

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. Today is April 11, 2016. I'm talking with Jon Semlear of Sag Harbor, who is a traditional fisherman/bayman here on the East End. Can you tell me very briefly a little bit about your family history on the water?

Jon Semlear: Well, I'm actually a first-generation water person or waterman. My family's been in Sag Harbor for about seventy years. My father's actually a local physician. When Sag Harbor was a small town, before the influx of city wealth, he was a GP [general practitioner], and he delivered everybody I went to school with. In my schools, everybody was delivered by my father. So it was a small town back then. But I was always interested in just being on boats and going clamming or scalloping after school or weekends with my father a little bit but on a recreational basis. Sort of one thing led to the other. I went to the University of Rhode Island, and I studied marine affairs and coastal zone management there. I was there for two years. Then I transferred to Southampton College, where I studied environmental studies and some marine science classes. I ultimately graduated from Southampton College. From there, I just started working on the water. During college, I worked on the water and high school, just sort of on a part-time basis. When I graduated from college, I started to go shellfishing, clamming steadily, and scalloping. Then, later got into trap fishing, which is basically my mainstay at this point.

NS: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like when you first got onto the bay? What was a typical catch like? How long did it take you to get a typical catch in a day?

JS: Well, when I first got on the bay, it was before the brown tide.

NS: What year was that?

JS: The brown tide was in 1985.

NS: And when were you born?

JS: I was born in 1960. I was on the bay for a few years full-time before the brown tide hit and pretty much wiped out the scallop industry. It affected most other shellfish to a degree, too.

NS: So can you tell me, those first few years before the brown tide hit, what were you catching? How long would it take you to catch?

JS: Well, I mean, I can't really say. I couldn't really give you timeframes on the catching. But I mean, there were a lot of scallops. They were very prevalent. I went clamming. I went musselling. I did all kinds of shell fishing, and that's pretty much what I did, was all shell fishing when I first started to work on the water.

NS: What kind of equipment were you using?

JS: I was just working out of an eighteen-foot Howard Pickerell garvey that he built me and just using rakes, scratch rakes, bull rakes, dredges, and scallop dredges.

NS: Where did you get your tools from beside the boat, obviously?

JS: Well, I got my original scallop dredges from an old-timer in Greenport. There was a blacksmith over there; Paul was his name. I don't know what his last name was. But he built thousands and thousands of scallop dredges and rakes and anchors, and you name it. But that's where I got my original scallop dredges from him. Then clam rakes I bought from this guy Ray at Armor Instrument. It was up in Sayville, I believe, and Island Fish Net in Sayville and – I don't know – [inaudible] McDonalds, if they still have that place. But it was a really cool old place. Pretty much it, yeah.

NS: Who were your customers?

JS: I sold to the seafood shop in Wainscott primarily. I sold some to John Morris, who now is Mattituck Seafood. I sold some to Cor-J's in Hampton Bays. Then, the scallops I always sold at home here out of my shop. Local people that come to buy scallops. They still do. Last fall, I did the same thing.

NS: Nice, nice. When did you get into the pound trapping?

JS: I got into pound trapping twenty years ago. So I guess that would have been, like, '93, something like that. Yeah, about '93, '94. My friend Kenny Clark and I bought a guy out who was a trap fisherman from Greenport. He was getting out of it, and we bought his gear. Most of it was in awful shape. But the most important thing was we got the sites in the bay that are old sites. When the fish trap sites were first permitted, they had started from zero with the numbers. Well, I have number two, number five, and number seven. So I have some of the original sites, and they're good sites, and that was basically the most important thing that we bought, were the sites when we bought the gear, the equipment. The rest of the equipment we all replaced. I've built all my own nets and cut trap stakes down all over Virginia and everywhere. Because it gets very hard to find the straight poles around here, just because we pound them in, so they have to be really straight; they can't be crooked. When you pump (inaudible) in, you can use just about anything. But the gear we fish is not – it's pretty specific.

NS: Have there been any accidents? People not seeing your nets and plowing into them?

