

Tom Jefferies
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Interviewed by Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions
Freeport Bayman

00:12 – 05:00

How do you catch the spearing and what happens with it?

We catch it – called hall seining – ancient term – comes from the river Seine in France. That's when it was first done with the net against the shore line like that. Targeting spearing. Also known as Silver Sides. Local known as shiners. Excellent bait for fluke and tuna. Now hand packing it. Hand packing it because not a mercy of whole sellers. I can put out my own product. Will do better financially with it. Actually what my grandfather taught me to do. Time consuming and labor intensive but it pays. Better Dividends at the end of the day.

Who buys from you? Shops and individual fishermen clientele – believe it or not. Have people who call me and take 20-30 bags – avid fisherman. They appreciate its caught, iced well, fresh, doesn't sit around. Sometimes when you deal with a wholesaler – you buy from several baymen. For instance – they'll buy a ton – 2,000 lbs – will take them forever to package.

Spearing is a sword fish – stomach will give way. Won't hold up well if not iced properly and taken care of. I feel I put up a better package. Maybe I feel my product is better than anybody's.

Favorite places to catch spearing? Back bay of Jones inlet, East Bay, Baldwin bay – one of my favorites – where I grew up. Down around shore beach – coast guard station. Later in the year is very good. Right now still on north side of the bay. Still spring. Catch our fish while they were spawning. Later on we'll catch them using bait.

Describe chumming? Throw a little fish oil or horseshoe crab eggs in the water. They get tight and ravenous on them – they all want to eat.

Horseshoe crabs State of NY allows a certain allotment, get that freeze them, portion pack. This way every day I can take what I need. Don't abuse it. Bunker I get from a friend, gillnetter, right next door.

Make concoction; spread it out on the water. Oil will attract them. Then hopefully we can get some good shoots of fish.

How do you get the horseshoe crabs? Horseshoeing is not easy. Horseshoe crabs are defenseless. Life cycles is based on the moon's. May moon, and the June moon will come up to lay their eggs – they would be very easy to be harvested but it's a well managed resource.

State of NY just hit our quota last – 15th of June – now entitled to 30 horseshoes a day – which will in a couple of weeks go down to 5. Always allowed 5 in possession.

Would like to say – to anyone on the beach – it is good that they know these things – there are people out there who abuse the harvesting. Most of May – it's usually 200 per person per day. Till June 15th is 100 per day per person – licensed persons. Goes down to 30 in the next few weeks, then go down to 5 which it is now.

If you see someone heating, drop a dime on them – it's not right.

05:00 – 09:55

How did you get into spearing, hall seining, fishing? My grandfather had fishing station here in Freeport out on island called Spit Meadow. We'd go killeying all summer, horseshoeing, spearing. Sell it, had a clientele party when we came out to our doc. My mother and aunt would wait on the party boats. Grandpa would catch the bait. We would package it or portion pack it. Killies are a live bait, they are a little harder to handle. But that's how I got into it. One thing led to another – chase your dream. So I'm still running after my dream.

What are your favorite things to do?

Like spearing fishing the best, putting up a product. Like when a real fisherman comes and take 20-30 packs and toots my horn on how good it is. Fact that it catches well, hold hook well. Something to be proud of. One of the resources here is well managed – I don't see it being a problem.

How do you know where the spearing are? Iconic – placed probably go back to beginning of time, but –places I'm catching them now are the places I was catching them 30-35 years ago with my grandpa. Same places we are today.

Is there a sign that there's spearing to be had? What are some of your clues?

We always pray for a good spring – we didn't have one this year. The catch was a little off tasting. Last year we had an excellent spring. Dry, warm and that's what will make these run harder and thicker. Wet spring is what we had this year – it makes it harder for them to come in from the ocean – they do travel a fair distance and come in and find their spots and reproduce.

How many people are out there catching bait fish like you?

Fair amount, tough racket, very regulated. Here in Town of Hempstead – there could be 8-12. Guys who put their heart and soul into it. Fulltime. They won't just chase spearing – like everything else – what you do on the water changes with the seasons. Might go eeling for a few months – clamming – some guys go clamming all year. I calm in the winter. Go bank musseling in the spring. Maybe set a few eel traps in the fall. You have to be ready to do anything. All hinges on Mother Nature. You don't realize how venerable you are. You try and get ready to do a few things. Just in case one doesn't pan out, you pull up the slack with the other.

Done everything from gillnetting to working on trawlers, to clamming, bait fishing. Never went lobstering. Always wanted to do that one. Adapt and as time goes on you try to build a good work ethic. Hang with same guys. All stick together. Believe it or not, there is competition but it's better to pull together and network amongst yourselves. Have a good friend next door; help him hustling up some of his stuff. He helps me with some of mine. Friends across the street who go blue claw crabbing.

