

JIMMY MILEWSKI
ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA
November 1999

Like a rusty diner on an abandoned highway, Erie's working-class neighborhoods look like they've seen better days. And they have. Early each morning, their maple-lined streets used to bustle as workers streamed to factories and mills, where they manufactured things that America needed.

From the same neighborhoods in this freshwater port city, other workers made their way down to their fishing boats, or the net shops, boat yards or processing plants, where the day's catch would be packaged for shipping to consumers in major cities, both to the east and the west.

Today, most of Erie's mills and factories are downsized or mothballed, and only a few offer productive work.

As for the fishing industry, the fleet had dwindled to just eight vessels by 1994, when the Pennsylvania State Legislature took away the netters' gear.

Jimmy Milewski was one of Erie's last fishermen. Milewski's father had worked in the town's steel mills and boiler shops; he also netted fish from the lake's waters during the spring run. Jimmy, 55, learned to fish on his father's boat as a kid. Later, he bought his own boat and, like his dad, both fished and worked for a wage.

In November 1999, he couldn't do either. A flood of cheap imported steel had priced Pennsylvania's steel out of the market, and tourism-crazed politicians had handed all of the fish and the waterfront to the sportfishing industry.

While we sat in Jimmy's kitchen, thumbing through his photo albums, Milewski told me what he thought about it:

"I only used to fish part-time. I was workin' in a shop. Well, it'd be more than "part-time"—I was workin' two jobs. Just before they put us out of business, I was workin' in a boiler shop here in Erie. I had 25 years there. The boiler shop went out of business, the commercial fishing went out of business, and I got a job at Erie Forge and Steel. Now I'm laid off from there, from them bringing all that foreign steel into the country. I'm out of a job right now.

My dad was a commercial fisherman. He worked in a steel mill too, in Erie. In fact, right now, I'm laid off from the place he used to work. Dad was workin' in a boiler shop when he started a commercial fishin' business up. He started with a small boat, a wood boat, and worked two jobs—in a boiler shop and commercial fishing.

When my brother got out of the service, he went into full-time fishing. In about 1950 they had the steel boat built, the Captain Jim. And my brother fished that up until about 1955, '56. Fishin' got really bad here then—they lost the blue pike, and whitefish got real bad. What happened?

It was pollution-related. Plus, these emerald smelt that they put into this lake, they devastated them pike too, eatin' the small fry. Mostly pollution.

Pollution's goin' on right now. A couple months back, we had big fish kills in Lake Erie. Our whitefish are dyin' off, bottoming up all over. Yeah, they're dyin' off, but they won't let us catch 'em, you know? You're talking thousands and thousands of fish all

over, whitefish, a lot of burbot or what we call eel pout, sheephead. They're saying it was a thermocline problem.

Now our seagulls are dyin', this ain't no small kill either—they retrieved 268 of them here, and it's a big thing over in Canada too. They're callin' it botulism, bacterial poisoning. So we've got big problems up here.

The lake's warmin' up. They've got a nuclear power plant that's contributing to it, that's why you might have had these whitefish dyin' off. Lake Erie has got warmer this year than it ever got in the history of the lake. Seventy-five, 76 degrees! Unbelievable.

You've got one nuclear power plant up here in Kingsville, Ohio, on Lake Erie. Lake Erie's only got one, I think. Down in Lake Ontario they've got three or four of 'em. That's changed the temperature of that lake down there. "Thermal pollution." They talk about global warming, where a couple degrees changes the climate? How about four or five degrees on the lakes, what do you think that does?

And we've got all these exotic species in here, comin' in from those ocean ships. The zebra mussels and stuff. The wild ducks right now, they want carcasses so they can test 'em. The ducks are dying—bluebills. They're eatin' these zebra mussels. They filter so much water that the poisons that are in that lake, the pollution is so highly concentrated in these zebra mussels that it's like eatin' a cyanide pill. Now your whitefish are eatin' 'em, your perch are eatin' these things.

I made a statement to these guys when they were puttin' us out o' business. I said, "You guys don't know it, but they're doin' us a favor puttin' us out of business because of what's happening to the ecology of that lake. At least we're gettin' some money out of this."

Down in Indiana, when they put them people out of business, they got nothing. They could have done that here. They were fishing in Lake Michigan, a little corner of it.

