

Howard Pickerell

June 12, 2007

Interviewed by Nancy Solomon

Long Island Traditions

Track 2 Born in Bay Shore and raised in Huntington. Born in 1944. Father was a bayman – clammer – Howard – he's junior. Worked on the water all our lives. Clamming since he was 7 years old. Was probably 4 or 5 years old when he first went clamming with father. Just about everybody back then had something to do with the water. Had scallop dredges in back yard. Grandfather was a carpenter – house carpenters. That's probably where I picked up how to make boats – using tools. Father had basic row boat – 14 foot row boat – came from a New haven sharpie. Slab sided – tonged for clams. In later days 1950s – 60s we started using rakes. At that time that's all there was – hard clams. Oysters were on lots owned by LI Oyster farms. Knew some people who worked for them by face. It was a big company. Had dredge boats. Owned a good part of the Huntington Bay. They had a 99 year lease on it from the town of Huntington. Lease was not renewed. 1978 when lease ran out. Opened it to all the baymen. Company took all the oysters before they lost the lease. Harvested hard clams.

Track 3 – 3000 baymen- licenses given out during the 1960s and 70s. Part time baymen . Full time baymen – 800 – 1000. Started working on the bay when I was about 7. All through school that's how I paid my way – used to go down after school and scratch up some clams. Sold to Kelsey seafood in Centerport – shipped to Campbell's. Had chowder clams. We could do a bushel an hour – about 600 – 700 clams. \$8 a bushel. For a little kid I made good money. When I finished high school I went to the bay full time. 1979 – moved to Southampton. It was getting so crowded up there. I did very well clamming here too. I can find clams. Did not know Southampton baymen. After a year or so it got to the point where they were following me around. I can find clams on the sidewalk and most baymen can't find them. I can find them. If they are there I'll get them. He would bring a bunch of clams to the shop and the next day you had people following you around. Sold to John Morris – Mattituck shellfish. Located in e. Quogue.

Track 4 – easier to clam in Southampton – shallower water. Could harvest a bushel an hour. Was always a clammer. Also went scalloping during the season. Everyone went scalloping. Dredged scallops – 6 dredges on his skiff. Some years you would only get a month, sometimes 3 months. We had plenty of scallops then. I never got into anything else. I was a clammer. Others worked on conchs, soft shell clams, horseshoes crabs. Most things got legislated out of business. Worked either in Shinnecock Bay or Little Peconic bay in the creeks. Fewer clams now. Worked in the creeks – nooks and crannies, poking around. With a little imagination you can find clams. The open bay never had much. Clams don't like high salinity – don't like brackish water. They prefer the creeks which are all freshwater fed – likes Noyac creek, Mill creek, North Sea harbor. Southampton town – 600 licensed baymen, now it's down to almost nothing. Any homeowner can go down and get himself a mess of clams. The clams are nice here. Never any friction between recreational and commercial fishermen clammers. Used one of his garveys – v bottoms.

Track 5 – I've made hundreds of boats for Great South baymen. Worked well on east end. No changes to the garvey. The sharpie – had to change the design somewhat for scalloping – straighter side and higher side – scallopers preferred it that way. More traditional. When your grandfather and his grandfather had that design, that's what you have to have. Garvey has a blunt bow. Sharpie is a pointed boat. Garvey is low sided, lays real low, carries a load real good, very seaworthy. Howard's boats took a traditional boat – has more shape to the boat – it's not a boxy, they rise in the bow, have v bottoms, "a very salty boat." Built first boat for sale when he was 12 or 13 years old. I was 14 – it was for a guy named Stubbings – an old baymen from Huntington. He used the boat for 25 years. Started out by making it for friends. Was paid \$200 – 240 dollars. Now they are sold for \$5000. "I still make that same boat." We used to use a lot of oak – LI used to have a lot of nice oak. Bought it from Harned sawmill in Peconic. Still in business today – shipped from RI and upstate. Original boats were made from LI white oak. Later used red oak – rotted. Now uses pressure treated green wood – conducive. Epoxyed together.

