

Interview with James Reilly, commercial fisherman

Occupation: commercial fisherman

Port Community: Oceanside, NY and Atlantic City, NJ

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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Location: Port Jefferson, New York

Project: The Graying of the Fleet Part II: How and Why Young Fishermen Choose to Fish?

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. Today is February 13, 2019. We're in Port Jefferson, New York. We're sitting here with James Reilly. Could you please state your occupation?

James Reilly [JR]: I'm a commercial fisherman.

SS: Is that fulltime or part-time?

JR: Fulltime.

SS: Fulltime commercial fisherman? And what is your homeport or ports, if there are multiples ones?

JR: My boat is homeported in New York, New York. I do a lot of fishing out of Oceanside, New York and Atlantic City, New Jersey.

SS: What boat is that? What's the name of it?

JR: It's the fishing vessel Ocean Girl.

SS: Ocean Girl? Ok. How old are you?

JR: I'm thirty-three years old.

SS: Thirty-three. Just briefly, what is your educational background?

JR: I have a high school diploma.

SS: Alright. Are you the owner of that vessel, the captain, or crew?

JR: Captain.

SS: Captain of that vessel? Who's the owner?

JR: The name of the company is Winter Harbor Brands. It's owned by Barney Truex. Do you want to know their names?

SS: No, no need.

JR: It's owned by a company that's called Winter Harbor Brands, but it's really owned by Sea Watch International.

SS: What kind of gear and species are you targeting?

JR: We target surf clams and ocean quahogs. We dredge them with hydraulic dredges.

SS: Ok, great. Now that we've established the basics, do you want to tell me your story? You can start from the start, or wherever you'd like to.

JR: That's fine with me. I've been fishing my entire life. Aside from a job at a deli in high school for a year, it's all I've ever done. I worked with my dad my entire career until recently. I guess I was like thirteen or fourteen when I started on the boat with him, where I was getting paid. I always was on the boat helping from the time--there's pictures of me on a boat that he was building, where I must have been two years old. I was bred to do it for the most part. I started fishing when I was a teenager. I didn't like it at first. As a kid, I loved being on the water, but when it came down to doing the work, I was like, "Oh man, this is a lot of work." Probably by the time I was seventeen years old, that's when I was like, "Ok, the money's good. I can do this." Then, probably by the time I was twenty, I was in love with it. There was nothing else that I was going to go do. I had gone to college for a semester and it just wasn't for me. I came home and I think I might have worked construction with my uncle for a bit. I wound up getting a job with my dad because someone got hurt or fired, I don't know. I was nineteen. That was April. I'm thirty-three now. I was nineteen then, so fourteen or fifteen years. Ever since then, I've been fishing, and it's been on that boat. I mean, I grew up on that boat.

SS: That's the boat that you work on now?

JR: Yeah.

SS: Ok, so your dad used to run it?

[03:50]

JR: My dad ran it.

SS: So you've taken your dad's exact same job?

JR: Yeah. He told me, "You teach someone something, you like to see them succeed. You like to see them excel at what they're doing." He's like, "I've taught you so well." He's like, "I'm

so proud.” He’ll be the first one to tell you that when we were fishing together, I was out-catching him and it was a noticeable thing, and it got to the point where he felt like he succeeded. He was like, “Alright, I did my job. I can stand out of the way” and hand it over to me. I’ve been running the boat since I was twenty. I had all this experience on deck throughout my teenage years and he wanted me to get in the wheelhouse because our trips started getting longer. It was going from fill the boat in a couple of hours, depending on where you were. If you were in the state fishery, that would be quick. In the federal fishery, maybe ten hours, which is still a good trip. But then it was getting to the point where we were fishing for fifteen, sixteen hours, fishing for twenty hours. He was like, “We’re going to get to the point where you’re going to have to run the boat, because we’re going to be out here for a while.”

SS: That was because the resource was becoming scarcer?

JR: It was changing.

SS: Was it farther away?

JR: Well, if you look into the surf clam fishery, that’s what they said is going on. People in the fishery have witnessed it. I’ve seen what’s going on. It’s not that the clams are disappearing.

SS: They’re just moving? Is it temperature-related?

JR: More than likely. That’s what I think. Granted, there’s not as many clams in the ocean as there was in the heydays, even twenty years ago. But it’s still a sustainable resource. There’s still plenty of young clams out there. There are more clams out there than I ever remember, and I’ve done this all my life. I’ve heard history of the fishery, things that have happened in different areas. In my eyes, the ocean is poised to set up big time, but that’s just my opinion, because from what I’ve been told, clams spawn when they’re younger, at least more. I don’t know if it’s true, but this is the idea that I’m going with. I think it’s ready to set up big time, because there’s young clams everywhere you go. I have a lot of knowledge of this fishery. I’ve been in it forever. I could go on forever.

[07:15]

SS: This is the only fishery that you’ve done?

JR: I’ve done other stuff. This is my bread and butter. I do other stuff on the side, like I do some horseshoe crabbing. I might do some bay scalloping, which I haven’t done. I horseshoe crabbed this year and I’m planning to do it again.

SS: So that’s just you operating inshore off your own license?

JR: Yeah, and also, my dad and I bought a gillnet boat a couple of years ago. We’ve been doing the striped bass fishery and things like that. He’s not sure what he wants to do with it. He may want to sell it. He may want to keep it. Honestly, I see what it takes to run a boat, and the costs and everything that go into it, and I look at my situation that I have with the company that I’m with. I’m the youngest captain in the company. From here, Atlantic City, and New Bedford.

SS: How many captains are there? How many vessels?

[08:21]

JR: Twenty-something. All these guys are old. There might be a few in their forties. Most of them are in their fifties, sixties. My dad was sixty-five or sixty-six when he left. This is why I'm looking at it the way I do, because I see opportunity coming, because there's bigger boats and larger vessels and I'll be able to be a part of this, so it only makes sense. In my fishery, comparatively, I run one of the smaller boats. Are you familiar with the surf clam fishery?

SS: I know very little about that fishery.

[09:10]

JR: Back in the eighties, my boat was what you wanted. Things have changed since then. You have boats that catch five times what my boat catches.

SS: How long is yours?

JR: My boat is seventy-three feet. That's what it's documented as.

SS: And these newer, bigger ones are about how long?

JR: Anywhere from a hundred to 150, 160 feet. They just built one that is 158.

SS: Big difference.

JR: Big difference. You go from doing thirty, thirty-four cages per trip. Each cage is thirty-two bushels. You go from doing thirty-something cages a trip on my boat, to where the new boats can do upwards of two hundred. So there's an opportunity there, especially if this fishery goes the way that a lot of other fisheries have gone, where there's consolidated licenses and whatnot. If it's viable to move people or downsize and use larger boats, I feel like isn't that what the government wants the fisheries to do, with the way that everything is regulated now? They want big boat fleets. They want permits stacked on top of permits stacked on top of permits on one boat.

SS: You see that as an opportunity?

JR: No, not in that. Well, I see it as an opportunity for someone who's in it, for someone like me who's a hired gun. But I don't see it as the best option. I don't think that what has happened in New England with the groundfishing and all that—I mean, I understand the need to change things, but I feel like a lot of people didn't get a fair shake with the catch shares. You hear the horror stories. That's another reason that I look at it as owner versus hired. I don't have that risk. I won't lose everything that I have. It's almost like that's the way I see a lot of fishing going. There's a lot of owner-operators. It's no longer owner-operated. It's changing. It's not necessarily good for everyone who's in the business, for someone who's a captain who has knowledge. There's only so many people who know how to run

boats. There's only so many people who know how to catch clams. There's only so many people who know how to tow a net. If I went on a dragger and tried to catch fish, I wouldn't be able to just do it. It's kind of like a specialty. That has really bothered me, what the government has done to a lot of the fishermen. Why was it that they weren't listened to? They were telling you, "This is going to ruin." Exactly what they said was going to happen happened. Do you know what was the percentage? How many licenses were there at the start of catch shares and how many are there now? It's got to be more than fifty percent that are gone. It has to be. There's no way. How is that right? It's not like if anything changes, these people are going to get their permits back and these people are going to get their boats back. They're gone! You've pushed people out of the industry. It's not right. Fishing's like the oldest. How many professions are there that date back further than fishing? Why do we have to eat foreign fish? Why? Why is ninety percent of the seafood imported? It's kind of like we take this great resource that we have, and we can't harvest enough to feed our nation. Is that what it is? I guess, by the numbers? Is that really what it is?