You know, this didn't just start recently. This originally started up on Lake Michigan back in the '50s, or maybe even earlier, with these sports groups. Pennsylvania was the last ones to be put out because we were fightin' 'em. Michigan got put out, then Ohio got put out, then they hit New York State, because they were weak down there. And about five or six years later, they got us here in Pennsylvania. After years and years, they just kept peckin' away at us, and they finally got us.

The commercial fishing industry made these ports. These cities were nothing but fishing villages at one time. All over here on the Great Lakes, they're all fishing ports.

The Captain Jim, I'm the namesake for that boat. That was our first steel boat. Fishin' got bad in the '60s and that's when that boat was sold. And the Jeanie D, my boat, I sold her last October. I was fortunate to sell it. I sold it to some Indians, some Ojibway Indians off of Owens Sound in Lake Huron. They have tribal fishin' rights up there, and no quotas.

They fish for whitefish and herring. They took my nets and bought some from [Bill] Munch too. And had a pretty good season up there.

My boat was probably valued at about, I don't know, it was only 37 feet long. I was fortunate to get \$15,000 out of it, at least I didn't lose on it. I could have turned it into a charter business, but it takes too much money by the time you figure your insurance, your dock rent. So I was better off to just sell the boat, take the money and that's it.

Man, they put the screws to us down here on dock rent. You're talkin' 2,500 bucks a year. We can't afford that. They said they were givin' us a break at that rate—commercial docks, you know? You could pay it when you were gillnettin'. But what are you gonna do?

The whole situation with the fishin' industry here, the sport people wanted us out of business, and they put us out of business. We even have proof that they threatened state legislators that if they didn't go along with them puttin' us out of business, *they* were gonna be bye-bye.

It's more than a *handful* of assholes that put us out of business. The Sons of Lake Erie, the Erie Downriggers, they wanted us out, they don't give a shit. There's more sport fishermen than there are commercial fishermen, so we had to go.

Harrisburg, that's where they put the screws to us. We went down to Harrisburg, before the Fish and Game Committee. They were totally against us from the beginning too. It was cut and dried, the Fish and Game committee told us right out, "We don't want you guys. We want you out of business." I forget the guy's name who said that. He was one of the directors at that time. They didn't like us, they wanted this to be a sport lake and that's it.

We had our meeting with the Fish and Game committee, and the next day the sportsmen had theirs. We couldn't sit in on their meeting because we were fishin' at that time. We had to get home, because we had nets in the lake.

Now, you think, these legislators, where are they gettin' their votes from? They're gettin' 'em from the sportsmen. They ain't gonna help the commercial fishermen. They said, "Well, we're not puttin' you out of business, we're just takin' your gill nets away."

Actually, what the story is, with the gill nets, they are very effective for fishing. They're mobile, you can pick 'em up and move 'em here and there, and you can fish 'em. But these trap nets, like Jerry's got, that's bullshit. They couldn't make money here years ago with them.

For the amount of money that we were makin', they bought us off for chump change. Jerry got the most money, about \$145,000; there's Shaw, he got about \$116,000; Munch got about \$126,000; Ronnie Zielinski got about \$45,000; Reggie Minor got about \$90,000; I got \$40,000. Donnie Zielinski, he fished from a small boat, I think he settled for about \$5,000. The eighth guy, Ray George, I'm not sure what he got.

The amount of money that they gave us was nowhere near enough to get involved in the trapnet business. You needed no less than a quarter million dollars just to get set up. And then there was no guarantee that you were going to make any money.

You needed a new boat, a low-profile boat where you can pull them nets inside and bail the fish out of 'em. And there was nowhere near enough money to buy a boat like that.

Me and Bill Munch, we went up to Ohio, and we talked to a trapnetter up there. And he told us all about it, he said, "Listen, you cannot make any money unless you own 20 traps." And you're talking \$7,000 a trap. Plus all your hooks, this gear, that gear. Then we don't know nothin' about it. We don't know nothin' about it!

So what we were gonna do, me and Bill Munch, we'd have taken and hired one o' these trapnetters and get him down here to show us what's goin' on. But we decided

against it. You can't make it with trap nets. You can't. Jerry's tryin' so hard it's unbelievable, and he's hurtin. Hurtin'!

How many pounds did they get? On your perch and your pike, they had us on a quota. Your walleye, they had us down to 16,000 pounds. That was a joke. That was one big quota that we all had to rush out and get what we could get—it wasn't 16,000 apiece. And that's ridiculous. Them sportsmen are takin' that many out in a week.