Track 6. Used to use tar or a bedding compound for bonding. Epoxy creates a good bond. Cannot find good oak – green wood is southern pine. It's not cca – salt treatment retards rot. Last oak came from Hartwick NY – in 1980. Went to all greenwood for the framework in the boat. Still used plywood on the hull. Fiberglass plywood inside and out today, not just outside. Has been using fiberglass since 1960. Used to fiberglass the seams, and then it got to the point where I was fiber glassing the entire boat. Construction procedure ahs changed. Used wellwood glue, now it's epoxy glue. Switched about 6-8 years ago. Used wellwood glue in the early 70s. Made out of horse's hoofs. It's very biodegradable. No parents or relatives helped build boats. Children have made boats – all of his sons have built a boat. Just a few. Customers – 90% of my customers are baymen. I cater to the commercial fishermen. In the 1970s –

Track 7. Clamming was big on Great South Bay. Couldn't make them fast enough. When I first moved here I was 9 boats behind. Other boatbuliders – guy in Jamesport – made skiffs, a few guys in E. Hampton – didn't know them. Baymen came to me. Made boats for guys in E. Hampton when he was living in Centerport. They found out someways. Scalloping in state waters – some of the guys came down here in scallop season. Knew baymen before he moved there – the Lesters "how can you not know the Lesters" – Richie Lester, Stuart Lester, Stuart Vorpahl, Billy Schultz, Brad Loewen. I kind of blended in. Built boats for them. For Brad I probably made him 3 boats. If you're from E. Hampton you have to have a sharpie. The only guy I converted over to garveys was Billy Schultz. He had fish traps. I put a well in the back so that he could tilt the motor up. I cater to the commercial guys, and commercial fishing is over. Now builds 4 or 5 boats a year. I'm taking a commercial hull and finishing them up real fancy for pleasure boaters. Some people want to have something a little traditional. Started noticing scallop decline in 1986, the year after the brown tide.

Track 8. A couple of years after that there was virtually none. We had one good year a few years later, and then it never happened again. About 1990 – we did very good scalloping. It's never happened again – in sag harbor cove and Shinnecock bay. It didn't happen in the big bay – Big Peconic Bay. Up west by the canals. They never came back there. We used to scallop there. Sag harbor cove is all brackish water. In the last 10 years the tide is approximately 6 inches higher and lower – cut upon Shinnecock inlet, Moriches inlet – deeper and wider. After

they did that the tide in this bay is higher and lower. Salinity is higher. Juvenile shellfish like brackish water. They like higher salinity when they're older. Too high for when they are younger. A larger shellfish can thrive. Visit hatchery someday. When was the last good scalloping – a long time ago.

Track 9. 13 years ago we did very good in north sea harbor. After that I got involved with the oysters. Cornell got a grant from the state I'm guessing to help the offset scallop baymen that were affected by the brown tide. They educated us on how to grow oysters in containment. I was the first one to do it with Cornell. Other baymen too. I was like the prototype and experimenter. I know Greg (Rivara) - he got us plastic bags, oyster seed, it worked. They gave us adpi bags – plastic mesh bags, a couple thousand oyster seed, and we put them on long lines out in the bay – we had maybe a 100 bags – in 1990. It worked. And so a tremendous amount of baymen got involved. Each bag was 10 feet between the next bag. Had 4 -5 lines. Each line was about 600 feet. Spool of line was about 1200 foot. Anchored with a buoy. Bags are tied to the lines - resembles lobster pots. You had to clean them all the time –depends on when grass is growing - in winter you hardly had to touch them, in summer you have to pick them every couple of weeks for months because grass is growing. But oysters grow at the same time. You want to get the grass off the bag. I hoped that I

Track 10. could possibly have some sort of an income. Because there are no more clams round, no more scallops around. Had 100 baymen at first, but 95% of them disappeared that first year because they thought you just put them out there and watch them grow. It don't work that way. You have to maintain them. Right now I have 900 bags out there. Bags are in little peconic. I sail year round – I have a steady market year round. I can produce an oyster in 18 months. In the wild it takes 3 years to produce. With a lot of maintenance it can take 18 months. That's the trick. The best part is being out in the water. I've got to make a living off the water. I sell to mostly white cloth restaurants – high end restaurants. I sell them for a good price. I have a very high quality product. When you're clamming wild product, you're just taking. When you're doing the oyster like I'm doing, I'm giving to the bay. Shellfish are siphon feeders- they clean the water, which is a good thing. So that works out really good that way. So you're putting them there, and they're doing the bay more good than harm. It's a good feeling, a good thing. I'm cleaning the bay.