SS: Right, or is the system just not working for local people?

[14:46]

JR: Right. Is that what it is? I love the people that have figured out direct marketing and the owner-operator that said, "Ok, I've got to adapt," and all of a sudden, they're selling straight to these guys across the street, straight to the restaurant, without the middleman. I'm sorry for them [the middleman], but I'm pro-fisherman. I know they're a part of it, but they'll adapt too. It's not like [the fishermen] they'll sell all of their fish. It would be a good thing for everyone. He's going to have less fish. He can charge more for it. He might get a better product. I'm all for things changing for the better. It's great that they figured that out. When my dad and I first got that boat that we bought, we had a gillnet boat—we still have it—I tried to convince him. "Hey, let's direct market this stuff. Let's do this. Let's do that." In order to do that, you need your setup to do it. He never wanted to get set up to do it. That's fine, ok. He didn't want to put the investment into it, which I understand. If I were to do it on my own—we were more of a partnership, he put more money in than I did—but if I were to do it on my own, that's what I would look to do. I feel like if you're going to get into fishing, depending on what you do, that's kind of the best way to do it.

SS: Direct marketing? Control your own market?

[17:00]

JR: As much as you can, because I don't know what the markup is, but I know people are making at least a few dollars on that fish. Why can't you keep it in your pocket? If I were to go that route fulltime or even just on my own as a secondary type of option that I would do on days off or time off, weather, I would try to direct market whatever I could. I think that's a great idea.

SS: Do you know what kind of permits you would need in this area to get set up to do direct marketing? How much of a hurdle is that?

JR: There's a shipper-dealer permit that you need. What you do is going to determine what kind of facility you need. If you're shucking scallops, you're going to need a sanitized facility.

They're going to come and inspect it, so you'd have to build out a shucking place where you're going to do it. If you're storing a lot of clams, you're going to need refrigeration. If you're not storing anything, if you're just getting it and being the middleman, or just taking your stuff from that day and going straight to restaurants, I believe all you need is a shipper-dealer permit. That's for New York State.

SS: Yeah, it's different everywhere.

[18:42]

JR: Now that's only buying New York state fish from New York state waters. If you want to buy out of state, that's different. If you want to buy federal, you need a federal dealer's permit. So you'd be limited in what you can buy. That's what everyone would look at, is what you want to do. If you want to stay within the parameters of the law, you have to understand it. It may not be true. You may be able to buy from whoever. I don't know. They may just have to have a certain license. New York is strange.

SS: Was your dad the first in the family to fish, or were there other generations before him?

JR: My grandfather wasn't a commercial fisherman, but he has an avid fisherman. That's where my dad got his love of fishing was from him. He was a painter, my grandfather, and he went hard-clamming with my dad—quahogging, whatever you guys call it up there—and halfway through the day he looked at my dad, he said "Jimmy, more power to you, son. I can't do that. I'm going to stick to my painting. That's too much for me. I'm proud of you for doing that. You go and do what you got to do." Because my father was making more money than my grandfather, as a teenager in high school, catching clams on the bay. So my grandfather said, "I'll try it. Doesn't matter how much money. That's not for me." It took a certain type of person, at least in my dad. You have to be tough to make a living on the bay. That's where it started in my family, was on the bay. I could tell you his background if you want.

SS: Maybe just briefly, since it explains part of yours.

JR: He started on the bay. He bought his own surf clam boat for the sound. That was in the eighties. He patent-tonged. Then he moved into dredging. He was one of the two or three people to start the fishery over here, basically. It was him and one other guy, John Dempsey. He did that for I don't know how long, and what happened was the fishery got kind of bombarded by everyone. There were out-of-state people, people from Connecticut, Rhode Island, everywhere. By the time they were done, there were probably sixty boats. It got wiped out. It eventually came back. But they moved on. He worked for another company, and then a guy who actually runs one of these ferries, Eddie O'Neal, they were working together at a company and he asked him if he wanted to work. "There's a guy who's thinking of bringing a boat up to New York to dredge surf clams. Would you want to work for the guy?" My dad said, if it was who he thought it was, then he would be interested, and it wound up being the owners of the company, Sea Watch. They didn't own Sea Watch at the time. He started working for them in maybe 1991 or 1992. That was basically it. He started here and went to the ocean and wound up getting the Ocean Girl in probably '93 or '94 maybe, and that was that. He ran that boat until he decided to retire. That's his little brief history, and it kind of ties into mine. His father gave him the love for it, and I got the love for

it from him. My uncle fished with us. My cousin. It was a family thing. Fishing's always been a very family-oriented thing for me, because I fished for my dad all my life, up until the last couple of years, most of the time. I mean, I fished without him, but most of the time I fished with him. Like my crew, I feel like we should feel like we're family. I feel like if you don't have that with your crew, if you don't have that "I would die for you" mentality, I feel I like having that type of cohesiveness. Running boats and being around people, I feel like regardless of people's ability—stuff can be taught—if you get a good match and someone that's capable of doing a job, even if you have to teach them, it really works out better than having a super experienced person that knows what they're doing but doesn't necessarily mesh with your program or what you have going on.

SS: Who do you have for crew, age-wise?

[24:28]

JR: I have two fifty-year-olds.

SS: It's three of you on the boat?

JR: Three of us on the boat.

SS: Has that generally been the case, that the crew you have working for you is older than you?

JR: Yeah. When I worked deck, we had a couple of my friends and people that wanted to work. We had some guys stay for a while. But when I broke into it, I was always the youngest. I've always been the youngest.

SS: You said before you are the youngest captain.

JR: I'm pretty sure I'm the youngest captain.

SS: For crew, is that also true that it's mostly older people?

JR: There's not a lot of young people, at least in my fishery. In scalloping, I see younger people. There's some younger people doing other stuff. I would say for crews, they'd be from thirty-five to fifty-five. I don't think anyone older than that is working on deck. Anyone older than that should be in the wheelhouse, unless you kept yourself in really good shape. Fishermen—it depends on the people—they tend not to take care of themselves. Me included. My diet on the boat is horrible.

SS: It's a physically rough job and it beats you up.

JR: Yes, it does. It definitely beats you up. It really beats you up. I almost lost a finger one time, or the tip of it. I kind of wish that they took it off, honestly, because I'd get more use out of it.

SS: It bothers you?

[26:41]

JR: Yeah, it bothers me. It made me stay out of work for a few months instead of a month. I even asked the doctor, "Can't you just cut it off?" I heard about a football player that did it. He said, "I'm not going to do that." I said, "If my insurance company is paying, come on. It's going to be useless." It was two weeks until they did the surgery.

SS: It just prolonged the agony?

JR: Now I don't have any top joint movement. That's all I can do. That happened on the boat. That hurt. That hurt. I didn't think there was a tip there when I took the glove off. It just bled and bled and bled.

SS: Did it get pinched in something?

JR: We have a conveyor that runs down the length of the boat. Surf clamming, I'll explain to you how it works. Basically, what happened was we have this conveyor, and there was a chute that came down on top of it, and there was a lip, and it kind of was hitting against the conveyor wall, this was kind of right there somehow, and it came down, and as it came down, my hand got caught there and it almost cut it off. You can see there's a scar. This is from where they cut it, so to fix it, they had to go like this, like this, like this. Then the top, you can see where it was cut. The tendon was torn. It was only connected by the skin. I was holding it and it was angled up. It was pretty bad, but it could have been worse. It could have been a lot worse. Where do you want to go from here?

SS: You were saying that you're the youngest captain and you don't even see a lot of crew younger than you. Do you have theories or explanations? There are so many reasons that it could be. What do you think it is?

JR: The fact that there's not enough young fishermen to begin with? I don't know. Maybe it's the captain's choice. Maybe the captains are older and they've had their crew for a while and those people haven't gone on to run boats, but they still need a job.

SS: So the jobs just aren't available?