Perch, I don't know, the quota kept goin' down because they said the perch were disappearing. Let's use a figure like 24,000 pounds. Twelve ton among eight licenses! So we'd get that full, that was it—we weren't allowed to fish 'em the rest of the year.

There was no limit on whitefish, and there was a lot o' whitefish in the lake. See, the sportsmen could not catch 'em hook and line.

We were catchin' a lot o' whitefish. The last years we fished, you're talking hundreds of thousands of pounds, maybe a hundred ton even, between all of us boats. There wasn't a lot of money in 'em—50 cents a pound—but we were makin' a livin'.

They said our gill nets were “indiscriminate,” that they just catch all types of fish, and they were too effective. Which wasn't true, you know? We had a lot of arguments, but it's just that they want the lake to themselves and that's it, plain and simple. That ain't no bullshit, that ain't no lyin', they want that lake for sportfishin' and that's all.

They had the city council vote that we don't want gillnetters here in Pennsylvania. The city council! We didn't even know about it. I found out about it later and went up there and got a transcript of the meeting. And I said to the head of the city council, “Hey Bob, you voted on this?”

And he said, “Yeah, what about it?”

I said, “Where do you get the fuckin' right to try to put us out o' business, to take our livelihood away?” Oh, he didn't know what to say.

But that's what them sport groups did, they swung a lot of weight. Doctors, lawyers, you know, belong to these sport groups, and they went up there and talked to that city council: “We don't need these guys, it's gonna improve the tourism if we get rid of 'em. You'll catch more fish.”

“Alright, I believe you, yeah.”

They don't care about the consumer, who wants fresh fish. They figure, “They're gonna come in from some place.”

So where are all our fish comin' from now? Your perch, your pike? Canada.

Governor Ridge is from Erie, but he wasn't the one who put us out. It was Casey. Ridge wasn't in office yet. I told these guys, “Let's go over and talk face to face with Casey. He's got to sign that bill.”

See, he had a second chance on life, had a heart transplant. If we'd have talked to him, “Hey man, you got a second chance in life from God. How about not signin' this bill?” And I'll bet you he would not have signed that bill.

But all these people had him brainwashed anyhow. Tourism, you know, “We don't want 'em catchin' them fish.”

The Jeannie D, my old boat, had a six-cylinder Ford diesel. She was a steel hull with

an all-aluminum house. It's all covered to keep warm, with a wood stove. And I used to have skylights, for the light.

I used to leave my boat in the water the whole year. I had a "bubbler" on it. It looks like a five-gallon bucket, but it's got a propeller on it and what it does, it draws up the warm water from the bottom, circulates it and keeps it from freezin'. It's down in the water, on the bottom. Turn it on and it makes a big flush of water.

I used a Crossley net lifter, to pull the nets. They are made up in Kennebec, Maine. It's a hydraulic unit—your roller's outside and you pull up your nets as the boat moves.

You'd set about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, get out there the next morning at daybreak, pull, clean 'em up, set 'em back. I used to fish ten 40-yard nets to a box. That'd be 400 yards in a box, and maybe fish ten boxes, depending on how the fishin' was, how much fish you're catchin', how much scrap you're catchin'.

For perch, we'd fish 2 3/4-inch mesh nets, 24 meshes deep. That's about four feet deep, and we'd fish 'em in 50 foot of water or more.

We'd reel 'em to dry 'em. Monofilament twine, braided-plastic sidelines, polypropylene corks. I used to make some real colorful nets, I'd die my twine yellow.

I used to sell my fish to Billy Munch. He owned the company, Munch Fish Company. His father started it.

Billy, he was havin' troubles with his boat after they shut us down. He wanted to hang onto it, but the thing is, the dock rent was eatin' 'im up—\$3,000 a year. The boat's rustin' away, and I says, "Hey Bill, listen, take what you can get and get rid of it, just put it out of your mind and get rid of it. You're gonna hold onto it, the dock rent's gonna eat you up. Get rid of it!"

So he did. But you know who he sold it to? He sold it to another commercial fisherman here. The guy come into some money, his aunt died, and then he got his money from the gill-net settlement. He's in a bar business, and somehow he's writin' it off.

Bill sold the Joann for \$30,000. It'd cost you a quarter million dollars to build a boat like that today. That was built here in Pennsylvania—they put all the boatbuilders out of business here too!

We used to have to fill out a daily fish report. Now they're startin' to monitor these sport guys. They're making these charterboat guys do that and they're startin' to say, "Holy shit, look at the fish they're catchin'!"

