

Joey Scavone
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Interviewed by Nancy Solomon

Total time - 38:05 (parts of interview inaudible)

00:00 – 05:00

Born in Freeport. Used to right out here and fish with my dad. Come out with 6 or 7 guys. Born on the water. Water in our backyard. Started clamming with a rowboat. Dad came home from work – helped me sell my clams. When I started seeing money signs –haven't stopped since. That's what started it all – my dad is what started it all. My dad is what started it all. Used to bring me out. He didn't want me to be a fisherman. I said 'you shouldn't have taught me'. It's something you get started doing and you can't stop. You wonder what's going to happen the next day. You can't wait to get up. Got to get out there and see. If you stay, home you're wondering what you missed so you have to go.

Father's name is also Joe Scavone. He used to go fishing on the weekends when he wasn't working. He's from Brooklyn. He even left his own grandfather at the dock as a deposit on a row boat. They came back to the dock, his grandfather had bunkers of fish and they went out on the rental boat and they had nothing. They guy said there's only way they're taking the boat and that's if someone stays behind. That's where his grandfather stayed all day – fishing off the dock.

I can remember stories dad used to tell me along these beaches here – Coney Island. All you had to do is come down to the beach with a bucket. Whiting would just wash up on the beach. You didn't need a boat or a fisherman. Just walk along the beach. After a storm –storm would make fish wash right up.

Started out as clamming in the bay. Little Necks and Cherrystone. When I was a kid – had a paper route. During my paper route – I got a job on a big 78 foot clamming boat that comes out here in the ocean. After 1 week working on that clamming boat right off Jones Beach – I gave up my paper route.

The guy owned 3 boats. His nickname was Billy Bob. He was also from Freeport. Had 2 big boats and 1 smaller boat about 45-50 feet. There was only 1 captain that would take me and my friend out cause we were too small. The other 2 captains wouldn't take us on. Used to get \$10 a day. We used to shuck for a \$1 a bushel back then. It was great.

I used to shovel clams. You didn't always catch straight clams. You'd have to pick out the crabs, seaweed, shells. So you'd shovel clams into a basket. Then drag the baskets over and dump them into a cage.

05:00 – 10:00

How were the clams getting from the ocean into the boat?

It was a pole with a big dredge. It would pull this dredge. It looked like a big steel cage. Pull it along about 1 mile an hour. The clams would go into it. Then lifted it up on the back of the dredge. Then used to pull this line called a pupa. Then the clams would fall out onto the deck into a pile. In fact, used to sell 2 tracker trailers a day for them.

So there would be big pile of clams, you mentioned other things that were caught?

We used to catch fluke. Take the fluke and sell it. We'd have plenty of food on the boat, coffee and stuff. We used to big, Angle head, Ocean blow fish. Monk fish – used to catch big 25 pounders. Only catch 2 or 3 for the day but they were big. We caught a torpedo once off of Jones Beach about 4 feet long. That was kind of scary. Every now and then you'd catch a striped bass. Mostly the flat fish on the bottom – we would catch those. The rest were mainly clams. Would catch other things like claw fish.

When I first went on that boat I was about 13. When I used to go out with my dad when I was 2 years old. With my father, we would clam just buy jumping in the bay with our feet and our hands. Started that when I was about 7 or 8 years old and haven't stopped since.

My first captain on that 78 foot boat – today is his first day back out. His name is Jon – we called him Captain Jon. 83 foot boat. He's 73 years old and still a captain of a clam boat. John Dempsey. He doesn't want to give up.

The boat he's on is docked – he should be sailing out today. If not today – tomorrow.

When I started working for him, he was with a different company – the Freeport Sea Clam. Only 3-4 blocks from my house.

10:00 – 15:03

15 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bottle of soda – 4:30 am every morning – where I was all summer long. One of the most important things I learned from them was safety – always came first.