JR: Maybe the jobs aren't available. I mean, there are jobs available. And there are young guys. But as far as captains go, I'm the youngest. This is just my company, and it might not even be my company. It might be a couple of companies in this fishery. I have no clue. I know that now, the captains are older for the most part, all of them. They started in the heyday and stayed with it. That's why clamming is the way it is. That's why I don't own a clam boat and I'm a hired gun, so to speak, is because of the way clamming was allocated when they did the ITQs back in the nineties. It was the first fishery that did that. The way that it went was that the processors got the quota, for the most part. If you had a boat, yeah, you got some, but the processors got the quota. The processors, some of them bought up boats. Some of them were just processors. Some of them got bought into or bought out by someone who had a fleet of boats. That's kind of why clamming went the way it did. That's why there's no independent people left. There's really no one. There might be one or two people left here. Their market's small. I don't know what their story is. New York State only gives you ten thousand bushel a year to do. That's another thing, at least in this area, as far as my fishery is concerned. You got the allocation that New York State gives you, which is

just over ten thousand, and you were able to get twelve dollars a bushel, or maybe you had a better market and you were able to get twenty. You're making anywhere in the ballpark of a hundred and twenty to two hundred thousand dollars, gross to the boat. A hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Can you pay for boat insurance for a year, fuel, crew, all that stuff? What happens if you blow an engine? At least for this fishery in this area, and really everywhere in this fishery, wherever you do it. It's a little different up north where you're from. I know there are a lot of smaller or at least independent surf clam boats on the Cape. They operate out of New Bedford and whatnot also. But here, it's so hard for a single boat owner to make a living, if you only fish in New York State, if you don't have federal quota. That's all the money you're making.

SS: You'd have to be doing other stuff too.

JR: There's a lot of controversy with the state fishery here, the surf clam. My owners are out of state. They own licenses here. For years, they had the lion's share of licenses. They had licenses that even people that owned boats that leased to them. It wasn't like people here didn't work with them. It got down to the point where it was our company and I think two or three independent guys. What happened was the state changed the fishery to an IFQ, which is what it is now. Then the permits became valuable and my company bought a couple. Then they changed it to an ITQ. So then I had one boat instead of four. Because I worked on four boats. Before they changed it to an ITQ, I worked on four different boats, one day a week.

SS: Because you couldn't consolidate licenses on one boat?

JR: Couldn't consolidate licenses. Then they made it to where you could. Great. It was awesome. We were doing well. The fishery seemed to respond to it. There were areas that set up that hadn't set up in a while. Then, the state had put what they called a sunset clause in the regulations, and said that it would be brought to a vote if the fishery wants to go back to IFQ, public comment will be taken, blah, blah, blah. They decided to put it back to an IFQ after all these people consolidated permits, sold boats, did all this stuff. I almost feel like New York State baited the hook and almost had a plan to do that.

SS: You're saying that now, the permits are no longer transferable?

JR: Now they're no longer transferable.

SS: So there's no way for, say, an independent fisherman to buy a boat from a company?

JR: It would have to be on a boat that hasn't fished a license in that fishery for that year, and if it fished that license, it wouldn't be able to fish another one.

SS: This is in state waters, right?

JR: In state waters. It's absolutely ridiculous. It's criminal, if you ask me. When it comes to New York State and regulations, it's not a great conversation.

SS: Are you personally affected by those regulations?

JR: Oh, yeah.

SS: How do they personally affect you?

JR: I have gone from doing four licenses a year, which when I was on deck, was a good amount of money. When running the boat, if I had four licenses, and didn't do anything else, I would do pretty well. Now, I can only do one, because what happened was they changed the law. Boats that we ran got sold, or told by the insurance company that if you don't keep insurance on them, you can't keep them in the water, this or that. Some of them were scrapped, because they were unsafe. The idea was that the state was working with everyone. It worked. It even worked for the independent people. It really did. They liked it, because they were able to lease people's quota that we weren't able to do, or that they worked a deal out with. It wasn't a bad thing.

[36:58]

SS: I'm having trouble following all of this. There's state waters and there's federal waters.

JR: Yes. Three miles.

SS: Federal waters, obviously the surf clam fishery went to an ITQ system a while ago. You participate in that.

JR: Yes.

SS: Then there's state waters, which I knew nothing about until today. They also went to an ITQ, then an IFQ?

JR: Yes.

SS: You participate both in state and federal surf clam fishing?

JR: Yes.

SS: When you say you're personally affected, the conversation we're having now is about the state? So you were rotating between four permits and four vessels originally, in state waters?

JR: Yes.

SS: And now it's down to one?

JR: Yes.

SS: Are you doing the bulk of your fishing in state waters, then?

JR: No longer. Used to. No longer.

SS: Ok. Now, what explains that?

JR: The fact that I'm only allowed to catch ten thousand bushel a year on my boat instead of forty, instead of four licenses worth, because there's no longer boats or licenses to do that anymore. They made it to where each boat that has a license has to catch its own quota. They originally made it an IFQ, then they made it transferable—

SS: But it sounds like it was an even number—ten thousand per boat—whereas what we're used to is the history-based system.

JR: It wasn't history-based. They whacked it up evenly. It was distributed evenly throughout all the licenses, even when it was the weekly thing. Unless you missed your trip for the week, it was equal.

SS: Ok, and then they made it into an ITQ where you could consolidate permits on a single vessel, so you were doing forty thousand a week?

JR: A year.

SS: A year. And then that went away, and you were down to ten thousand, and so you had to start working more in federal waters?

JR: Well, we always worked federal waters, but we just started doing it more.

SS: In federal waters, aren't you also limited by your own vessels—

JR: Limited by the vessel size.

SS: It's by the size?

JR: What I can carry.

SS: You were allocated enough to fill your boat?

JR: Yeah. If I'm catching the clam, I have allocation for it.

SS: Ok, so it's not an issue where there's a cap on what you can catch because of the ITQ system.

JR: No, not at all. In our fishery, there's plenty of quota to go around.

SS: Ok. That's a rare thing to hear in fisheries [laughter]. I'm trying to wrap my head around that.

JR: That's how it is with our fishery. It runs smoothly. As far as regulation and management is concerned, it runs pretty smoothly. It's fed me my whole life. Like I said, I haven't done anything else in my life. It's all I've ever done. I've done a lot of different types of fishing. I've gone scalloping offshore. I've gone dragging. I've done gillnetting. I've done a lot of stuff—some filling in, some working for a few months, just depending on what the story was. For the most part, this fishery has fed me and has given me everything that I've ever had. Isn't that what management and regulation, isn't that what their goal was with regulating fisheries certain ways, to create stability? You have people that buy houses, buy cars, have families, with my fishery at least. You don't have the horror stories that you have had in the

fishing industry with certain fisheries. There's two ends of the spectrum. I'm happy doing what I do. Would I like to make more money? Of course. But I do just fine. But then again, that's working for someone. If I went and worked for myself, I may not be able to get the permits that I need to really make money. In state waters, I can fish with my permit. That's great. I can fish the state waters all I want. The seasons and the quota—am I really going to make a living doing that? Depends on how you do it. That would be a crapshoot.

SS: What you have now is stability?

[42:20]

JR: That's why I stay doing what I'm doing don't go and look and try to do other stuff. I mean, I do other stuff on the side, but a lot of my time is taken up. Even if I'm not fishing, a lot of my time is taken up with the boat—fixing it and whatever. What I try to do, I try to do some horseshoe crabbing. Not only is it nice to make some money. I like doing that. Like, I really like that.

SS: What do you like about it?

[43:03]

JR: I really can't tell you exactly what it is, but there's just something about wading through the water at night with a headlamp and nothing else around you, and looking around and there's nothing but crabs around. It's one of the coolest things. The first time I saw it, I was absolutely amazed. You go and you grab them, and you put them in your boat. Then you come back, and there's another ten near where those five just were. I don't get why states have made it to where you can't catch them. Like Virginia, Delaware, where they come up even thicker than they do here. You're not allowed to catch them there anymore. New Jersey, you're not. I believe it's here and maybe Rhode Island. Do you guys have a harvest?

SS: Yeah, you can. It's pretty limited.

JR: Rhode Island. I don't think any other state that has them come up is allowed to harvest them. Now, I was talking to a conch fisherman, and he said he's paying anywhere from two to five dollars a crab. That's crazy. We used to get seventy-five cents. Now we get a dollar, a dollar a quarter, a dollar fifty. You know that they're selling for more. You get at least a dollar for them. If they would let us catch more, that would be a nice little season here.

SS: That's in what? April and May?

JR: April, May, depending on the moon. It's usually the full moon in May is usually when they come around, something like that. One of the guys that I fish with, something would change and he would know. It was always around the moon. I can't remember what it was.

SS: Some kind of cue?

[45:16]

JR: Yeah, something. I can't remember. It's interesting. You were asking about the crew and why I don't see younger fishermen. How is it—now I'm interviewing you—what is it like in your area? Are there more young guys on the boats?