The charter business? I could not see making enough money. You'd have to re-power the boat to make it faster. You're talkin' no less than \$15,000, plus the gear. I'd have to take and open it up, for the pole fishin'.

I weighed every angle of it. I have buddies that knew all about it, that had boats, and said they'd help me. But I said, "Hey, screw it."

Besides, I didn't have no money to put into it, because Bill and I weren't acceptin' our money. And Jerry was holdin' off too. He wasn't gonna take his money. Then he realized, "If I'm gonna go into this trapnet business, I'm gonna need the money."

Out of the eight, five of the people took their payoff four years ago. Bill Munch, Ray George and me, we could have taken it and put it into an IRA or something. But the three of us held out because we have a good chance of gettin' this extra money.

See, they kept on collecting money from the sportsmen, after they put us out of business. Now there's \$248,000 that the Fish Commission wants to keep. But we say,

“Hey, it’s for us.”

We couldn’t accept our money while we were fighting them, but now we did go ahead and accept our money. But we’ve got state legislators, a couple of senators, behind us, and we’re pretty sure we’re gonna get this money.

End of edited transcript

Raw interview of Jimmy A. Milewski, Erie, PA 11/99:

Harrisburg, that’s where they put the screws to us.

The Captain Jim, I’m the namesake for that boat, that was the first boat. Fishin’ got bad in the 60s and that’s when that boat was sold. And the Jeanie D, my boat, I sold her last October. I was fortunate to sell it, I sold it to some Indians, some Ojibwa Indians off of Owens Sound, Lake Huron. They have tribal fishing rights up there.

My boat was probably valued at about, I don’t know, it was only 37-feet long. I was fortunate to get \$15,000 out of it, at least I didn’t lose on it. The reason why I didn’t keep it, I could have turned it into a charter business but it takes too much money by the time you figure your insurance, your dock rent. Man, they put the screws to us down here on dock rent. You’re talkin’ \$2,500 bucks a year, we can’t afford that. So I was better off to just sell the boat, take the money and that’s it. They said they were givin’ us a break at that rate, yeah, commercial docks. You could pay it when you were gillnettin’ you know. But what are you gonna do?

They’re fishin’ it up on Lake Huron right now. Lance Root, he bought it. They have tribal fishin’ rights there, and no quotas. They fish for whitefish, herring, they took my nets too and bought some from Munch too. They had a pretty good season up there.

My dad was a commercial fisherman. He worked in a steel mill too. In Erie. In fact, right now, I’m laid off from the place he used to work. He used to be in the boiler business, my dad started a commercial fishin’ business up, he started with a small boat, a wood boat. He worked in a shop, worked two jobs, commercial fishing, worked in a shop. and when my brother got out of the service, full-time fishing.

In about 1950 they had the steel boat built, the Captain Jim. And my brother fished that all the way up until about 1955, ’56.

Fishin’ got really bad here, they lost the blue pike, whitefish got real bad. It was pollution-related. Plus, these emerald smelt that they put into this lake here they devastated them pike too, eatin’ the small fry, well, mostly pollution.

Pollution’s goin’ on right now. A couple months back we had big fish kills in Lake Erie. Our whitefish are dyin’ off, bottoming up all over, yeah. Yeah, they’re dyin’ off but they won’t let us catch ‘em, you know?

There’s a little article about it. You’re talking thousands and thousands of fish all over, whitefish, a lot of burbot, or what we call eel pout, sheephead. They’re sayin’ it was a “thermoclyne problem,” which I think is BS. Now, our seagulls are dyin’, this ain’t no small kill either. They retrieved 268 of ‘em here, and it’s a big thing over in Canada too. They’re callin’ it botulism, bacterial poisoning. So we’ve got big problems.

The whole situation with the fishin’ industry here, the sport people wanted us out of

business and they put us out of business. We even have proof that they threatened state legislators that if they didn't go along with them puttin' us out of business, that *they* were gonna be bye bye.

Here's my attorney, you ought to take his name down and have a talk with him. Elliott Segal (sp.) 454-1500. These are all the names of the 8 guys who got put out of business by this. The reason I've got this letter right now is, see, they collected too much money. See everybody took their payoff, five of the people took their payoff. But Bill Munch, Ray George, and me, we did not accept our money. We've been fighting them for five years and because of this extra money deal we could not accept our money.