JS: Last year. I'm losing track of time. I guess it was a year and a half ago; there was a – yes, there was an accident. Did not hit my trap. But somebody hit a trap in a boat, and they were badly injured. I don't know what, if anything, has come of it. But other than the fact that they changed the regulations, we had – well, we just had to have a DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation]]permit. Then we had to get a Coast Guard permit after that. Then we had – we didn't have to have lights on our traps before. I always did just because it was the safe thing to do. They made that a requirement. You also have to have your name and your number on your trip, which is a standard thing. But I have had traps run into. Never had a boat stay there. Never heard of an injury. But it does happen occasionally.

NS: I know the Town of Brookhaven –

JS: Yeah, they made them illegal, I think.

NS: Yeah, because of some drunk boater. After the brown tide hit, were you still able to go shellfishing?

JS: I was to a degree. But I also did some carpentry work. I worked for a local contractor for a number of years. I was doing both. I was working for him part-time, and I was going conching. I had the conch pots that I was setting. I was doing that too. So I augmented – when things got sticky there, I augmented it with doing something else.

NS: How are things now?

JS: Well, the scallop seasons have been pretty good in recent years. I was not scalloping right up until the last day of the season just because I've been working on getting my fish traps together. But some people scalloped right until the last day of the season. There are probably ten or fifteen guys that worked right until the end. So that's been pretty good. The trap fishing is – it's steady for me. I handle a tremendous amount of bunkers, so I sell a lot of bait. A lot of people have not been involved in the bait end of it because A, they're hard to sell, B, since the lobster industry collapsed in Long Island Sound, they're harder to sell. But I do have accounts that take my bunkers, so I'm fortunate. It's also a lot of work. I'm lucky to have this spot because I'm not at a public facility, where I'm trying to unload in some circumstances that are pretty tricky, and my traps are within three miles of my dock here. That makes a big difference. But I handle a tremendous amount of bunkers.

NS: What do you use for bait?

JS: I don't. I mean, my traps have – you don't use bait. They have a leader that goes – it's like a fence thing that goes off and on off the beach. The fish encounter that and then instinctively swim to deeper water.

NS: Like the pound trap.

JS: That's it. That's what I mean. That's what this is. I mean, that's what I'm speaking of. They go into a maze and then through a funnel, into a box, and they're all alive. So that's what I'm doing.

NS: I thought when you said trap fishing that you were talking about a handmade –

JS: No, no, pound trap fishing, yeah.

NS: Because I noticed you have some traps –

JS: Yeah, those are sea bass pots.

NS: Tell me about those.

JS: I don't know much about them because this is the first year I'm going to have them. But you set them – I'll be setting them out in the bay not too far from my traps in the deeper water. You leave them for three days, and you catch black sea bass in them.

NS: Do you use any kind of bait in those?

JS: No, they go in there for shelter, so you don't bait them at all.

NS: Did you make those traps?

JS: No, I bought them from Ketcham in Massachusetts. It's a trap-building company. But all my pound traps, I built every one. I've sewn everything together, built all those traps entirely. Cut all the stakes, pointed them, done everything on those. It's like an industry that you should have been doing in 1950 and 1960 when labor meant nothing. Because time is money now. Everything's hectic. Growing up in Sag Harbor, raising three children, I was the only one the whole time my kids were in school that made even a little bit of money off the water. So I mean, that's really unusual – where I am here, in Sag Harbor School District, I was the only parent that was a fisherman. East Hampton and Southold and Hampton Bays were a lot more. But here, there's just not.

NS: Now, when you were growing up, did you have friends whose parents were fishermen?

JS: A lot of people went scalloping to augment their regular incomes. But I didn't really know many steady full-time fishermen.

NS: Who have been your mentors in terms of fishing?

JS: Well, I'd say even though he's the same age as me, my friend Ken Clark in Shelter Island has been a best friend and a mentor. He's always been a hard worker. We share information every day. We're on the phone every day. I've learned a lot from him. He has fishing people behind him [for] generations. Then another mentor of mine who – he's passed away ten years now is Ed Warner, Sr., who was a trustee with me. I was on the trustees with him for fourteen years. And then his son was appointed his spot after Ed passed. I think Danny, who is Ed's son now, is a sixth-generation bayman. So he was like a father figure to me and a mentor, and a great friend. I actually did the eulogy at his funeral. He was really helpful to me. He was great. I loved Ed. So I would say my buddy Kenny and Ed.