SS: It seems like there has been a bit of a resurgence recently, and other people have said the same thing. I think young people get into fisheries when they see other young people in fisheries. It's the same thing as anything else, so once you have a few, it sort of catches on. The last couple of years, there's been an apprenticeship program that introduces about a dozen young people each year to the fisheries. So that's a dozen young people, and then they tell their friends and they tell their friends, and that can catch on. Another interesting thing is that we've had a number of fisheries observers, including a number of women, who became familiar with commercial fishing by being observers in the observer program, and then a lot of them really got tired of being the bad guy on the boat, and decided, "I could probably make more money and have more fun and be better liked as a deckhand." There are a number of—especially young female—observers that are transitioning into crewmembers now, which is really cool to see.

JR: You know, I always thought about that. I had that thought when the observer program came into being: how many of these are really going to stay doing that, when they find out that they can make more money probably, if you're on the right boat? I don't know what the observers make. I know it's a lot of money that the observer company gets paid. But what trickles down? That's another atrocity.

SS: What's that?

JR: The observer program, making everyone pay for it. They have the technology for the electronic monitoring. It's been used in many other fisheries. Not here. Many other countries have used it. Why is it that the United States is so reluctant to try new things? At least in fisheries, why are they so stuck in the mud?

SS: Do you have observers in your fishery?

JR: Yup. We're supposed to take them if we're called, but I don't know if I've ever had one. I used to work with the state and do the surveys with the state. Observers? I can't remember. I know we're mandated. We're in the program. But it hasn't happened, for some reason. I don't know why.

[48:37]

SS: You said you participated in doing surveys for the state on your boat?

JR: We did all the surveys for New York State, from the early nineties up until the last one. I worked closely with the head of marine shellfisheries and their whole team.

SS: What was that like?

JR: It was pretty cool. It was always over the summer. It was easy work for me as a teenager, so I really enjoyed it. Then as I got older, being more invested in the fishery, obviously it was

a good thing because then I could, not necessarily voice my opinion, but maybe get some information, maybe spark an idea somewhere.

SS: Just that communication?

JR: Mm-hmm, and that relationship. It hasn't really worked out that way. It's still a decent thing. Don't get me wrong. You go to the state, you see people. It's not necessarily them that are making final decisions and whatnot, so a lot of it doesn't even involve those people. So it is what it is. What we would do was a lot of people would put in bids for the contracts. I know our owners always put in a bid for the Ocean Girl. I don't know who else did. I know that there were other boats that did. I really don't know why we were the only boat to do it, but it gave you a control at least. Boat was the same. Things were the same. It was usually ten or twelve days. We would start from all the way off of Rockaway, Queens, and work our way all the way to Montauk, just past the IGA—pretty far out, it's basically until you get into all rocks. It was like three hundred something stations. It was cool. It was fun. You'd go and make a three- or a five-minute tow. They'd count the bushels. It's documented. I saw the change in that, and that's in the state fishery. That's in New York State. You go from you're catching thirty bushel in three minutes to now you're catching six or seven in four or five, or one. It's documented in New York State. At least the historical spots for surf clams, where they used to be, where they usually would set up, haven't anymore. They try to say why. They try to come up with ideas. The idea that they have is that they're moving north and east and deeper. They're right. That's what's happening. Obviously they're going to move out of inshore waters, or move east. I think that another survey should be done in New York State, because it's been five years or six years. It's been a while. We put money into it, every load that goes across the dock, here in New York from our fishery. You could call it a tax. You could call it whatever you want, but it goes into a fund, and that's supposed to fund the survey. It's done every year or two. So what's happening to it? Where's it going? Are we funding this now or are we just going to keep it as this and we're not going to look at what's going on?

[52:45]

SS: Do you think that's because they saw it going down and were like, "Well, we don't need to—"

JR: I don't know. I have no clue. After the last survey, we had some of the best fishing that I'd ever seen in state waters. There were a couple areas that set up, that were phenomenal, off the charts, ridiculous clamming. It's happened. I've seen what they said is going to happen. It's happened. Maybe we should go take a look. Maybe there should be a survey. That's the problem in a lot of this science and these surveys and all the assessments and everything. There's not a lot of industry input. There's not a lot of input from the fishermen. They say that there is, but if there was, they wouldn't do things the way they do. I'll give you an example. You got to know how to catch clams and tow a clam dredge, right? There was a NOAA boat, however that works. I guess it was NOAA. They were doing a clam survey with their dredge and however they were going to do it, and it was on one of the two-hundred-foot, two-hundred-something boats. How can you do a survey? Like, did you have a clam captain? Why wouldn't they use an industry boat? They do a federal survey. I've seen pictures of it online. I've seen pictures of the boat. They came real close to us. My dad said he got a good look at them. He said they were towing a clam dredge. Where's the science in

that? How does that work? If they're going to do a study, don't you think you should do the study with the participants in it? Or at least have someone on the boat? I feel like I read something about an assessment where that might be being practiced now. I read something. I can't remember what it was, but it was some sort of research-based thing, and they said they had a captain that they contracted to come out with them. I thought that was great. That's awesome, because if they're towing the net and it comes up and there's a problem, they're not necessarily going to see it. Those things could be all twisted up—the wires. There could be all sorts of issues. I don't understand that. What I saw with the scallop fishery is that they listened, and that the fishermen listened and they got behind them. They said, "We want to prove to you that there's more resource out there." They were able to prove to them. Now, that fishery is—geez. I don't know how big it is in Rhode Island, but at least in New England, that fishery is unbelievable. If I ever go do a different type of fishing, like go work for another company or something, or if I could ever get myself into a position where I could fund my own operation, that's where I would want to [be]. That's where I could see, given the experience that I have. I've scalloped a little bit, not a lot. I'd somehow get experience or I'd just go do it. I've towed dredges. It can't be that hard. I feel like that, compared to net fishing, it would be easier to do. I've struggled, don't get me wrong. But I think I'd be able to figure it out. If I were to get into something right now, that's what I would continue to get into.

SS: Do you think seriously about doing that? Switching into something like that?

[56:56]

JR: If an opportunity presented itself, yeah. Yeah, if I was able to do it, yeah. As far as that is concerned, scalloping. That's just because of the money that's there. That's a thriving fishery. That's something that I feel someone can get into. Other types of fisheries, I don't know if you could. With the scalloping, you can get into a boat like that, and when you're not scalloping, you can put a net on the boat and get someone to go run that and go do whatever the permit is. There's a lot of guys that are doing that now. There's a lot of guys that are doing that. They buy a boat, rig it to do both. I worked for a guy that we did that. Instead of just going scalloping, we'd go dragging for a day, then we'd go scalloping, then we'd come in. That was cool. It got long, because dragging wasn't great, but it was a cool experience. Scalloping, at least pulling dredges, was new to me, but dragging wasn't. I felt like I was learning stuff. I was the only guy on the boat that had fished with the net, so I kind of had an idea of what was going on, so I was able to watch and learn and whatnot. It was kind of cool. The owner came out one time and he was like, "These things aren't catching right." He took out the manual for the doors, for the doors on the dragnet. He's reading how they're supposed to shine and stuff. I'm looking at it with him and I'm reading it over his shoulder, and I'm like, "Oh, alright. Ok, alright." We started talking about it, and he was like, "Alright, we're going to try something." "Let's do it." It turned out that we were letting out twice as much cable as we were supposed to. We started pulling in cable and towing shorter, and we got it to where it was wearing how it was supposed to. Wouldn't you know it? It started catching better. I couldn't believe that there was an actual piece of paper with a manual, almost, telling you all that. That's something else! I've never seen that before. That's interesting. I've never seen anything else like that. There's never been a manual for any other sort of fishing. Nowhere.

SS: How would you say you learned what you know?

