

Tom Ruhle
Interview by Nancy Solomon
April 3, 1997

Editor's note: Tom Ruhle has released his rights to the tape and agreed it could be available to the Voices of the Fisheries project.

Side A

Tom is not a typical bayman. He skin dives for clams which has angered older baymen. He is trained scuba diver. He dives with a snorkel, moving the sand away from clams with his hands. He culls them in a basket, yielding a half-bushel. Limits on clamming are comparatively recent. There were none in the 1970s. In contrast there have been limits on scallops "forever." The limits were imposed for conservation, after the clams began to disappear.

Tom was born in Montauk. He clammed there – in Accabonac, Napeague and 3 Mile Harbor. He clammed mostly in Lake Montauk. Eel grass and rocks are hostile for clams. "The worse the better – that's where the clams are." He owns rakes, 6-foot long, and tongs. He uses them in winter. The sandy areas have no clams because they've been harvested. He clams in deep water now.

"Lake Montauk has always been the exception to the bay. There's been years where there have been no scallops, and Lake Montauk has had scallops." West of the lake it is sandy – "people cleaned it out."

1970s – eel grass "took over" and diminished the clams. Before – scallops in middle, and clams on the edges. Tongers clammed on boats. The handles were wooden. In the winter he tonged through ice cut with a chainsaw or an ax which Tom prefers. He would chop a square hole and then put the rake and tongs in the hole and put clams and scallops on ice. He would also put them in warm water to thaw. In the summer he would put the clams in cool water under shade.

Goes clamming 2-4 times per month. Also harvests oysters and scallops. Works for the Town of East Hampton. He also digs for soft clams. In the winter the bay is closed at times due to rain and runoff. The traditional calendar:

Catch striped bass in summer
Catch scallops in fall
Catch clams in winter

With restrictions on striped bass and scalloping decline, clamming is increasing. There are many part-timers at the beginning of scalloping season. If there weren't enough people to open them baymen dumped them at the dump. Scalloping was popular at Napeague and Lake Montauk. Used a 36-inch mechanical dredge. Also dove for them. Scallops attach to eel grass. Scallops can swim. Deep water- used to be full of scallops which interfered with the clams. Chowder clams are common today. Fewer smaller ones – less growth due to brown tide, predators. Tom thinks it's a combination of this and pollution. It's not overharvesting because large clams

would be gone too. Lake Montauk has always had large clams. Where there has been harvesting there have been smaller clams. Osborne Island – rocky shoreline. “I used to clam there constantly from May until November, year after year after year.” Caught mostly small clams.

1970s- 1980s: large clams mostly. South end of lake used to have more. 1960s – west side of lake had eel grass and clams. Few oysters. More common now since the late 1980s. Ditches were dug to get rid of mosquitoes.

Side B

Creating the mosquito ditches brought more fresh water which led to more non-point source pollution. Natural predators such as starfish have disappeared too. Rotting vegetation due to fertilizers. Hurricanes cleansed the bay. Brown tide has killed vegetation. Tom went treading which most baymen do not do. He focused on areas where eel grass was plentiful. Got 7 bushels, 2000 clams in 1 day and was paid \$275. 1 bushel of little necks per day is ideal. Clamming was a last resort for most baymen. Dredging was most common.

Rakes were 36-inch wide with no teeth. Plywood put in front to clear the way. Used sash weights. Shortened rear bags to prevent heavy lifting. Blades were angled.

Northwest Harbor in East Hampton was the first spot. Cleared out easily. East Hampton, Shelter Island and Lake Montauk were harder. Other places – 3 Mile Harbor, Accabonac Harbor and Louse Point. Favorite harbors among baymen. Could get 20,000 bushels of scallops a week in Northwest Harbor. Need more dredging to allow for better water circulation. Big projects affect salinity. Non-point source pollution is the major problem. “The better job we do of preserving the area, the more people want to live here.” “Bays are like parakeets in the mines – if something’s wrong, they croak first.”

Sewage plant in Riverhead.

End

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10% less shellfish annually before brown tide. Oysters, weakfish and blowfish have disappeared. Striped bass declined but are now back. There is a battle between sports and commercial fishers. 1978 – tried to outlaw shellfish diving in East Hampton. Baymen's techniques are inefficient. Divers used wet suits, mask, fins, some used scuba tanks. Clams spawn in June. Winter – clams are thicker and tastier. There are 5 divers today. Tom started as a kid. He does not use a boat.

Soft clams – need low tide and sunlight to harvest them. Live in intertidal area. Illegal to harvest at night. Northwest winds and high pressure makes soft clamming easier – there is less water in the bay. Long handles on rakes make tides less a factor.

Tom sells to Gosman's in Montauk, Stuart's Fish Market in East Hampton. Gosman's treats him well and they are loyal and honest. At times he has gotten stuck with clams. Scallops were always sold. Sold scallops to shucking houses in Amagansett. He was paid more money for shucked scallops. Stayed up until 1 am shucking. Sometimes it was hard to sell in winter. Prefers harvesting to selling. Spent 200 days approximately on the water.

Cannot afford to work on the bay today. Worked for his father's carpentry business off-season. Problems caused by jet and water skiers, mosquitoes, storms.

Ran for town council in East Hampton and won in 1988. Went to college. Misses the bay – it was prosperous when he worked it in the 1970s and 1980s. Brown tide arrived in 1986.

Side B

Tom's cat loved raw scallops. Would eat small ones when he was shucking.

Map depths are not accurate. Differences between 1 and 3-feet of water. Bay shorelines have eroded. Shellfish are not affected by erosion. Jet skis banned in East Hampton harbor. More boats have appeared recently. The bay is improving. Less garbage is thrown overboard. "Non point is killing us." Parkways did not go the Hamptons until the late 1960s.

"The collapse of the fishing industry and the reduction in the quality of the bays has been directly related to the increase in population."

End.