So now we did accept our money but we've got state legislators, Senator Jane Earl and a couple of other senators behind us, to get this money. That extra \$248,000, the Fish Commission wants to keep it, we say, "Hey, it's for us."

We're pretty sure we're gonna get this money. But like I say, the three of us held out. A legislator? Dombrowskie? No, he died. You'd have to go to Bebko-Jones. She was one of them that was threatened, because she was new in office.

It's more than a *handful* of assholes that put us out of business. Concilla, a conflict of interest. He's the one that did the threatenin'. He's on the fish commission and runs charter boats.

This letter's new, he sent it out October 4 to the Fish and Game committee. Concilla's one of the Sons of Lake Erie, the Erie Downriggers, a fishing club. They wanted us out, they don't give a shit.

Actually, what the story is, with the gillnets, they are very effective for fishing. They're mobile, you can pick 'em up and move 'em here and there and you can fish 'em. But these trapnets, like Jerry's got, that's bullshit. He was told he couldn't make any money here.

They couldn't make money years ago. The amount of money that we were gettin', you know, they bought us off for chump change here. Jerry got the most money, about \$145,000; there's Shaw, he got about \$116,000; Munch got about \$126,000; Ronnie Zielinski got about \$45,000; Minor got about \$90,000; I got \$40,000.

I only used to fish part time, I was workin' in a shop. Well, it'd be more than "part-time," I was workin' two jobs. And the amount of money that they gave us was nowhere near enough to get involved in the trapnet business.

You needed no less than a quarter million dollars just to get set up. And then there was no guarantee that you were going to make any money the first year. You needed a new boat.

Jerry's boat, he tried but that boat of his ain't right. I had a nice boat, similar to that where you could cut the house off. You need a low-profile boat where you can pull them nets inside and bail the fish out of them trapnets. Low sides. And nowhere near enough money.

Me and Bill Munch, we went up to Ohio, and we talked to trapnetters up there. Dean Cook, his name was. We had videos and everything we got up there. And he told us all about it, he said, "Listen, you cannot make any money unless you own 20 nets, 20 traps. And you're talking \$7,000 a trap. Plus all your hooks, this gear, that gear, then we don't know nothin' about it. We don't know nothin' about it!"

So what we got to do, what we were gonna do, me and Bill Munch, we'd a taken and hired one o' these trapnetters and get him down here to show us what's goin' on.

I don't want to speak bad about Jerry but he's a fuckin' hardhead, he knows everything. He went up the lake, he bought nets, and he bought somebody else's junk that they didn't want. And he had all kind of trouble here.

He started in 96, 97, and in he done good. But he didn't make no money the first two years. He didn't even pay for fuel. It's sickening, it's sickening. He wasn't doin' it right, he didn't know what he was doin'. But he's such a hard ass, he ain't gonna go ask for help.

Last year he left his traps in the lake. He lost a couple o' traps, he lost the leads. You're talkin' thousands and thousands, maybe \$20,000 worth of nets that he lost. You got to have them nets out of that lake right now. Come November get 'em out, get 'em out. No, he's gonna leave 'em there. When that lake freezes up, and that ice starts scrapin' that bottom.

We had a mild winter last year, that lake didn't freeze. The lake's warmin' up, they've got a nuclear power plant that's contributing to it, that's why you might have had these whitefish dyin' off.

Lake Erie has got warmer this year than it ever got in the history of the lake. Seventy-six, 75 degrees, unbelievable, unbelievable, yeah. You've got one nuclear power plant up here in Kingsville, Ohio, on Lake Erie. Lake Erie's only got one, I think. Down in Lake Ontario they've got three or four of 'em. That's changed the temperature of that lake down there. Thermal pollution. They talk about global warming where a couple o' degrees changes the climate. How about 4 or 5 degrees on the lakes, what do you think that does?

And we've got all these exotic species in here, comin' in from these ocean ships. The zebra mussels and stuff. The wild ducks right now, they want carcasses so they, the ducks are dying, they're eating these zebra mussels. They filter so much water that the poisons that are in that lake, in that water, the pollution is so highly concentrated in these zebra mussels that it's like eating a cyanide pill. Now your whitefish are eatin' 'em, your perch are eatin' these things.

I made a statement to these guys when they were puttin' us out of business, I said you guys don't know it but they're doin' us a favor puttin' us out of business. At least we're getting some money out of this. Because of what's happening to the ecology of that lake, what's happening to me.