[59:55]

JR: I learned most of what I learned from my dad. He was my teacher. He really taught me well. When I was younger, it was tough to work together. We had some epic blowouts. We had some great arguments. But then I got to the point where I grew up, and that went away and we had a really good relationship. We still do. On the boat, we were able to have a great relationship. As soon as we were able to do that, everything clicked. We went from doing well to blowing everyone out of the water, to really, really producing. I've seen the saying a lot, "Attitude makes the difference." It's so true. It's really so true. If I didn't see it with my own two eyes. It just makes things so much easier. With clamming, you spend a lot of time on a boat and a lot of time looking at the same two people. You got to have a good relationship. It doesn't work if you're screaming and hollering and yelling all the time. Who's that going to work for? Treat people how you want to be treated, as far as that's concerned. Even when it comes to my crew, I try to make it a point to not yell and to only yell if they're going to hurt themselves or they did something really stupid. I have become really chill. I honestly didn't think that I would be that way. I really didn't think that I would be that way, but I've noticed that it's easier to manage people and get along in life if you can take a step back and look at things with a level head. Fishermen tend to be very aggressive and very in-your-face and I am all of those things, but I've learned how to control it and how to better use it, because if you can take that and channel it into something else, I feel like it's better used that way. It almost becomes like an art, dealing with people and managing people and all that stuff. Sometimes it's a fine line. I've had some people on the boat where it's like, I can't wait to get in, because it's just not right. There's just something not right with them. Then something happens, and it's like, "I knew it!" You never know what you're getting until you get the guy out on the ocean. They can be the best guy on land. They can tell you whatever they want you to hear. It really doesn't matter until you get them out on the ocean. That's where people are tested. That's where it's proved. I've seen it more than a few times. Sometimes it's funny. Sometimes it's sad. You see it happen to grown men. They get broken or whatever you want to call it. It makes it like, "Oh, wow. Ok." You think the guy was able to take anything, and he has some sort of breakdown. It's like, "Yo, man. I thought—you know." It's just interesting how I've seen changes in myself as I've gotten older, and how it's come into my life with fishing. It's not that I've just learned to do that—relax and take things in stride and deal with things in the workplace. It's something that's happened in my life as I got older. I wasn't necessarily able to do that when I was young. I almost feel like with what I do and fishing, I feel like it was a two-way street. They complemented each other, and it's helped me grow as a person. If it wasn't for fishing, I don't know what I would have done. I'm sure I would have found something, got into something. But I really have no clue.

SS: Did you ever think about doing anything else?

[65:05]

JR: Well, no. Once I started it, that was it. I really haven't had anything that I've found that I would enjoy doing more or would make me more money, or whatever reason it would be. I don't fish for the money. I really don't. I fish because I thoroughly enjoy being on the water. I enjoy being in the elements. Granted I have a crew with me, but sometimes when I do stuff off of my big boat, it's by myself, and I like the solitude of that. Even when I'm out with the other guys, they're outside. I have my space. I'm by myself. Everything that comes with

fishing is really why I do it. If it was for the money, I probably would have figured something else out by now. I probably could have. But until it gets to the point that I can't make a living doing it, that I can't figure something out, if I have to go do something else—another fishery or whatever it may be—I'll go do it. If it gets to the point where fishing isn't viable at all, then I guess I'll have to move on. Or if I move, that would be because I'm like, "Alright, I'm going to change." The only time I would think about doing something else is in that aspect—if I move. I honestly don't see myself staying here on Long Island. It's too expensive and it's getting worse. That's not a problem. I can move wherever. I can go to Atlantic City, which is fine. That's where I do a lot of my fishing out of.

SS: You're commuting from here to there anyway, right?

[67:25]

JR: Yeah, I'll go and stay. I'll stay for however long—a week, two weeks, a month. It depends on the weather and how much I'm fishing and if I got to do anything back here. I'll go and live the boat life for however long. Honestly, I've done it both ways—where you daytrip and come home all the time, and go to work and stay for a few days, and I prefer that. I prefer being on the boat for like a week or two and then being home for a few days or the better part of a week and then going back. That's how I would rather do it. I don't know why. I guess it's because there's no time clock when it comes to fishing. It's around the weather. It's something that I'd rather be on the boat. When it's time to go, let's go. Clamming, especially, is based around the weather, especially on your size boat, towing a clam dredge across the bottom in fifteen-foot seas, unless you have a big, big boat, which is only a few of them, it's not going to happen. If it's a rolling sea, that's one thing. It's just not going to happen.

SS: In addition to weather, is there any seasonal cycle to it, or is it just throughout the year?

[68:57]

JR: No, the clamming is year-round. April to April is the federal year. It's a year-round thing. That's another thing. There are a lot of pros to why I've decided to stay doing what I'm doing. It is year-round. There's not seasons. The only real things that stop you from fishing are this lovely weather that we have and breakdowns—repairs and maintenance.

SS: Other than that, you can just go whenever you want?

JR: Other than that, if you could fish 365 days a year, you could do it. With the quota the way it is and how it's set up, it's set up to that's how you do it.

SS: How many days a year are you typically fishing?

JR: A year? Ideally, I'd like to be on the water at least two hundred days. That's what I would like. I probably do that.

SS: It's a combination of some day trips and some longer trips?

JR: Yeah, probably about fifteen day trips throughout the year, and then the rest is at least twenty-four hours. Lately, twenty-four hours, but I've had trips that are fifty. That's dock-to-dock time, from the time you leave to the time you get back. But they're relatively—in the grand scheme of things—relatively short trips. What we usually do is we just keep going, until the weather stops us. We just keep going, in and out, in and out. That's the nature of our business.

SS: How long of a commute is it from here to Atlantic City?

[70:46]

JR: Three to three and a half hours.

SS: That's a pretty long commute.

JR: Yeah, but like I said, I stay. But it is a little bit of a trip. I pick up my deckhand. We drive down. We spend our time there. Plus, you're in Atlantic City. It's not the most attractive place in the world. Unless you're going to go to a casino or you're going to go somewhere specific, you're not really venturing out or walking around. It's not the greatest of areas. As far as doing what I'm doing, it's one of the places you'd want to fish out of. It has a decent size fleet. I've been there for probably about a year now, almost a year. I went down originally because I had a breakdown and I went down to get the work done, and I started fishing there, and I stayed.

SS: Where were you before?

JR: In New York, out of Oceanside. It's on the south shore. It's right by East Rockaway Inlet.

SS: There's a little fishing port there?

JR: The company owns a little pack-out dock. They've got a little crane and a concrete dock for the cages to go on and a truck bay for the trucks to back in and then they load them onto the trucks there. It's not a fishing port at all. It's just us that go out of there. There's maybe an oil barge and some tugboats, but it's not—no. It's a couple canals away from Freeport, which is historically a fishing port. Now it's not. Probably the only fishing ports we have now are Shinnecock, Montauk, and maybe Greenport, if you want to consider that a port. I'm trying to think. You got guys that work in the bay. Even Shinnecock's really not a fishing port or a fishing town. That's just like, you're over the bridge and there's a commercial dock and couple of restaurants. Montauk is really the only place around here.

SS: Pronounce the name of the place you live—Patchogue.

JR: Patchogue.

SS: Are there commercial fishermen there? Is it coastal?

JR: Hmm. That's not coastal. What we have is the mainland where everyone will keep their boats. What Shinnecock is part of the barrier island. You can keep your boat anywhere along the mainland and then just go out one of the inlets into the ocean or go fish in the bay.

I guess the reason Shinnecock has become popular is you got easy access to the ocean. You're right there. And Montauk. The baymen on Long Island—you used to be able to walk across the bay on bows of boats, that's how many. That was the legend. That's how many boats there were on the water. Hundreds, maybe thousands. Who knows? My dad would tell me about it. Who knows what happened to this bay? This bay used to support a lot of people.

SS: What's the name of the bay?

JR: The Great South Bay. It used to support a lot of families. If I were to clam out of Patchogue, those would be the areas I would work—Patchogue Bay, Bellport Bay, Narrows Bay, areas over there. Maybe there's five or six guys, maybe.

[65:04]

SS: It's almost disappeared completely? It sounded like you said something happened to the bay? Like an ecological change?

JR: Whatever has happened. My belief is that everyone wants a green lawn, and all the fertilizers and stuff runs right into our bay. They ran a sewer pipe underneath the bay, and that kind of coincides with timing and stuff. There may have been other things. I think it's really that Long Island changed. Long Island went from duck farms and all this different stuff, to being a built-up, urban place, suburbs, all those lawns and papers, everything else that winds up going into the water. I think that all had something to do with it. That's my opinion, but if you look it up and do research, you come to the same conclusion. It's like, "Ok, this is what actually happened." It probably wouldn't be the only place that it's happened, either. I'm sure it's happened in many places.

SS: Same old story, yeah.