NS: What are some of the major challenges in doing pound trap fishing?

JS: Well, I guess the setup. This is the latest I've ever not had my stakes in the water. So the weather, when we're trying to put stakes in, it's got to be really flat and good. So the last day that we were on the water putting stakes in was Easter Sunday. So that's three weeks, and that almost never happens. We put five sets of stakes in, in one week prior to that. Then the weather turned. So the weather is tough. Where I fish on the west side of Jessup, any kind of west wind – there's a lot of exposure there. When you're carrying bunkers and stuff, it's tricky. I fish out of a relatively small boat, a twenty-five-footer. You're putting four or five thousand pounds of fish in there, and you got to be careful. It's challenging. The other thing that's challenging in a different way is that you are spending a lot of time working on equipment, and you're not getting paid for it. So you hope you catch enough fish so that you get paid for when you aren't getting paid when you're working on gear. That's why I say it's kind of a – it's something out of the past, what I do. I mean, it's a lot of labor. If you don't love it, it's not something that you can do. There's a lot of labor involved in it. The expenses are relatively high. A lot of my friends that I grew up with they're in regular jobs, I guess you'd say. It's really hard for them to get the concept of me standing there for hours, weeks, sewing nets, doing all the gear work that I do that is just part of it. There's no getting around it. If you don't do it, you can't go fishing. If your gear is not

maintained, then your traps fall down in a storm, or things are not – you have to have decent equipment. So I'm pretty – I never leave anything – I never leave a task not done. You have to have a lot of self-discipline. When you work for yourself, if you're not – like now, I'm fifty-five, going to be fifty-six in May. I'm starting to say, "How much longer can I work like this?" It's a little scary. If I get hurt, there's nobody. I'm out. But that's the way it is, I guess in any other – anybody that's self-employed. The body's the machine, and if it goes bad, you're in bad shape.

NS: How have the environmental changes with all these new houses on the waterfront changed how you fish?

JS: Well, I think that we've had these red, mahogany red tides recently. I don't know if you can directly relate to shorefront building. I think it's a combination of groundwater flow from all over. It's groundwater flow from farmlands, from – who knows – vineyards, from anywhere. I don't know whether you can really point a finger at it. In some of the years when we had the really bad red tide, I had fish dying in my traps. If they can escape, they're fine. So if they could swim out of the bay away from a red tide, they're okay. But if they're pounded, like they are in my traps and the red tide sits on them for a day or two, a lot of them will die. I had a lot of fish die like that, especially bunkers. It hasn't been like that the last couple of years, but three or four years ago, that happened to me.

NS: Are you seeing changes in the kinds of fish that you've been catching?

JS: Well, I used to catch a lot of butterfish. I don't anymore. I used to catch a lot of blue herring. I don't. I don't catch as many smooth dogfish as I used to. There still seems to be a lot in the ocean. I know the ocean gillnetters still see a lot of them. I guess that's pretty much it. The other stuff – there's tons of bluefish, more than we can keep. We're on very tight restrictions on those. Last year was the most bunkers I've ever seen in my life. Right now, there are untold bunkers in the bay. I mean, I should be fishing now. I usually start on the 16th or 18th. I probably won't be starting till the 22nd or 23rd [inaudible] this year. But last year was the most bunkers I've ever caught. It was incredible. There's a lot of striped bass in the bay, and last year was a good thing because we could keep them on June 1st. Normally we can't. Previous to that, we couldn't keep them until July 1st. By July 1st, they're out of my area. So I have to go into the ocean and catch them with somebody else, doing something else. But this last year, I was able to catch them in my traps. Normally, we just release them all. What else? Porgies. Last year, there happened not to be a lot of porgies. But sometimes, when a lot of bluefish come in with the porgies, the porgies will not settle in. But I catch a lot of porgies in my traps normally. Fluke. I catch a variety of stuff. One thing I don't catch many of – like horseshoe crabs. I used to catch hundreds a day in each trap. I get very few, very, very few. They've been affected in my area, for sure. But pretty much, my fishery is fairly steady. The same thing happens every year that's within a few days. This fish shows up; the next one shows up. There's a whole succession of things. I write it down every day in a little ledger.

NS: You mentioned that you go for striped bass offshore as well. Can you tell me a little bit about your offshore –?

