fish life. 3 Mile Harbor – pollution bloom appeared in 1982, a few years before the brown tide struck. Was visible from an airplane – looked like a mushroom cloud. No fish. After brown tide grasses disappeared. Sewage treatment plant installed in 1990 – chlorinating plant installed in 1960s. Sewers first installed in 1870s. Riverhead plant opened in 1985, when brown tide first appeared. In the 1970s there was a major spurt in 2nd homes constructed.

Other creeks – Dennis, Mashomack, West Neck, Dickerson. Bulkheading. Dredge spoils in 1960s put on wetlands. Condons creek in 1950s. Done by crane. Trucked in fill in the 1920s to create Shelter Island Heights.

Hydraulic gears lift nets. No major changes in shellfishing besides move to motor boats.

Everyone helps shuck. Shops charge a lot. Could shuck 1 gallon per hour – a good pace. Done on same day as when caught. Done until nighttime. 5 bushels, 30 lbs. takes a few hours. Put shells in dump or driveway. “It smells like scallop season around here.” Scallops put in “tins” from oyster companies- Bob’s Fish Market, “Bush” Ryder, Morris Tuthill, Charlie Stroebel. Most scallops are sold on Shelter Island.

More yards on the water – “nice green lawns”. “Can’t blame it on agriculture because it’s been declining.” Synthetic fertilizers are the main source of pollution now.

Soft clams like fresh dredge spoils and dredged habitats. More bottom tilled areas (trawlers, etc. cultivated) are the best areas – most productive. Gets aerated. Peconic – hard crust on bottom.

Tape 3

Clam growth in creek after bottom was “roto” tilled with rakes. Common in other areas. Work different sections at different times of year. Use different nets. Scallop beds are left alone. Communal property.

Clamming – use “Bull” hand rake which has 20-30 teeth. Nephew clams 6 months/year. “You have to be a bull to pull it.” For soft clams use a long tooth rake, can use power. Low tide.

Counts by government are estimates based on licenses. Unreported catches. Sales to neighbors not high – 20%. Tourists buy. Markets sell imported species unless local scallops are available.

Strong northwest wind could blow scallops onto beach. Could also destroy crop. Anchor frosts – bottom would freeze first, killing scallops. Happens occasionally. Does not know what causes it. Ice can protect or kill. “Bugs” – juvenile bay scallops. Would sometimes go “bugging” in scarce times. Use gauge to measure.