

Milt Miller & Jim McKearn
Interview by Nancy Solomon
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Side A

Dumped garbage in Long Island Sound 30 years ago. Runoff has been a problem for years. Everyone used to dump garbage. Since World War II. Need to clean up rivers. Houses on rivers and bays are problems. Spray for mosquitoes. Traces in saltmarsh. Frequent spraying. Post World War II – DDT killed soft clams. Crabs died. Happened throughout estuary. Ospreys died, songbirds. Used to harvest “Wagon loads” of soft clams. Sprays for gypsy moths in 1970s. Mixed DDT with kerosene.

Jim –road runoff – oil on roads. Drains to bay. Harvested clams: chowders, quahogs, soft clams. Milt is 80 years old. Went tonging. Dredged for clams, raked too. Deep water. Harvest areas kept changing because clams moved. Went to Montauk Lake and the bay. Clammed in deep water – Shinnecock. Need high salinity – mouths of estuary.

1945 – good years. Houses – phosphates, ammonia and other chemicals are leached into the estuary. Bay closes after it rains. Started when DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) was formed 25 years ago. No major event happened to warrant this action. Outboard motors hurt the bay. Oil spills. As bad as Exxon Valdez spill – total number of outboard motors on east coast. Oystering stopped in 1960s. Need freshwater. Dredged channels reduced oysters.

Side B

Great South Bay – planted oysters only. Originated in Hudson River. Went tonging for oysters. 10 – 15 bushels per day. Few oystermen. Never a lot in the Peconics. Did not work year round as an oysterman. Major producer was Promise Land – harvested oysters, 2000 – 3000 bushels per boat.

Clamming and scalloped part time. Could not survive doing it full time. Lake Montauk used to have the most clams on Long Island. Mecox Bay – oysters – natural set; soft clams. Eel grass is okay to scallop spawning but too many causes suffocation. Eel grass hinders maturation, stunts growth.

Variation in yields naturally. 20- year gaps of scallop harvests. Small dredges – 3 feet wide, standard size. Same size for oysters. Boats used 10-foot wide dredges. Clams – hand dredges. Tonging – 20-foot deep water. “Oysters were just a sideline.” Tongs were different lengths – 20-foot, 16-foot, 12-foot and 10-foot because clams were found at different depths. Low tide was best for hard clams. 3 Mile Harbor – year round shellfishing. Oyster companies: cleaned the bay using predators. Went clamming in winter. 20 – 30 days per year.

End