Never leave lines out, maybe you can trip on them, always make sure that it was clean safe so you don't slip on the man hole. If it was nasty out, never go out on the deck by yourself – always make sure someone knew you were going outside. On your way out or our way in – that went for anybody, not just because we were little kids.

He taught me how to steer, when we were in Fire Island. 2 milk crates- he'd stand me on top of them and tell me to head west.

Was he always a clammer or he fished for other things?

Yea, he fished. He fished for a while in between clamming. Porgy fishing. Another 83 ft boat. He used to go offshore 3-4 days, sometimes 5. Stayed out until the boat was full. Could be porgies, squid, macros, fluke. But do know he used to like going porgy fishing.

At this point had you finished High School? I was never with him when he went offshore. I was probably clamming in the bay back then.

During the teenage age years, it was during the summer times and the weekends cause we had to go to school. Occasionally I would slip to go out. I also learned about gillnetting when I was a teenager from a man named Allan Keller. I used to pump gas at a train station at the end of Wood cleft Canal when I was 15,16,17 years old and this man used to come in with his kids on a gillnet boat. He started taking me out too. Then one day he said, my son knows how to work this boat, but I just don't want to let him go out on his boat by himself – he's only 15. But if the 2 of you guys go together, you can take the boat.

So if I wasn't fishing with them, I was in the bay clamming. So If I wasn't in the bay fishing or clamming with them I was on another clam boat. There was always something going on. Too nasty to be in the ocean, stay in the bay.

What kind of clamming boat did you use?

Started out with a row boat. Then I had a 13 foot boat when I was about 11 years old– 18 horse power. I worked all summer to get the money – it was \$200. That was a Boston. Then after that I got a 15 foot garvey. That was like now I was really a clammer. That was the best.

15:03 – 20:00

I got that boat thru a friend that I met at another gas station for a bait station. I bought that boat off of him. I don't even remember what I paid for. That was at least \$200 or \$300 without a motor. So I had to come up with a motor now. Still had my other little boat. So I fixed up that garvey. My uncle gave me a 40 horse one. I used to put everything in that boat. Used go out in the ocean and catch cod fish in that little 16 footer. In fog where you couldn't see passed that , stand straight into the wind, hoped the wind didn't change. We used manage to find our way back home. It's amazing – I wouldn't do that now. Back then we did anything. You didn't know bad things can happen.

Meteorite hunting. I've taken friends of mine 8 miles off shore in the summer time. Used to call Meteorite hunting because. The further you get away from land, the more you see the sky, because there are no lights. Used to take friends way out. When they said there was going to be a meteor shower, we'd go way out. Because it was so dark, once you get out there you see all the stars. With that little boat. Think I had 50,000 bushels in the time I had that boat.

Still treading and digging?

Treading in the summer. Had been on clam bars in the winter and the summer. Raking. My thing is mainly raking. I rake a lot of clams. My first rake was from a guy up in Huntington. Guy named Jon. Was about 16 when I got my first rake. It was before they came out with the Long Island rake. It was just called a mud rake. It was all made out of steel. Probably had that for year or 2 before wore it out. Nowadays they have stainless steel. They always shiny and brand new. The stainless steel rake I have now got from a guy in Bay Shore. We became friends. He passed on about a year and half ago.

Now as just introduced to another new guy. Just got rake off of him 6 weeks ago.

You've been using clam rakes how long now? About 35, 36, 37 years.

20:00 – 25:00

How do you know where to go clamming? After all these years, spots seem to stay the same. But there are new spots. There are spots that some and go. It's like hunting. I never thought of it that way until a friend said 'Are you going clam hunting today?' I said as a matter of fact – yes I am. It's like an ester egg hunt – looking for that clam. A lot of them grow back in the same areas. There areas where they are, areas that they're not. As far as I know there never were there either. Just the way it is – tide...

