

Steve Waring: This is Steve Waring with Long Island Traditions. Today is July 12th of the year 2000. I will be speaking with Bob Kaler, a crabber, on Great South Bay. And he docks down in Patchogue. For this interview, we will actually be accompanied by Skylar, his helper in crabbing, and we will be on the boat. This is tape 007 and this is side A. Okay, could you tell me your full name?

Bob Kaler: [laughter] Bob Kaler.

SW: When and where were you born?

BK: In Patchogue in 1945.

SW: Have you lived in this area your whole life?

BK: Same street.

SW: Same street?

BK: Yes. Different houses, same street.

SW: Are you married?

BK: Yes. Everybody's married. [inaudible]. You have to be married.

SW: Do you have any children?

BK: Yes. A son and a daughter.

SW: What is your occupation?

BK: I'm a grounds man in the daytime and a crabber at night and on the weekends.

SW: How did you get into crabbing?

BK: Clamming went bad in the [19]70s. I had to switch over to something. Crabbing was the best.

SW: What type of clamming did you do when you were clamming?

BK: [inaudible] clams.

SW: Have you always lived out in the Great South Bay?

BK: Yes, yes. And in Spring, we work in the North Shore for bait mussels.

SW: Bait mussels?

BK: Yes. That was another job.

SW: Yes.

BK: So, we have all kinds of neat things to do.

SW: What do you like about working on the [inaudible]?

BK: Freedom. I like freedom.

SW: Do you work by yourself or with a partner?

BK: I have that guy, Sky. He doesn't want to work. [laughter]

SW: [inaudible]

BK: I try, but he doesn't want to work. [inaudible] for twenty years.

SW: Do you need a special license or anything to be a crabber out here?

BK: Oh yes.

SW: Is it one you have to redo?

BK: What was that?

SW: Is it one you have to redo?

BK: Every year. But [inaudible]. What you see out here is what you got.

SW: Do you have any idea how many crabbers are out here?

BK: In this area, about seven or eight. [inaudible] to the west.

SW: If you had to describe this area to someone who has never been here, what would you tell them?

BK: Besides beautiful? It's beautiful. That's all I can describe. Right now, we're in a boat named Paradise, and that's what we're in.

SW: What type of boat do you have?

BK: Chesapeake classic.

SW: How long have you been running?

BK: This one? [inaudible].

SW: A seventeen footer.

BK: Yes. And if you don't improve, you're doing something wrong, you know.

SW: What do you need to do to get ready to set your trap lines?

BK: [inaudible].

SW: How important is it that you do that?

BK: It's real important, wise guy. Besides the gasoline.

SW: Does it take a lot [inaudible] for two people?

BK: No. [inaudible]. It's a little longer. All right.

SW: What got you started on working on the bay?

BK: I guess living by the bay.

SW: Did any of your family work?

BK: No. Nope. Nobody that I know of.

SW: Is there anyone around to show you what to do?

BK: You learn as you went. You know what I'm saying? We were little kids with the boss over there. You have to catch little piggy fish and you'll get maybe seventy-five cents for attempted bait.

SW: So, it is something you started. How young were you when you started doing that?

BK: Oh, probably ten, I guess. About ten or eleven. When you live by the water, you have to play by the water.

SW: Now, if you are going crabbing, what type of [inaudible] do you use?

BK: [inaudible]

SW: Why do you like those?

BK: They've been great for twenty years. They've been catching. [inaudible] He never made a penny. No one ever paid him.

SW: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen to this area?

BK: More crabbers. More [inaudible] than it used to be. It used to be like three or four here, now it's doubled. Maybe tripled.

SW: Full time in the bay?

BK: Full time.

SW: Did you ever clam full time?

BK: Yes, I clammed full time. In fact, I did a job for twelve years, too.

SW: Why do you like crabbing better?

BK: Working in a factory. And freedom, I guess, like we said before. Same thing.

SW: What are some things that you use to attract the crabs with?

BK: For bait, you mean?

SW: Yes.

BK: Mackerel is good. Flounder. [inaudible]. Any kind of fish like that. [inaudible].

SW: [inaudible]

BK: Cheap is good. They hold up pretty well, too. [inaudible].

SW: [inaudible]

BK: [inaudible]

SW: Do you think it is important that you really need to know and understand the Bay in order to work out there?

BK: Oh, definitely. A lot of things you have to consider. Wind, tide.

SW: How about in the winter? Do you work out in the winter?

BK: No, I try to avoid that. [laughter] After Thanksgiving, I don't work until March.

SW: What would you want people to know about those who work on the Bay?

BK: That it's a long, tough job. Cold in the winter, warm in the summer.

SW: What do you get out of it?

BK: Fun, freedom, and more fun.

SW: Would you recommend that younger people go and start working in the Bay if they have a chance?

BK: No. Computers. That's where the money is. Right, Sky? Go for computers.

SW: What do you think the future of the Bay holds?

BK: Oh, it'll stay good. It'll be good as long as they don't dump too much junk in it, you know. Computers are where the money is though. Or folklore. They have the money, them guys.

SW: What does your family think about it? You working out on the Bay?

BK: Oh, they love it. My wife's a turn, so thank God for that. You have a bad day, at least she's making money. It's always good to have two incomes. You need that to survive.

SW: Was there a time when that was not the case?

BK: You always needed two incomes. Back in the 70s you could live on it, but now, no more.

SW: No more. Do you think there will be a time that you could make it just working on the Bay?

BK: Some guys do, you know. But they're the younger guys. They put a big day in.

SW: What about the recreational people? Have you seen a bigger increase in recreational?

BK: Oh, surely. Big time. Blew up tenfold. This marina over here had nothing at one time. [inaudible] used to be there. You wouldn't find a [inaudible] in there now. Charlie over there. The rest are the big boats or the big money. Nobody wants a clam digger. Seriously. There's another marina up there. I think they threw all the clam diggers out. Got new owners.

SW: They got new owners and wouldn't let the working guys dock?

BK: Yes. And it smells. And, you know.

SW: What do you like about where you dock here on this one river?

BK: No one bothers you and it's the perfect place for bait.

SW: How long have you docked there?

BK: Here?

SW: Yes.

BK: Twenty years.

SW: Twenty years?

BK: Twenty years. My best friend owns it. And the boss, same guy. The boss owns it, so good way to go.

SW: Did you have a lot of camaraderie with the people down here that dock by you?

BK: Yes. Everybody's friendly.

SW: They look out for one another?

BK: Oh, yes. Definitely, definitely. That guy that was in the boat before I went out in a big blow. He came out looking for me to make sure I made it back.

SW: Is that pretty typical of the guys who work the Bay to keep an eye on each other?

BK: Yes, and a little clique. Everybody's got their clique.

SW: Do you ever pull people in that get stranded out?

BK: I have many times. Just had one last week.

SW: Why do you do that?

BK: Well, if you get stuck, you'd like to be towed in, too. That's Jimmy Roads. The man you're looking for.

SW: Yes.

BK: Does he know your name or anything? You want to tell him?

SW: Do you think you will continue working the Bay then full-time?

BK: Oh, yes. Year and a half, full-time, can't wait.

SW: You are still going to stick with crabbing?

BK: Crabbing's my main man. That's it. And then like I said, mussels in the winter.

SW: Okay. Well, I thank you for your time today.

BK: Yes. No problem. You can come any time, you know that.

[end of transcript]