We went down to Harrisburg, before the Fish and Game Committee. They always had a F & G Committee. And they were totally against us from the beginning too. Here's the guy who's the Executive Director of the F&G committee right now. The sports had their own meeting with 'em. We had a meeting with the Fish and Game committee, and the next day the sportsmen had theirs. And at that time, we couldn't sit in on it, they weren't sittin' in on our meeting, or was there one guy?

But we could not sit in on their meeting because we were fishin' at that time, we had to get home. Because we had nets in the lake and stuff, you know. It was cut and dried. Hey, the Fish and Game committee told us right out, "We don't want you guys." We want you out of business, they told us that. I forget his name, he was one of the directors at that

time. They didn't like us, they wanted this to be a sport lake and that's it.

You know, this didn't just start recently. This originally started up on Lake Michigan back in the the 50s, or maybe even earlier, with these sports groups. Pennsylvania was the last ones to be put out because we were fightin' 'em. Michigan got put out, then Ohio got put out, then they hit New York state because they were weak down there, and about 5 or 6 years later, they got us here in Pennsylvania.

Now you think, these legislators, where are they getting' their votes from? They're getting' 'em from the sportsmen. They ain't gonna help the commercial fishermen.

They said, "Well, we're not puttin' you out of business, we're just takin' your gillnets away." Well, you can't make it with trapnets, you can't.

The pounds? On your perch and your pike, they had us on a quota. Your walleye they had us down to 16,000 pounds. That's a joke! That was one big quota that we all had to rush out and get what we could get, it wasn't 16,000 apiece. And that's ridiculous. Them sportsmen are takin' that many out in a week. Perch, I don't know, it kept goin' down because they said the perch were disappearing.

Let's use a figure like 24,000 pounds. Twelve ton among 8 licenses. So we'd get that full, that was it, we weren't allowed to fish for 'em. There was no limit on whitefish, and there was a lot o' whitefish in the lake. So we had to start fishin' for them, and we were catchin' a lot o' whitefish. Jerry would know the figures, how many whitefish were caught. You're talking maybe 100,000 lbs. maybe 100 ton even, between all of us boats, we caught here the last years we fished, of whitefish. There was a lot of whitefish, we were all catchin'. There wasn't a lot of money in 'em, 50 cents a pound, but we were makin' a livin'. They could not catch 'em hook and line.

They said our gillnets were indiscriminate, that they'd just catch all types of fish, and they were too effective. We had a lot of arguments. It's just that they want the lake to themselves, and that's it plain and simple, that ain't no bullshit, that ain't no lying. They want that lake for sportfishin' and that's all. They don't care about the consumers who want fresh fish and stuff.

"They're gonna come in from some place," they say. So where are all our fish comin' from now? Canada.

The fish come from Canada, your perch, your pike. They're raisin' perch in farms now. They're not as good as what you're gonna get out of the lake.

If these other guys were here, we could talk a week about this stuff. But they wanted us out of business, tourism. They had the city council vote at city council that we don't want gillnetters here in Pennsylvania. The city council!

We didn't even know about it, and I found out about it and I went up there and got a transcript, this copy, and I said to the head of city council, his name was Bob Braybenner (sp), I said, "Hey Bob. You voted on this?"

And he said, "Yeah, what about it?"

I said, "Where do you get the fuckin' right to try to put us out of business, to take our livelihood away?"

Oh, he didn't know what to say. But that's what them sport groups did, they swung a lot of weight. Doctors, lawyers, you know, belong to these sports groups and they went up there and talked to that city council. "We don't need these guys, it's gonna improve the tourism if we get rid of 'em, you know. "You'll catch more fish."

“Alright, I believe you, yeah.”

And after years and years, they just kept peckin’ away at us, they finally got us.

Bill Munch had the transcript of the city council meeting. I think he gave it to Elliott. The lawyer’s got the box of all the goodies from day one when this was started.

Bill sold the Joann for \$30,000. It’d cost you a quarter million dollars to build a boat like that today. That was built here in Pennsylvania, they put all the boatbuilders out of business too here. Yeah, it’s a conspiracy, it’s a conspiracy in the whole country. Anything that’s productive.

I’m workin’ in the steel mill, they’re bringin’ in all this foreign steel. I’m out of job right now, I’m laid off. I’m not collectin’ unemployment, I ran out of unemployment. But I’m not going to work any time soon, laughing.

I’ve got a nice place up in the Allegheny mountains. In Bradford, about halfway, maybe not quite halfway between here and Harrisburg.