[76:24]

JR: I'm sure you've heard it in a couple different places you've gone. That's something that, maybe they didn't have the technology then. It's like, "You didn't research all this stuff before we started using whatever chemical it is? You knew that this stuff was going to run off and end up here?" Was it that, as a people, we just didn't think that far ahead back then, when this stuff started? Did we not think about consequences? Or is it only after there's an absolute atrocity or whatever you want to call it. It's a disaster what happened. To go from a thriving bay that fed who knows how many families, to now, if you work on the bay, you're a retired something-or-other, because if you're working, you're just going and having fun.

SS: What time frame was it that that change took place?

JR: Let's see. My dad made a living on the bay from the time he was in high school until after he got out of the Navy. Then he went surf clamming in the sound in the eighties, all while also hard clamming on the South Shore. He hard clammed up until '95, '97. Maybe like in the eighties sometime or the nineties, it started to get bad, and then by the time the late nineties were there, it really wasn't a viable option for people. Don't quote me on it. I'm not a hundred percent sure. But within those years, say within a span of thirty years, that stuff

went from a thriving place to all of a sudden, it's not there. It's the same story a lot of places. The eelgrass disappeared. The habitat just isn't there anymore. We used to have bay scallops in the bay. Not anymore. They're not there. It's sad. It really is, because you have something that you think maybe your kids could benefit from, or even if you just want to go eat some clams. To not be able to do that anymore, after it was such a staple from this area. Littlenecks, Blue Point clams—that was a name brand all around the country, and they were all caught and marketed through Blue Point on the South Shore. They were a big hatchery and whatnot. Now, it's like everything's gone. But it's gone the way a lot of our seafood has, at least shellfish now. All of it's farmed. There's so much farmed stuff. I'm not necessarily against farmed stuff. Granted, if it was me, I would rather eat wild. When it comes to shellfish, that's where I agree with it. I feel like they kind of got that down. What I don't agree with is the stuff that we're getting from overseas. I feel like if you're going to eat farmed fish, it should be coming from this country. I don't feel like you should be eating Vietnamese shrimp or Indonesian this. I've heard about the conditions. There's no way you'd ever catch me putting any of that [in my mouth]. No, no, no. That could be a future for young fishermen. Has the government possibly looked into young fishermen who want to be in a fishery in some way, maybe grants or some kind of program where they help you set up an oyster farm or aquaculture for something? I mean, that might be a way to get more young people involved. That's something I've thought about. I've never seriously thought about it. I've just thought about it. I wonder how you could do with that. I know a few people that do it, and roughly what you could do. That's a commitment. You got to be ready to do it. If you're going to that, it's "Alright, this is what I'm going to do." You got to be patient. You got to let them grow. I don't know if I necessarily see myself doing that kind of thing in the future, unless there's some sort of program where, "We're giving this out," or "We're doing this." I don't know if, unless there was an incentive, if I would see me doing it. I don't know if that's something that I would want to put my full investment into. But the people who do it, I think it's a good idea.

SS: Is that something that people are getting into around here? Young people, for example?

[82:17]

JR: There's a few. Not necessarily young people, but people. I've seen it in Jersey a lot. They're doing it a lot more than here. The whole Great South Bay. I was looking into it because a friend of mine started doing it. I was like, "Oh, I'm curious." I was looking. I knew where his plot was, so I started looking up stuff and I was able to find all the plots that were for lease in Great South Bay, and I was reading up on how to grow oysters, and I was looking and all that. He's growing oysters. It says that you got to have good tidal movement and all this stuff. I'm like, "Alright." So I started doing research and I saw where he was at. I figured out, maybe that's not the best spot. Maybe he should try a lease over here. So I went and I talked to him. I was like, "Yo, man. I was doing some research. I think maybe you should move your plot." He's like, "What are you talking about?" I'm like, "Well, I got kind of interested in it. I started doing some research. Maybe you want to try over there." He said, "What do you know about it?" I said, "I don't, but I don't know if you did your research or whatever. Where you're at is fine, but this spot might be better."

SS: Did he take your advice? [laughter]

[83:42]

JR: No, no, no. Of course not. If I were to get into something like that, the amount of research I would do before getting into something would be staggering. I'm not the type of person that's just going to jump into something on a whim. "That sounds like a great idea. Let's do it." I feel like, especially when it comes to business, if you're going to do something, you got to know what you're getting yourself into and what's going to come of it. That's why I say I think aquaculture is a pretty viable option, because if you do it right, A, you can sustain yourself, which is what your goal is, and B, you can help feed people, and C, you're cleaning the water too. They're growing oysters and clams just to clean water now. They're doing a project in the city somewhere, in one of the bays, in Sheepshead Bay or Jamaica Bay or something. They were putting clams out in chowder boxes, or maybe it was oysters, and just leaving them there, using the actual animal or whatever you want to call it.

SS: Yeah, vacuum up all the bad stuff.

JR: Yeah, I was like, "That's a great idea." You think about it, before we were here, that's what cleaned the bottom to begin with. There was nothing but shellfish on the bottom to clean the water anyway. How has this experience been for you so far, traveling around?

SS: Maybe I should tell you about that after. I'm supposed to be interviewing you. But I'm happy to answer any questions after we finish the interview.

JR: That's fine.

SS: Are there any other themes we haven't touched on that are important to understanding your personal story?

JR: As far as my story is concerned, that's what I've done and whatnot. I feel like, as far as the project that you're doing, it's all based on young fishermen and whatnot. I feel like there's a lot of ways—I don't necessarily know how, but there's got to be some way, whether it's the industry getting together with a program like yours. There's got to be some way to get the word out that this industry is viable, it needs people, it needs young people. You look at the hurdles facing fisheries, and besides regulation and stocks and all that, you run into, "Well, what's the future of the crew look like? I mean, really look like? What does it look like?" Because, every fisherman that I see, they're not young. For every one that retires, there's not one that replaced him. It's sad. It's sad that that's happening. I don't know if it's because, "Is fishing no longer a viable option? Am I blind to it, maybe?" Because it's all I've done. For the life that I live, it's fine for me. But do people need to live better than me or do they need this? Has that become the norm? What is it? It makes you wonder. I'm able to do whatever I need to do to support myself and live just fine, so that can't be the problem. It almost makes you think. I don't know if it was in Rhode Island, but I believe there's a school in New England—wasn't it like a college that was offering some sort of fisheries degree, I want to say? I don't know if I'm right on that. I feel like I might have heard something, or maybe I'm mismatching things or I have the area wrong. I feel like I read something about that. I feel like if that is the truth, that would be a great start, even if it's a high school, like a BOCES thing.

SS: BOCES?

JR: BOCES, like a vocational school. That's what it's called here, like as vocational type school that teaches you a trade. They could teach you like net mending or how to make gillnets or all that sort of stuff. There's skills in fishing that you do need to know if you want to enter. Like you were saying, that apprenticeship, stuff like that. Was it a pilot program?

[89:20]

SS: It was sort of a pilot program. They've done it twice now and they're gearing up for their third year. It's relatively new.

JR: If they're doing their third year, that's great. Stuff like that, programs like that, may be a way. Because the way you fall in love with it is the hands-on thing. You can't sit there and say, "Oh, I'm going to like this." Programs like that, even if fishermen would buy into that and say, "Yeah, I'll take a kid out for the summer." Is that what it is, or is it like ex-fishermen teaching people?

SS: As far as I know, from looking at it from a distance, having not participated in it myself, I believe it's about a month long. It's every day. There's many instructors. I think the primary one is Fred Mattera, who's the director of the Commercial Fisheries Center and a longtime ex-fisherman, retired fisherman and safety trainer. He does a lot of the safety training with them, gives them fishing industry 101. There are some partners from the University of Rhode Island Fisheries Science Department who impart some wisdom about science and regulations, because every fisherman needs to know about that. Then I think they may do a session with a net maker and a session with some other folks. They get an overview of the whole industry. Then they get paired to go out on a boat. It may be a day or a week. It's not like they're a full crewmember at that point, but it's to get the exposure so that they can know, "Is this for me or not?" That's what I think.

[91:14]

JR: That's cool. That's exactly what I feel is needed. If you want to start getting young people into the industry, you got to show them what it is. Because the only way you're going to see it—yeah, you're going to see it on TV, but that's bullshit—if you're able to send them out with people, if they don't have a family member or friend or whatever. The only reason my friends know anything about commercial fishing or have any commercial fishing experience is because they worked with me. If it wasn't for that, they wouldn't have any other way to get into it. There's got to be horizons expanded. I think that program, that's got to be a good start. Besides students, I don't know how you would reach the general public. Maybe trade shows or job fairs. It sounds stupid, but it makes you think.

