

Bill Gafga

July 17, 1997

Interviewed by Nancy Solomon

Bill is 54 years old. Born in East Marion. Father and grandfather were fishermen. Was in the military and worked for General Motors. Had pound nets. Scalloped in winter. Traditionally it was the first Monday after the 3rd Sunday in September until March 31. December and January were best because there were fewer people. 1975 – worked on the bay. Had a wooden boat 1st year. Switched to fiberglass. People thought he was crazy - ripped out seats of showroom boat – 24 foot Proline. Still uses it today. Later other copied him. Ice cut wooden boats – sharpie, sloops. Many kinds of boats used for scalloping – “anything that would float.” Used dredges: 30 inch, chain bag and net bag. Built by Paul Nostrack of Greenport – blacksmith.

Pulled 14 dredges in earlier days. Attached by rings on the gunnels. Run as close as possible – a few inches apart. 7 on each side of the boat. Did not pull all at once. Never the front one. Pull 1 onto cull board, pick scallops, and return 20 minutes before you pulled up. Earlier years this took 2 minutes. Vinny Martin built one. Son made one. $\frac{3}{4}$ round blade was good. Scraper blades – flat – caught garbage. \$100 for a frame. Welders made dredges mostly. Welding shops – North Fork Welding in Greenport make them.

Sold scallops to Southold Fishing Station to Mike Morris (deceased). In 1975 they made \$1.75 a pound shucked. Caught 80 pounds per day. Limits – 10 bags per man, or 20 bags per boat. Sister helped. At beginning of season baymen paired up. Got caught in an ice flow once in a while. Ice went through the North Race and South Race, Robins Island. Ice could come from 2 directions. One baymen drowned. Preferred working alone – later in season. Could use buoys to locate traps. Sailed with his father – power was illegal. Early to late 1960s they still sailed. Father has the same name. All were born in Greenport. Joe’s uncles worked on draggers.

Bill harvested hard and soft clams. Used mussels for bait which he harvested. West of Southold was better – bigger clams and scallops. Earlier years found scallops in 30 – 40 feet of water. 10-15 foot was also common. Have trouble using dredges in shallow water – hard to adjust. Deeper waters – adjustments for incoming-outgoing tides. Adjust rope length. Falling tide – shorten rope. Done every half hour. Adjust to catch “cleaner” and “to catch more.” Pulled dredges by hand. Deep water was hardest.

Sets have not lived as long. Protected areas. Sputnik – spaghetti grass. Too many scallops hinders growth. Too many in Orient.

Scallops live for 18 months. Travelled up to 18 miles. 20-25 baymen scalloped. 500-600 boats at beginning of the season. Orient Park created in 1938. Dug out “deep neck.” Does not know if it affected shellfishing.

1975: \$25/bushel of clams – 1000 clams per bushel. 500 in a count bag. Included “hangers.” Bill rakes clams. Joe Gordon lived with Bill for 1-2 years. Joe was a policeman and a part-time bayman. Went scalloping in winter – Christmas money. Do not have butter clams. Neck and steamers in creeks. Dug with a soft clam rake.

17 creeks in Southold – inlets from Sound to Peconic bay. $\frac{3}{4}$ are closed “due to water quality.” Are not dredged on a regular basis. Some are closed permanently – Narrows River, which had scallops and hard clams. Parts of Broadwaters, Mattituck Inlet and Passamonauk Pond. Chloroform counts do not distinguish between animal (swans and geese) and human waste. Overpopulation on creeks – fertilizers, septic tanks. Storms have not changed things greatly. Pollution is people generated.

Lobstering is doing well. Egg bearing females are unique to east coast. Not an old business – 40 years – began in 1955. Howard King (deceased), Stanley Dykowitz – 90 years old – went Lobstering. Conditions are better today. Not done in estuary – mostly in Long Island Sound.

Oystering. Grown and spawn in Connecticut and brought to Long Island – 50 years ago too. Individuals bought beds from Greenport or Riverhead. Oyster companies – Inmont. Joe’s grandfather ran an oyster boat. 15 factories in New Suffolk, Southold and several in Greenport. Used sloops. Companies had 4-6 boats. Constantly went to Connecticut for eggs. Cleaner water on Long Island for growing. Oyster beds were 6 – 25 feet deep. 3000 acres owned by Inmont. Beds ran into each other. Stakes off for identification.

Oyster season was 4 months. Town law – “R” months water was colder and “product was better.” Oyster companies got scallops too. Many baymen worked for the oyster companies. Bill’s father worked for Raydel – was part of Inmont.

Shelter Island Oyster Company, George Braun. Few natural sets. 1800s – started Connecticut plantings. Dredged. 6 – 8 foot dredges on sailing sloops. Bag in back. Towed in minutes in deep water. 60 – 70 foot boats. Recent years – power boats. 3 deck hands and captain. Cannot dredge with power today – a NY state law. Few oysters today. Sold clams to distributors (Mike and Mary Morris) who sold to Southold Fishing Station. Morris started business in 1960s.

Father sold to Billy Janovick in New Suffolk – bought scallops, Jack Delaney (clams), Swezey truck picked up clams for Fulton Fish Market. Most stuff went to New York City. Did not sell to restaurants. Thinks everyone would get a higher price by selling to a distributor only. Middlemen network to set prices.

Long Island lobsters are shipped to Maine and sometimes back again. 1980s – Mike and Mary Morris died. Braun is the only game in town now. Morris was good to baymen. They were anti-sportsmen. Morris started business in 1949, moved from New York City. Shipped via Swezey truck. Had road stops. Bag tags indicated destination. Baymen were paid by check. Shipper deducted freight cost. Took 1 week to get paid. Paid daily. Sold some to neighbors.

Highly competitive. Need more cooperation on prices. Interlopers. Lobster boat burned in Northport because of turf wars. Less competitive in shellfishing. Inlet is filled in. Does not know why. Storm possibly. Gull pond is manmade. Sages Pond is hurricane made, as is Goldsmith’s boatyard, and the brickyard.

Clam digging aerates bottom which spurs growth. Dead bottoms. Mill Creek opened in 1996 after being closed for 10 years due to runoff. Was not dredged. "The more they work it the more clams are there." Need dead bottom churned.

Fight between recreational and commercial fishermen. Feel outnumbered. Want fertilizer stopped. Chicken manure was better but residents complained about smell.

Fishermen are more diversified now. Many baymen in father's era. "If you weren't a farmer you were a fisherman." "You don't make a lot of money but it's in your blood." Father got 5 -6 baskets per day. Only did shellfishing. Family ties in East Hampton are stronger. More money to support baymen. Limited power of the association in Southold. Pete Wenczel is a trustee and a bayman.

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