Don’t travel at night through the mountains right now. It’s dangerous [deer].

If you want a picture of me, use this one. The Jeannie D, that’s my old boat. That’s how you pull gillnets. That’s a Crosley net lifter. Them are made up in Kennebec, Maine. Hydraulic, hydraulic unit. Your roller’s outside and you pull your nets as the boat moves. It’s all covered to keep warm, a wood stove.

Photos of perch in a gillnet.

We’d set about 3 or 4 o’clock in the afternoon, get out there the next morning at 7 AM, 6 AM, daybreak, pull, clean ’em up, set ’em back. I used to fish 10 40-yard nets to a box. That’d be 400 yards in a box, and maybe fish ten boxes. Depending on how the fishin’ was, how much fish you’re catchin’, how much scrap you’re catchin’. Jeannie D, steel hull with an aluminum house. A net spreader.

The retail business, you know you can’t just sell fish. It’s not like it used to be.

Jerry still ain’t gonna make it. He ain’t gonna do it.

The only magazine that has anything to do with the Great Lakes now, it comes out of Canada. This year they had a good hatch o’ walleye. It comes out once every two months. Net and Twine, the official publication of the Ontario Commercial Fisheries Association.

Billy Munch: “He’s havin’ troubles. The thing is the dock rent was eatin’ ’im up, \$3,000 a year. The boat’s rustin’ away. And I says, “Hey Bill, listen Bill, take what you can get and get rid of it, just put it out of your mind and get rid of it. You’re gonna hold onto it, the fuckin’ dock rent’s gonna eat you up.”

He’s in a divorce with his old lady, she gets half o’ the boat, I says, “Hey, get rid of it.”

So he did. But you know who he sold it to? He sold it to another commercial fishermen, Ronnie Zielinski. The guy come into some money, his aunt died, and then he got his money from commercial fishing. He’s in a bar business, somehow he’s writin’ it off, you know?

(Still looking at photos): Skylights, I used to have 'em on my boat. I had a 6-cylinder Ford diesel.

A golden whitefish, we used to get them once in a while.

Donnie Zielinski. He's getting' a settlement from the state too, cause he had a license. Fished from a small boat.

Just before they put us out of business, I was workin' in a boiler shop here in Erie, I had 25 years there. And the boiler shop went out of business, and the commercial fishing went out of business, and I applied and got a job at Erie Forge and Steel here, and like I said, I'm laid off. Lettin' all that foreign steel come into the country.

[Pat] Buchanan, I think he'd do this country good. He might be a racist like they say, but...I didn't vote for Clinton, I can tell you that.

Who took the picture of me? Probably one of my nephews, yeah. Bob Slowikowski. I shot a lot of pictures toward the end. 95's the last year that we fished.

Jerry brought that boat from up here in Beaver, Michigan, and it has never been out of the water since. 6 or 7 years. He got it about '94. And how many times has it almost sank? I mean to tell you.

Bob Minor, he's in Arizona. His kid's still here, I just talked to him yesterday.

The charter business, I could not see making enough money. You'd have to repower the boat to make it faster, You're talkin' no less than \$15,000, plus the gear. I'd have to take and open it up, for the pole fishin'. I weighed every angle of it. I have buddies that knew all about, that had boats and said they'd help me. But I said, "Hey, fuck it."

And I'm glad I did. The year I sold it, I sold the boat in October and the next week I fell down at camp and broke my fuckin' leg. I was really hurtin'.

I used to sell fish to Munch. Bill and I we weren't acceptin' our money, so we didn't have no money to put into it. And Jerry was holdin' off too. He wasn't gonna take his money. Then he realized, "If I'm gonna go into this trapnet business, I'm gonna need the money."

So he took the money. The poor guy's hurtin', hurtin', hurtin', hurtin'.

These pictures are from when we went up to Sandusky Ohio. Here's one o' the trucks to load the nets, the nets on the dock.

Here they are workin' on the nets.

A trapnet boat, cabin right in the front.

Bill's installing fiberoptics, communication lines in buildings and stuff. He went to school for that. But he's not working full time.

Here's the Doris M, that was for Bill Shaw. He's a security guard for Great Lakes Armor, that's what he's doin' now. But he's old enough to retire.

Polish names? Yeah. Bill Munch, he's German and Italian. Bill Shaw, he's part Polish and English, I think. Minor I don't know what the hell he is.