[93:22]

SS: Have you personally recruited anyone into the fishing industry, people whom you were friends with and said, "Hey, you ought to consider fishing. I'll show you the ropes?"

JR: I've got one guy. He can't fish right now. He's got stuff going on. But when he is able to, he's going back to it and I think he's going to stick with it. I've had friends work with me that have worked with me for five years or so, and then they move on. They either stick with it or they go and do something else. But yeah, I've got one guy who, when he comes back to

work, he's going to come work with me, probably. Honestly, I don't have any other people. Besides people that'll come up to the dock, I don't have any other people that I'll call and ask. I have some fill-in guys now. It's great to work with friends and it's awesome to work with friends, but at the same time, it sucks, because as a captain, sometimes they don't listen. Sometimes it's perfect, but sometimes it doesn't. It depends on the people and the situation. I've had the good and the great experiences, and I've had the not too great experiences. What I'm getting at is that I would rather hire people that I don't know. Not that I don't know. Someone that I know well enough to take him fishing, but isn't necessarily a friend of mine. I've just seen, besides me or whoever I've had with me, I've seen it with other people. You know, you had to fire the guy or the guy left or he was mad about something, and now that relationship is, you know. I don't have that many friends. I have a circle that might be a few people. I don't want to complicate things. We tried to get my brother to work with me. My brother, he's twenty-five and he's the polar opposite. He doesn't want anything to do with the fishing. He said the only reason he would do it is because of the money. It's the complete opposite reason than from why I do it.

SS: What is he doing?

[95:08]

JR: He does HVAC work. He's like an apprentice. He got in with a good company. He was looking around for a while, didn't know what he wanted to do. Then he got in with this company and he's doing real well. That's a good business to get into. If I were to go work on land, that's one of the things I would consider, because you can do well doing that and it's clean work. I was really happy to hear he got into that. He was so against the boat, just really didn't like it.

SS: What in particular?

JR: He didn't like the amount of time. He didn't like being away from home for days at a time, or a week. It just wasn't his thing. It's not for everyone. He likes to go out on the boat and fish and whatever, but he likes to go home at the end of the day. He doesn't want to be out there for two days, three days, whatever it is.

SS: That sort of leads into another question. What do you think distinguishes people who are cut out to be fishermen from those that aren't?

[96:25]

JR: You have to be mentally tough, I've come to see. You got to be able to handle a lot of bullshit. You've got to be able to put up with a lot. I feel like it's more mentally demanding than physically. Don't get me wrong, it's physically demanding, but if you get someone on the boat who isn't right in the head or who is on medication and hasn't taken it, then you can run into an issue. What exactly did you ask?

SS: What distinguishes a person who's cut out to be a fisherman from somebody who's not?

JR: I don't know exactly what it is. I kind of feel like you know, talking to someone, maybe. Not that I listen to everything this guy says, I'm going to believe everything he says, but you

can tell if people are genuine. You can tell if people are bullshitting you. As far as what distinguishes them, you always hear the saying, it does take a certain type of person to do this and do that. I would feel like, honestly, you have to be mentally right, at least mentally stable, and tough. Because a seventy-five-foot boat sounds big, but it's really not. It gets small. You really have to keep yourself focused on why you're there and keep yourself happy. You got to keep the morale up. It's got nothing to do with anyone's physical ability or anything like that. I feel like the main thing you need to find is someone that is tough mentally and doesn't lose his shit. He is cool under pressure. Someone who, if something happens, they can take it in stride, and figure if something needs to be fixed, if you've got an emergency. I feel like regardless of what their attributes are, at the end of the day, in order for them to react that way or to be how they need to be, it comes back to their mental state and how tough they are and how able to compartmentalize, maybe. Like, "We're doing this. Oh, ok, now this happened. Now I got to focus on this." I guess that's my answer to that. That's kind of what I look for now, is someone, because you never know. You run into so many people who say, "I want to go fishing." "Yeah, sure you do." I'll say out of every ten guys that come down to the dock, maybe two or three I'll consider. Maybe one of them is going to come once. I really have learned that even if you need people or need someone, you don't want to lock yourself into something with someone that is going to come stab you at night. I had an experience like that this summer. The guy completely lost it. It was like, "Oh man. Please, let's just get through this trip, please. Just get us through this trip, please. I'm getting rid of him as soon as we get to the dock, please." It's scary. It's not something you want to have to put up with. That's for sure. Never again. That's what I tell my deckhands now. I say, "We're not taking someone fishing unless—he's got to work for work for us for an afternoon or something. We got to get to know him a little bit. We can't just talk to him for ten minutes and then take him fishing." At the time, I needed someone. I was desperate. I was like, "You want to go fishing?" "Yeah, sure." That happened. Then the episode happened. It wasn't anything crazy, but it was enough for me to see what I needed to see. It was a learning experience. It was interesting. It was interesting [laughter]. Now I can laugh about it, but at the time it wasn't funny at all. Oh, boy. Do you have any other questions?

[101:43]

SS: You don't have a family of your own? No kids?

JR: No, no kids. No wife. No kids.

SS: In terms of thinking about the future—

JR: You're going to ask me if I would want me kid to fish?

SS: Yeah, I was thinking along those lines. If you don't have a kid, maybe it's harder to answer that question.

JR: It's something that I've thought about, though. It's funny you asked that. When I wound up deciding, "Alright, I'm going to do this," when I was like twenty, like I was explaining to you before, my mom, I heard her saying to my dad, "He was supposed to hate it. He wasn't supposed to fall in love with it. He wasn't supposed to do this. We didn't want this for him." I heard that and I'm like, "Well, too bad. I mean I understand, but this is just what I'm going to

do.” That’s just coming from a mother’s eyes. Then my dad sees it, and granted maybe he didn’t want that life for me because it’s not an easy way to make a living, and it’s a dangerous profession, and there’s a lot that can go wrong, but at the same time, he’s proud that I turned into the fisherman that I’ve turned into. What I would do is I would give my kid the chance. “If you want to come fishing, come fishing.” If he likes it, I’m not going to say, “You can’t do this.” No way. But I would want him to come out on the boat and hang out with dad. This is assuming it’s a boy. Girls can fish too. If either of them—boy, girl—wants to come out on the boat and try it, “Try it. If it’s for you, great. Stay.” If it is for them, it would be an awesome way for you to spend time with your kid and bond. You really get to teach your kid skills that are really going to help them in life, so to speak. You can do all the trigonometry you want, but when it comes to fishing, there might be some of that that comes into play with rigging the boat. It’s all stuff that you learn as you go. If I was teaching my son, I’d be teaching him from what I learned through my however-many-years of doing it. I feel like there would be a lot of pride. What I was saying about my dad before, about how he was really proud and happy with the job that he did with teaching me, proud that I was able to take to it that way. I feel like, “You want to fish? Sure.” I wouldn’t say, “You have to.” I wouldn’t be mad if he wanted to. That would be cool.

SS: If he did want to, it sounds like you see the fisheries that you’re in as being viable enough that by the time that kid is old enough to make a career decision, you still think that it would be a good one?

[105:13]

JR: He may have to get into something different. It depends on what the option is. If you want to fish, you don’t have to do this. You can go to Alaska. You can lay the options out. You don’t have to be fishery-specific. You can go to Alaska and fish the seasons. There’s plenty of work there, if you can get on a boat. I feel like it will be viable, as long as we’re not regulated out of existence. I mean, it’s hard to predict the future. You hope that that’s not what will happen. I heard someone say that we’re witnessing the death of the commercial fisherman in my generation, and I choose not to believe that. But at the same time, when I’m eighty years old, another fifty years from now, where are we going to be at? Is this it? Or are we going to get smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller, to the point where commercial fishing doesn’t exist? I sure hope not. That would be a sad day. That would be a real sad day. Besides the livelihood and people making a living and being able to live, all the tradition and all of the heritage and how many people’s legacies, so to speak, suddenly go down with the ship? It was all for naught. You have all these skills, but now there’s nowhere to apply them. That would be a really sad thing to see happen. That would bother me. That would bother me. To piggyback on your question, if my kid wanted to fish, and it was getting to that point and he still wanted to do that, I would want for that to be part of the reason why—because he wants to say, “No. This is part of our tradition. This is part of America. This is part of being a human, almost.” We’ve gotten food from places that we can. It’s almost like closing the forest, if you think about it. You close the woods. It doesn’t make sense, right? Why regulate an industry that has fed the world for so long out of existence? It’s not like we’re the only country. Not every country has it right, don’t get me wrong. The same thing with that. There’s got to be a middle ground everybody can reach on that. It’s proven that we can help stocks rebound, help stocks regrow themselves. Why is it that you got to cut seventy percent of the quota in a year? You don’t have to do that. It’s unfathomable. Why can’t you do something gradually, over a couple of years? Something that’s not going to