JS: Well, no, when I could not catch them in my traps, because literally by July, they're gone from the area. I mean, the water warms up, and they leave, and they're in the ocean. So I

usually would go with a gillnetter and fill my traps, and then you would split them with him. But I actually did a run a boat in the ocean for a gillnetter three summers ago, too, in addition to doing my traps. But that's how I would do it in the ocean on a gillnet if I did not fill them in my traps. But them changing that to June 1st was huge for me because then I could catch all my own fish, which was good.

NS: Have any of the regulations, either by the town or the state, had a significant impact?

JS: Well, the town regulations I have no – there's no jurisdiction from Southampton town on what I do. The state regulations – the quota systems are very restrictive. The bluefish quota is a thousand pounds. Last summer, they closed it for a period of time because the quota was met. Then they opened it back up for a couple of hundred pounds. But when you're catching ten thousand pounds of bluefish in a trap, and you're only allowed to keep a thousand, and you're releasing them, it's frustrating. Then two weeks later, they're gone. So my fishery is like – things come in bunches. So when the bunches are there, it's nice if you can catch those bunches because when the water heats up, or various things happen throughout the season, I know when those things are going to happen. It's just the natural way it goes. So when you're catching a lot of fish, it'd be nice if you could keep those fish because you know in three weeks you're not going to be catching those fish. It's not like you could take that portion that you couldn't catch every day and string them along. So that and the fluke quota has been very restrictive, and this year it's going to be restrictive again. The porgy quota has not been so restrictive. It's been more relaxed, so that's been helpful. But yeah, they've definitely had an effect. It's tricky.

NS: If you could tell the DEC “do this” or “don't do this,” what would it be?

JS: Well, first of all, they have done some good things. Changing the striped bass season was huge, and that was the DEC. So that was really helpful, so I really appreciated that. The other thing, I think that somehow they're going to – there's got to be a shorter synapse, if you will, between the science and the data and what's actually going on. Because by the time you figure out all the data, maybe that big herd of fish is – something else has happened to them, and it's gone already. I think they maybe have to use more anecdotal data, if possible. I mean, when there's a lot of something there, let us catch it. When it's not, then reduce it. The fishermen, like myself, don't want to be the one to catch the last fish. If we do that, then I can't go next year. So I'm not saying be a pig about it. I know they're in a tough state. Well, I shouldn't say – we're in a tough state because, for some reason, we do not have the necessary data collected over the years to show historical catches, and other states did. So our quota, like if you go up and down – you know the drill [inaudible] –

NS: Oh, I know [inaudible] –

JS: – up and down the coast is –

NS: New York got the short end of the stick.

JS: Right. Whose fault was it? Was it the DEC at the time that they didn't require reporting? Was it ours? I don't know. But we don't have the history, so that hurts.

NS: I think this gives us quite a bit of information. Are there things from your days as a trustee that have helped you as a fisherman?

JS: I would say it was more the other way around. It was my fishing that helped me as a trustee.

NS: How?

JS: Because just in my getting around the town shell fishing and fishing and coming from Eastport to Sag Harbor Cove, I really knew the lay of the land before I got in there as a trustee. So when projects and issues came up, I had a picture of it.

NS: Can you give me an example of when it came in very helpful?

JS: I would say pretty much every project that we ever worked on. Any shellfish project we work on, where we did augmentation of – we put juvenile scallops in, knowing where to put them because historically [we know] where they had thrived in the past. Knowing where to put the shellfish because I knew where they thrive. Knowing what was an appropriate place to replace a bulkhead and what was not because maybe horseshoe crabs spawn there or there was a nesting site for something. Just having a background where your heart was involved in it, and you weren't just reading it off of some text and trying to wing it. I mean, historically, since the beginning, in 1686, the trustees, there have been watermen on the trustees. That's not to say it should all be – there's got to be a balance. But having a background working on the water was definitely helpful to me being a trustee. You are stewards of town waters. Like old Ed used to say, Ed Warner – he clammed all throughout the town, and that [inaudible] clam rake was like a map in his hand of the whole town. He felt his way along the whole town through the end of that clam rake. I would have to say that was the same for me.

NS: I've always been curious. Are there certain places that used to be very productive for shellfish?