These are whitefish nets. We reel 'em to dry 'em. Monofilament twine, braided plastic sidelines, polypropylene corks. I used to make some real colorful nets. I used to dye my twine yellow.

Munch is about 46 years old, a good guy. He owned the company, Munch Fish Company that we used to sell to. His father started it.

I used to leave my boat in the water the whole year. I used to have a bubbler on it. It

looks like a five-gallon bucket, but it's got a propeller on it and what it does, it draws up the bottom warm water, circulates it and keeps it from freezin'. It's down in the water, on the bottom. Turn it on and it makes a big flush of water.

Set nets with a spreader. We're only in about 50 foot of water here. The nets are 24 mesh, 2 3/4-inch, maybe four foot deep. Or even shallower ones, because of the scrap. We get scrap here, oh fuck, you wouldn't believe it. Shad, sheephead, white perch.

[The picture of Jimmy]: That's what we call an eel pout, or a ling or a burbot. And that's a whitefish right there. They also call 'em too freshwater cod.

How old am I? 55 years old. My wife's a pharmacist technician.

Fishing's a full-time job, you're up at 4 a.m. Everybody else took their money four years ago. We could have taken it and put it into an IRA or something. But we fought and fought and fought and we have a good chance of getting' that money.

Gov. Ridge is from Erie but he wasn't the one who put us out. It was Casey. Ridge wasn't in office. I told these guys, "Let's go over and talk face to face with Casey."

See, he had a second chance on life, he got a black man's heart. He's got to sign that bill. But all these people had him brainwashed anyhow. Tourism, "we don't want them catchin' them fish." But if we'd have talked him, "Hey man, you got a second chance in life from God, how about not signin' this bill," and I'll bet you he would have not signed that bill.

I got this boat in 87, 89, and fishin' just kept goin' downhill, downhill, downhill. They kept cuttin' our quota, cuttin' our quota, I said they're doin' us a favor puttin' us out of business.

Down in Indiana, the state of Indiana, they put them people out of business, they got nothing. They could have done that here. They were fishing in Lake Michigan. A little corner of it.

Steve Horvath (sp) up in Ohio, he was gillnetter, and trap netter.

Originally, they limited you to just 10 trapnets per license. I could have gotten ... another guy with his license...end of tape...[Jerry], they feel sorry for him, they want to see him make it. I mean the guy's tryin' so hard it's unbelievable.

This commercial fishing industry made these ports, that made these cities at one time. These were nothing but fishing villages at one time. All over here on the Great Lakes, they're all fishing ports. All fishing ports.

But the way things are going, if we can get the goods on this guy Concilla, there may be a possibility to get back into gillnetting here. They may issue some permits. They had done that up in Michigan. They put the people out of business, then they found out, "Hey, nobody's harvesting these whitefish," so they reissued some gillnet permits up there.

But I'm not getting any younger. Do you think I want to get back in the business? I'll be 56. An investment, a new boat, build new nets, blah blah blah?

I'm the same age as Jerry, we went to high school together. His stepfather, who he named his boat after, Big Tony, used to work on our boat, the Captain Jim. Jerry used to come out with him, because Tony used to say, "Hey, get on that boat, it'll keep you out of trouble."

So it sort of rubbed off on him, you know?

We used to have to fill out a daily fish report. Now they're startin' to monitor these sport guys. They're making these charterboat guys do that and they're startin' to say, "Holy Shit, look at the fish they're catchin'!"

Roger Kenyon, that son of a bitch. Liar. They programmed him how to lie. How bad things really were, and blah blah blah to put us out of business. He's one of these that to save his ass, he does what he's told to do and that's it. He doesn't speak out for himself.

We had meetings with the sportsmen and we're asking this Kenyon questions and he couldn't answer 'em and he started lying, and Jerry said "Hey, you're lyin', don't tell us that shit." Yeah. And he got all red in the face. This is with these Sons of Lake Erie and stuff. Just terrible.

But there's more sport fishermen than there are commercial fishermen so we had to go.

Most people want Mrs. Paul's fish, already prepared. Van DeCamps, we have one of those here in Erie, all breaded portions, throw 'em in the microwave, they're ready.

People don't want to clean fish like they did years ago. Old timers come from the old country and stuff, you know? That was a part of their heritage, they ate a lot of fish, they survived on fish.

I'm already third, fourth generation. My father's mother came to this country during the war. Also, my mother's mother came to this country when she was about 3 years old. My mother's mother was Ukrainian.

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