hurt your people so much? Why is it that the resource is the absolute power? I understand that it's important, don't get me wrong. But if we're going to collectively run this together, it's got to be taken into account the effect on the other side. You can't just look at the resource. Don't get me wrong. You have to protect it. But who's protecting us? Who's protecting us? That's what it comes down to. No one, unfortunately. The only way to protect yourself is to align yourself, to get congressmen involved and stuff like that, and lobbyists. We shouldn't have to do that. That shouldn't have to be done. It's almost like fishing has become—they call them regulations and stuff, but it's almost like it's a law. It's laws, almost, because if you violate them, you can get fined. You can get a ticket. I just feel like the whole regulation process and whatnot can really be revamped, and if everyone listens to each other, not just us listening to the policy makers and the policy makers listening to us, but if we all collectively listen to each other and say, "This is what we absolutely need from you, and this is what you absolutely need from us." I almost feel like that doesn't ever happen. That will be part of the reason, if commercial fishing does collapse and fishermen don't exist anymore. That will be a big part of the reason, is because they couldn't get along. I feel like if fishing is going to stay sustainable and stay viable, that has to happen. There's no way. There's got to be some way for us to be heard. I'm saying young fishermen. If you want to be heard, you got to go to your council meetings and do that stuff. It's unfortunate that there's only so many of us, so it's hard to make an impression. We had a rally here last spring. It came up from the sports fishing guys, which is probably why there were so many, because it wasn't just commercial guys. I went to it. It was in Patchogue. It was like three hundred people, all fishermen. The congressman got together and he was doing a press conference. New York State kind of gets shafted when it comes to quotas that all of our fish share.

SS: Is this the fluke thing?

JR: Yeah, they were fighting for that, basically. It sounded like it was going to do something. You heard about it. You heard about it. Now, I haven't heard anything about it. Will something come about from it? I hope. But you shouldn't have to do that to get your point across. People look at it like, "Well, there were only ten people at the meeting." Well, there are only fifteen people in the fisheries, so this is seventy-five percent this year. It's an uphill battle. It's almost like if someone wins, then everyone loses. The only way is compromise. There's going to be no winners. If this is the way that things are going to be going, then no one's going to win. It's going to be extinction. It's unfortunate.

SS: Do you go to meetings and talk to regulators and elected officials?

[112:57]

JR: I try to. I try to. But it's hard to, with my schedule. Working for someone, I'm expected to keep the boat in the ocean as much as possible. But we have a representative from the company that will go a lot. We're usually represented even if we can't make it. Our ideas are represented through him. I don't know how it goes. It's hard to make them, but I try to. My dad was involved in New York State for a while. They had a surf clam advisory board to rewrite the regulations. He was involved in that for a while. He went to a bunch of meetings. I used to go with him a lot. You go to those meetings and it's tough. Sometimes you don't feel like you've been heard. Sometimes you feel like you're asked to comment but it doesn't matter anyway. There's a lot of times where it feels like decisions are already made and they're just going through motions. Like to say that you're going to cut a quota by seventy

percent, but public comment is open for another month, and to get however many thousands and hundreds of negative responses, and to still cut the quota by seventy percent, how is it that you even took anybody's word into consideration?

SS: Is that the cod quota that you're referring to, or herring?

JR: I think it was. I'm just referring to in general. I'm just using seventy percent as a number, because it's big. If you're going to cut a quota by that much, and say that you're listening to the people, and you got all this negative feedback and you still did it, are you really holding true to your word? Are you really listening to what people are saying? There's a lot of trust issues, too, with management. There's so many different intertwined things that end up coming with the cause and effect with this. There's just so many variables. That's the word I'm looking for. Then you got all the regulatory bodies that are involved. There's so many people that are involved in this. It's almost like if we had, "Alright, these are the people who are going to represent us as far as a regulatory body," and had fishermen that are going to represent us. Isn't that all you really need? Do you really need this advisory panel, and this one, and this one works under this one? It's kind of like, why do you need this many people? I feel like you get more done with less people. I'm not saying that less people as in "Oh, well, no one ever goes to the meetings." This is the one board that we deal with. We don't have to go through them, and then talk to someone else. This is how we make the policy—with them and us. That's coming from a fisherman's view that, "Hey, that might be the best thing." You may have other variables come in. Well, ok, there's a representative that is going to represent whoever needs to be represented. I'm just thinking of different ways that you could even try to do regulations differently.

[116:53]

SS: Just simplify the process so it's easier to engage in?

JR: Yeah. It doesn't have to be as complicated. They don't have to feel like they're against us, and we shouldn't feel like we're against them. We're all involved in the same fishery. We should be almost like a team, for lack of a better term. There's got to be some kind of cohesiveness.

SS: Between the fisherman or between the fishermen and the policy makers?

JR: No, between the fishermen and the government and science and the policy makers.

SS: People shouldn't be at odds; they should be working in concert?

JR: Right. I just see it as it's such a complicated thing, and it doesn't have to be that way. It's almost like it's complicated to make it easy. It's like complicated so that it's easy for whoever the powers that be are, the policy and regulations are made so complicated so that anything that anyone wants to fight on it, they can't.

SS: They get dragged down a rabbit hole of this regulation or that little regulation?

JR: And they get what they want anyway. That's what I'm thinking. We got to see what happens. I just hope there's change. Really, the only way that we're going to get it is to fight.

Not fight, but come together and make some sort of—there's got to be change. If we can agree on that, then you can agree on other things. I hope it happens. It's going to be sad if it doesn't. It really is going to be not a happy day if we come to that. If you think about it, besides the fishermen, how many other people does it affect? It trickles down. It affects you, people that have fish houses, it affects this person, that person, gear makers, fuel. It's not just the fishermen. New Bedford is a perfect example. All those shuttered factories on the waterfront that were all probably fish processors or something associated with the fishing industry. They're just gone. I worked out of New Bedford for a couple of months. It was scary. It was like, "Woah. This is what happens when things collapse. Holy shit. Woah." It was not something I was expecting to see, because I had never been there. Woah. These huge brick buildings, abandoned, looking like they'd been there for years. That fleet has shrunk considerably from what it used to be. It's still huge. It's at least the biggest on the East Coast. I think it is, at least. It's a fraction of what it once was. Back in the whaling days, it was full of thousands of ships. The whole harbor was full of ships. I can just imagine. You look at it. It's almost like we've been on this slowly declining amount of commercial fishermen for centuries now. There was thousands and thousands back then. Then there was a thousand. Then there was hundreds. Not there's maybe a hundred. It just keeps going down and down and down. I think that's why you don't see the young fishermen. You're losing jobs. The people that have them aren't going to give them up. They're going to keep them, especially if they're paying the bills. I think that's why a lot of young people—besides trying to own a boat, but even working for someone—it's hard to get in. Even in New York State, if you wanted to get a New York State food fish permit, you have to prove that you made X amount of dollars off the water for X amount of years or whatever it was. Which I understand and I don't at the same time. If you were opening it up, and saying, "Ok, people have a chance to make a living doing this," why would you have to have a history of income? New York State isn't that way. New York State is completely limited entry. But if you were to open it up, that's just a weird thing to me. Especially someone that's had other permits for years, and then applies for a different one, "Well, you need this, this, and this." Why would you have to prove that? You're getting into that business to make money. Why is it that my lack of making money in this business is going to stop me from possibly making money? That's the regulation stuff that I feel is backwards. Stuff like that just really doesn't make sense to me. That's New York State for you. They're a whole different story. We don't have to get into that.

SS: Well, why don't we wrap it up? Any final thoughts? Anything you'd like to close on? A parting comment?

JR: Yes. Save us. We don't want to become extinct. It's tough to make it as it is, and a little bit of help for younger fishermen may go a long way. Maybe we'll be able to take back the market at King Kullen and Whole Foods. Yeah. Save us, basically. Save us, please.

SS: Alright, I hope that message gets through. I will do my best to share that. Let me shut this off and I've got a couple of other things to go over with you, paperwork-wise.

[end of interview]

[124:26]