JS: Yes, there were. I mean, the Quantuck Bay up in Quogue was very productive. I didn't work up there. I mean, geographically, it was at the other end of the town, and I didn't work up there. But Ed Warner and his dad and them, they had tremendous shell fishing there, and those places completely collapsed. So there are areas where there is nothing. There are other areas where things have rebounded. But that's one place that comes up.

NS: Do you know why it collapsed?

JS: I don't know. We had all kinds of studies done, the trustees, and trying to figure it out. We never really could find – we made no-take zones. We put shellfish in there to try to augment it. We had the worst brown tide blooms in there every summer and worm coral that grew on oysters that we put in there. So there were a lot of issues there. But we really never could find out why.

NS: Do you think that development has changed the ecology of the bays?

JS: Well, yeah, I would say definitely. There's a lot of stuff on Long Island. It's a little sandbar, so to speak, and there are a lot of – but it's not necessarily just shorefront homes. I mean, everybody says, "Oh, it's the houses on the water." It's not because the groundwater flows. So

the groundwater is flowing from one – middle of the island, it's going one way. The other – the middle of the island, it's going the other way. So it's either going to the sound, or the ocean, or the bay. So every farm field, every home, whether it's inland or on the water, everything you put down, everything that drains off of the roads from vehicles – antifreeze, oil, rubber off of tires. Everybody that puts stuff on their lawns. Every single thing is on the surface of the land. There's only one place for it to go. It runs directly into the water. It goes into the groundwater and then runs to the water. But eventually, it's getting there. Eventually, I think it will be to the point where everything is suffocated. Things cannot go on forever. We have little glimpses, and a lot of times, when we have bright spots, we make them brighter than they are because there have not been a lot of bright spots. I guess it's the nature of looking for the best in things. It's just what it is. As a trustee, I always said what we're doing is we're holding our thumb in the holes in the wall. We're holding our arms up, trying to keep the wall from cascading and just collapsing on us. I want to say you're fighting a losing battle. You're doing the best you can to try to do environmentally-conscious things and make decisions that are for the greater good for the environment and everything. But there's so much pressure from the building and real estate and the wealth and everything that it's just going like that. Eventually, I don't see any way that things will not collapse. I think it's just – it's like the traffic thing. There's so much traffic on 39, and every year, there's more traffic, and there's more traffic. It's workers going to work on houses. It's people that are coming here. It's just more pressure, more pressure, more pressure. Eventually, the environment will not be able to sustain it.

NS: One last question. Is there a particular experience of something that happened to you on the water that has stayed with you?

JS: You mean like a –?

NS: A good story of something that happened. Either getting caught in a storm –

JS: Yeah, I've had some –

NS: Any close calls?

JS: Yeah, I've had some close calls. This is probably ten or so years ago, ten or twelve years ago. Ed Warne, Jr. and myself – we worked together shell fishing a lot of times in the winter – and his son Dan. We were razor clamming west of Ponquogue Bridge in Shinnecock Bay. It was in the late winter, and there was a big ice flow that was coming down on us. We thought we were going to be okay, and Ed shot up with the boat and tried to push the ice flow off. He couldn't get it to move. So he came shooting back to us. His son and I were in the water with the churning mechanism for razor clamming. He shot back to us. We jumped in the boat, and the ice came over us, and it almost flipped the boat up. We were on the side. It was scary. The rack got tumbled, it broke. We did recover it under the ice. We were able to get the motor off of it before the ice came. But it almost flipped the boat over, and it was brutal cold, nasty. So that was one thing. Then we were in Mecox Bay, Ed Warner and I and his son again, steamer clamming. This was in December about eight or nine years ago. This was this huge storm that came through, and it blew a hundred miles an hour. We were on the bay. We went to the landing, and then those guys jumped off. We were on the windy side of the bay, and then I took my boat and ran it against – to another landing because we were going to get swamped. It was in

the lee. It ended up that the windows blew out of the Southampton High School. It was this crazy, just incredible hundred-mile-an-hour gale that came through in December. That was one of those things we talk about to this day. It was a frightening experience. I know there was a guy that – (Doug James?) in his thirty-six-foot boat, conching in Peconic. It blew the windows out of it. I mean in Peconic Bay. There was a friend of mine scalloping in Noyack here, and I came home from Mecox that day. He almost swamped his boat. He made it into my creek, and he was soaked, standing in front of my wood stove, trying to dry out. So it was one of those – a crazy day. But those are two things that stick in my mind.