When you were first getting started, how many clammers were there? Started mid 70s. 1974-75. Out of the Great South Bay was a big clam boon. Between 75 and 77. There were a lot of clams out there. Would go out there occasionally after school. It was a long ride but I would go out that way. Actually our bay was closed from 72 to 81. Not even sure why. So I had travel – couldn't stay in our area. I could go in Zack's Bay in the winter time. That was it. Had a good friend at Channel East. So I used to go there – a lot of clams in that bay.

They just opened an area this past week – Hempstead Harbor. It's like that again – you can walk across. There's so many of them. I might go up there.

How did you get out there? Where did you keep your boats?

Hosts in Freeport. My parents had a house on the water. Kept the boats behind the house. There was a time I had 2 garvies. That is been up till a year or 2 until the house was sold.

Now it's on 1 side of Freeport, 1 on the other side. They're in small marinas. Not a lot of traffic. Between the 2 boats I pay \$2,500 a year to host. For the big fancy boats you pay \$6,000 a year.

Water space is very expensive these days.

Were there other clammers in your neighborhood? No. Weekends. Recreational.

25:00 – 30:00

Everybody had a regular job. Freeport and Baldwin weren't that many commercial fishermen at that time. Back in the 50s and 60s.

When did you decide to become a commercial fisherman? It wasn't really a decision; it's just what we used to do. There was no such thing as a license back then – you just did it. Then you'd sell all your stuff. Sold to local markets. Cold Storage Fish Market, Captain Bens, Two Cousins. I first started selling clams to Two Cousins.

We were so little – when I got there I couldn't even get the clams off the boat. They had to send the older guys 18 and 19 year olds to come down to my boat and carry the clams off my boat. That's how little we were. We had to go by boat because we didn't have driver's license. That was the easiest way to do it.

Remember what you got paid?

When I first started clamming, I would get \$32 a bushel for littlenecks which was really good. Then after that big freeze from 75-76, it went from \$32 to \$75, 76 a bushel – that lasted for a few weeks after the freeze.

Why did the price go up do much?

The whole bay froze. Ice box. The whole entire Island was shut down. Nobody could. It was frozen solid like a rock. So the price went up, always supply and demand with this stuff.

Used to cut the ice in the canal? Yea

We go clamming out of the bay.

And it happened again 9 or 10 years ago. We were iced in for 10 days. Jan 21- 31, 2002/ 2003. All the canals froze, bay froze too. Some days you go out, path was clear and when you come back the path was frozen.

30:00 – 35:00

That's when you know it's cold. When the water sprays freeze up on your rain jacket. When you go to bend your arm and ice just cracks off your arm. When you have to steer home with your back to the wind. That's when you know it's cold. Then ice builds up on your back. Then you have to worry about your clams freezing. Now if it's 20 degrees or less I won't go out.

When you first wake up and it's 18, you know it's going to be 21 - 22 for the day once the sun starts beating. If it's 1, 2pm in the day and sun starts getting cold.

Would you go out alone?

Yea. I just about always go out alone.

When did you start coming back to Great South Bay? 1981 or possibly '82.

Fishing for other things? Back then I was gillnetting.

Who taught to gillnet? I guy named Allan Keller. His boat was on Woodcleft. Name of boat Johan Jay. A 33-footer. Used to keep it tied up where Cold Storage used to be. Cold Storage is now where the Japanese Sushi House is. That was Cold Storage. There were quite a few fishing boats.

It was nice we would just come in and tie in.

Did you fish all year around? Mostly there was a spot near Christmas. Actually it started during hunting season. We used to stop fishing.

Week between Christmas and New Year's catch cod fish until around 2nd week of March.

Then start catching whiting, big blues, lange. Then as the water warmed a little you'd start catching Macro. Then couple weeks after that Fluke, some Blues, Butterfish.

35:04 – 38:05

Where the prices for fish all the same for all the fish? No. Good fish was Sea Trout. Good fish to catch. Fluke, Flounder.

END