If I know someone wants crabs, I point them in the direction. They do the same with bait with me. Try to look out for each other. There aren't many left.

Biggest changes?

09:56 – 15:00

Regulations are tough. But we do need to be regulated meaning fisherman. You have to learn to deal with them, and when you get an opportunity to catch well within the boundaries of the law you do it. Other things that hurt our development unfortunately are the tremendous amount of homes on the water. It's too late now. They can't be taken down. It does affect the habitat.

3rd thing in my eyes are the jet skiers. Too many of them and the boats are too fast. Certain areas should be preserved- not saying everything. But certain marsh areas. Very disturbing to birds, to fish. Everyone is entitled to fun but these things need to be regulated.

In Jamaica Bay, it being a national seashore, there's an area where jet skiers are not allowed in. there's plenty of room for them but do disturb the birds and the birds are such a big part of the ecosystem today. We caught fish because of the birds. Without them they don't have eyes. They see everything.

Other than that those are the changes. I'd like to see in Town of Hempstead some upgrades on our sewer system. I believe they are in the works. Because of the clam industry. Hopefully money can be acquired if not already, to upgrade sewer system up at Bay Park and Cedar Creek.

Other draw back in town of Hempstead, City of Long Beach, has an antiquated sewer system. They find that it's more cost effective to let raw sewage go and pay federal fines than to have a tertiary plant put up – which is state of the art. Things like that hurt everything. Not only fishing and clams, it's not healthy. You can have outbreaks of cholera.

With all the technology we have why not use it. I have seen discharge of things when I go to Long Beach. These days I don't see why people don't spend the money; taxes are there for a reason. Spend them wisely - we all benefit from it.

You come from a long line of bay house owners, can you tell me about your bay house? Some earliest memories.

Talking about the fishing station I was talking about earlier. Only commercial lease left in the town of Hempstead. Remsen bay house – my grandpa's last name. on Smith Marsh – right out of Monk Creek – reason it was built there because there was such a party boat fleet back in the 60s – easy access – they come by and get their killies, spearing, squid and go out there to go fishing.

As a young boy, it was nothing but great memories. Total of 11 of us out there. 11 cousins. 3 families. Stayed from Memorial Day to Labor Day. We would work would grandpa as young guys, girls kinds suffered because it wasn't an environment for little girls. They overcame it. It was a great way to like Tom Sawyer. Every day was an adventure. We would fish, clam, in evening go seining for bait, and go get our horseshoes. Grandma would make a meal everyday – sit down meal for 11 people. Great way to be brought up. There was no friction between us. My cousins are like siblings as opposed to nephews.

House built in 1958. Proud of that. House well maintained by a few friends. Still our family house and everything is clicking well. And on 23rd will have a ripping party.

15:01 – 18:43

You've worked on both the bay and the ocean, which do you prefer?

I like coming home at night. Nickname – Light Variable Tom. Light meaning winds and variable. Ocean is very unforgiving. Never been threatened or anything in it. I respect it. I'm more in my element in the bay. I do work in the ocean from time to time. Fill my bass tags in the fall with a gentleman out in Shinnecock – a commercial fisherman.

Some guys prefer the ocean, some bay, some do both. As time goes on I might have to back out in the ocean. Had a gillnetter, which I got rid of about 4 years ago, 30 ft boat. I'll probably buy another one someday. You go with what is clicking with you right now. As long as I'm still healthy I could keep doing what I'm doing. I'll show you a picture of the boat – have it up stairs.

Turned 56 years old – last week.

How long have you been working as a commercial fisherman? When I got out of college I tried...

We grew up on the marsh in the summers, something that I understand it, it becomes 2nd nature. Ocean done it – some skimming, gillnetting, some dragging. I guess it's a matter of preference. It doesn't mean that one day I won't have to go back to it. To work for someday else or for myself. Thankful I'm working.

Why are you a baymen? When I got out of college, 1977, I tried some other things – would always come back to this. As time went on, early 80s, economy seemed to be doing well. Fishing was very good. Went with it. Now I'm in it so going to stick with it to the end.

Is there a particular passion that fills you with open joy about being a fisherman? As time goes on, I realize there are more people in our corner than thought there were. Nancy being one of them. That's reassuring. With the regulations – we've had good management here in the town of Hempstead. I think we're an asset. We are treated that way. Hopefully we can keep on in our niche. All the guys I work with believe in putting out a good quality product, wild, no farm raised stuff, whether its bait or bass, which we try to get in the fall. Don't buy farm raised bass. Such a difference in texture of the meat. Chemicals. You get something from the ocean, it's going to be clean. That's the truth.

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