Track 11. When asked which he prefers – wild harvesting or oyster farming, he says “the harder you work the more you make.” When clamming. Now “half the time I go out I'm farming. If I could make money clamming I would be doing it. But the price of clams is the same now as it was 10 years ago. 15cents or 16 cents a clam, it's the same price. Something's not right there. And you go to King Kullen and they're selling them for \$5 a dozen. I think the baymen are getting stuck, getting stiffed. The reason is because you can make a phone call and have clams delivered from Virginia for 16 cents. They're not the quality clam we have here but we don't have clams here. We have that unique peconic bay scallop – it's a nice tasting animal, and the clams are the same way. But the poor baymen is not getting anything. The only way baymen are going to make it is through aquaculture. Some are making it through conks. Can government do anything – they need to find out what the story is with the water quality. They've been “supposedly trying” but with zero success. There are probably 30 participants in the

aquaculture program. Full timers – 12 – 15 full time participants in the program. Some started but bailed out. New ones came along – homeowners.

Track 12. Okay with homeowners. Some have gone commercial. It's an educational process. Some people grow oysters in their backyard. Learn how to keep the water nice. He doesn't see baymen making a living in the future. "We live on an island, surrounded by pristine water, and we can't make a living on it." Shellfish like highly polluted waters. But you can't eat them. Clams love cesspools, fertilizer. Development does have an impact – destroying the wetlands is very detrimental. Bulkheads destroy the environment. Our town is putting restrictions on it – you can't fill in wetlands, setbacks for bulkheads, can't cut down fragmites. That has a major impact on shellfish and finfish – development. Has never had bags stolen. Sets his bags blind. Boats have damaged buoys but that's expected. Has cork on each end of his lines. Doesn't damage boats. Sets bags in shallow water. Not near shipping lanes. Stays in shallow waters. He's completely on his own. Permits – hatchery permit, shellfish permit from the state.

Track 13. Owns bottom land in the bay from Southold town. Has to pay taxes – spends over \$500 a year for licenses. I can always sell everything I bring in. I have it scheduled – can speed them up or slow it down. I was out cleaning oyster bags today. I usually start at 7 o'clock. When I was clamming I was out by 6. Getting too old for that. I have a pressure washer on my boat. I cleaned close to a hundred bags today. I have to use a machine. Some guys use a brush. My wife cleans them and packs them – Diane. She goes out on the boat with me in the summer time. People want to buy them but I don't. They're dedicated already. Sells to American hotel in Sag Harbor – they go through a lot of oysters and they pay their bills. Most of his customers are on the south fork. Sometimes north fork wineries call him. Used for tasting events. They know I have a nice product. One winery is involved with the American hotel – that's how he found me. Howard is committed to the program.

Track 14. I'd rather grow a lesser amount but a higher quality. My oysters have a nice hard shell and they're fat. Easy to open. Other oysters the shells are all flaky, and they have to go in the side – there's fragments – customers don't like them. It's all maintenance. You can't just throw them out there and watch them grow. It doesn't work. Doesn't see younger baymen following. Doesn't see boatbuilding continue. It's very limited – I cater to commercial guys, and the commercial guys aren't around anymore. Doesn't see any of his children continuing the tradition. Everything's push buttoned computer generated today. Everything I have I worked for. Nothing was given to me.

Track 15. Cages are basically made of lobster pot wire – 6 feet long, 3 feet deep by 3 feet high, and hold 12 bags, a giant lobster pot with shelves in it. Shelves are 5" apart, 4 high. I lift the whole cage or rack up and open the door, and you pull the bags out, clean them. Have 60 cages now. They are all on the trawls, 10 feet apart. 700 lbs when they are full. Has a winch, mast and boom and he pulls them out with the electric winch. 2000 lb. winch. They are very heavy when they are out of the water. I constantly get scallops and occasionally clams. It's a good place to hide. I get scallops an inch or an inch and a quarter. I eat them. Doesn't eat scallops or clams. My father always said "you can't eat the profits."

End.