NS: I have one more question. Sorry. How come you never decided to do offshore fishing?

JS: I don't know. I did do it one summer. One summer, I worked running a gillnetter. A friend of mine owns two gillnet boats. I ran a gillnet boat on the beach for bass and bluefish. In the fall, I went monk fishing. I ran the boat monk fishing, which is, like, fifteen, eighteen miles offshore. So that was an experience. One of those things that I don't – I wouldn't want a steady diet of it, but it was an experience. I live in Sag Harbor. The bay is close to me. The bay worked out for me and just [was] what I knew and was accustomed to. I really didn't know much about working on a dragger or being offshore or anything like that. Just sort of stuck to what I knew. One thing I can add, too. Nobody showed me anything about this net work. When I first bought the nets – my friend Kenny had a little bit of knowledge about net work – I went to the library and got a book.

NS: [inaudible]

JS: It was, like, how to fix holes in a net and stuff. I remember being in the yard when I first got nets, and I had the book opened up like this. I'm looking at it, and I'm looking at a hole in the net, and I'm trying to follow it. I'm really good at it now. I could cut tapers for people. I love it. It's a hobby of mine. I build nets for other people, friends of mine. I enjoy it. It's like therapy. But that's how I started out because I didn't have a dad that was in the industry to show me or anything like that. It's kind of funny. I tell people that; they're, like, "What?" I got a book, and I just kept picking away, and I learned how to do it. I say it was a blessing because the equipment I got was so bad. It had so many holes. It was in such crappy shape. At the time, I thought it was a disaster. But it really was a good thing because it forced me to be able to fix anything. That was one of those things.

NS: Anything else you'd like to share before we –?

JS: I don't know. I've been very fortunate to work on the water. It's been rewarding. When you catch a lot of fish, you have a big day, there's nothing like it. It's like an endorphin rush. You set the whole thing up. You're doing it yourself. Nobody's doing it for you. You really get pumped. You get high. It's like a *yahoo* type of thing. It can be the best thing you ever did. Then, when things are going badly, you're going, "What am I doing?" How in the world did I end up doing this? I could have done – my friends have been mowing lawns and making a fortune, and [it's] steady. What am I doing? So you go through these ups and downs. But I have been fortunate to – I've put three kids through college and two masters. So I made out okay as far as that goes. I was able to help my family. I've had a lot of freedom. Nobody tells me to go to work. But I never don't go to work. I always go. Maybe it was a little socially – I was

always working when other people were maybe doing other things. I had a little free time and stuff. Some of it, I could have backed off on. But it was just like a – I don't know. It's an addictive thing. You didn't want to let something go, and you keep going. It's a nice day; you don't want to go. You go. You go. You go. You go. It's been an unusual ride, and I've been fortunate. I'm pretty good at what I do. I couldn't do it if I didn't live on this property, though, the way I fish. There's no way. If I didn't have this property, I could not work out of a facility that is not – a lot of people do. But just the setup I have, it just is very – I mean, I look out the window; I know exactly what I'm up to. I know what the weather's going to be when I get outside the creek. There are those flat spots there. I know exactly – when I look out, I know what my day is. I can hear it at night. I know what I'm going to be up against the next morning – wind. So I've been fortunate.

NS: This is off the subject, but I've been asking fishermen, how do you know when a bad storm is really heading our way?

JS: I don't know; I watch the weather. So I mean, I've got apps on my phone and whatever it is. So I watch it a lot. I have a couple of sites that I go on, and it shows me the hourly winds and stuff.

NS: Before we had all this great technology, how could you tell?

JS: I don't know. I guess just watching the sky, that's all. I mean, I've got my ass handed to me a lot of times with traps, where I've been holding the trap and – not so much in recent years. But years ago, things happened where it was scary. Black as night and blowing forty miles an hour from five miles an hour two minutes before.

NS: We'll talk about that another time.

JS: Now, I got my phone, so I can look at the apps on it.

NS: On that note, let's finish up this interview. Thank you very, very much, Jon.

JS: Great.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/9/2022