

Steve Warrick: Hey, this is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. Today, I will be speaking with Lenny Nilson we are at his, company here in Islip. The company's name is L and L Bait and Tackle. We will be discussing working on the Great South Bay and in the bait business. Today's date is July 15th, 2000, and this is tape 008, side A. Could you state your full name for me?

Lenny Nilson: Leonard Nilson.

SW: When and where were you born?

LN: I was born in Bay Shore, Long Island in July 1947.

SW: Have you lived in this area during most of your lifetime here?

LN: During most of my life, yes. In the early seventies, I spent some time commercial fishing down in Florida and in Patterson in North Carolina during the winter months.

SW: How did you get into commercial fishing? Were one of your parents involved?

LN: Yes, my father. I was born into the business. My father immigrated from Sweden back in 1929, he came to this country. He had a commercial fishing background. His whole family, we go back probably a couple hundred, two, three hundred years in the fishing industry. He immigrated here in the 1920s. He started working on Great South Bay and then all through the 1930s. By about 1945, he decided to go into the bait business. Actually, I grew up on West Fire Island, which is an island out here in Great South Bay. I spent the first five years of my life out there on the island. My dad had a shrimp and live killie business. Then by 1952, he came ashore to the mainland and started in with the wholesale bait business, which we are in today in the freezer warehouse and distributor and things like that. So, two more years, we have been in business fifty years now.

SW: What was one of your first times out with your dad? What some of your early experiences out there?

LN: My early experience is I was [laughter] probably about four or five years old. My father used to take me out on his workboats with him. Specifically, one time, he had anchored the boat down by the inlet to look for a driftwood, which he built his docks and staving out of. He asked me to stay in the boat while he went out of site looking for wood. You just do not tell a four, five-year-old to stay alone in a boat. What happened is he came back and he found me walking along the jetty down at the end of the inlet on top of the rock jetty. One slip on there and I would have been over into the tide and gone. I remember that scared him to death to never leave me out of sight again. Then also I just remember working on the boats with him as he would catch the bait, helping sort the bait and pick the fish out, and various things like that on the boat. Anything that a child could do at that age to help him out on the boat. When you are a kid, it is fun. It's not just work, it's fun.

SW: About what time did you start getting into the work itself then?

LN: Well, the actual work itself, probably, in my teenage years, by the time I was getting to be sixteen, seventeen years old, I was starting to get active working full time on the bay with my father at the plant and everything like that. I went to college for Marine Biology in 1965. I have an associate's degree in Marine Biology there from Suffolk Community College. That was one of the first years they had the program at that time. That is probably when in my teenage years, really got into it active full-time. Of course, after college and then after I was drafted during the Vietnam War era in 1968, then after returning in 1971 from overseas, that is when it became a real full-time occupation for me. Say 1971 when I got into it full-time fishing and working in the industry.

SW: Were you mostly working in the bay or on the ocean as well?

LN: It started off in the early [19]70s when I came back. It was primarily in the Bay with the bait fishery. But then my father sold the plant that he had over there in Bay Shore. I came over here where I am now, and I was in partnership with these people. I worked in the ocean from about the mid-1970s to 1986. I spent about twelve years in the ocean with the pound nets. We were the last company on the East Coast and probably in the United States to fish these pound nets or trap nets with poles in the ocean.

SW: What was the company's name?

LN: That was the Sunrise Fish Company, which eventually evolved into L & L wholesale Bait now. That is what we have now is just basically a continuation, but we just changed corporation names.

SW: Could you tell me a little bit about how you would go about pound fishing? What do you need to do to get prepared to do that?

LN: Well, to get prepared for that, I guess the first thing is the sites that we have where we're allowed to put these in the ocean was up to the Army Corps of Engineers. I remember, we were under their jurisdiction. There was allotted sites where we were allowed to place our nets and nowhere else. The Sunrise Fish Company at one time, because they started doing the pound nets back in the early 1920s. That is how long it went on. They had four or five sites as well as a dozen other companies on Long Island here back then. By the 1960s, the Sunrise Fish Company was the last one to do it. All the other companies, due to economic reasons, were all out of business and Sunrise was the last to do it. To start to do it the first thing is, once this site is established where you are allowed, where your permit is, then you have to bring out the poles or trees. These were seventy-five and eighty-foot hickory trees because they had a lot of flexibility to them. We could pump them into the ocean floor, and they could take the motion of the waves and the storms without snapping off as other woods would do. So, we had to bring them out by barge. We had a sixty-foot self-propelled barge. We brought these poles out in the water. We had a blueprint, and we would pump these with water pressure into the bottom of the ocean, into about twelve to fifteen feet under the bottom, and we would pump them in the form of our blueprint. They had to be accurate, and they had to be in that blueprint form because when the nets were brought out to be suspended and hung from these poles, if they were out of

measurement and dimension, the nets would not fish right. They would be all out of whack or they would pull too much one way or another way. Basically, after the first ice, the month of March, you wanted to get the poles out there in the ocean and start pumping them. You could only work on ice days, of course, you know, with the barge and pumping them. So, we were restricted by weather. Once we got the poles, in the bottom, in the configuration we wanted, then the nets were all brought out. The nets were connected to frames. The frames were hung from the poles off the block and tackles. Then the nets were laid out from the back of the barge. As we went through the poles, they were laid out through the back of the barge. Then by winches pulled up to their respective places on the frames and lines and tied in place. Basically, the pound nets, they were hung a little above the surface with the top, and then they were weighted down with huge iron weights on the bottom and they fished just off the bottom. We were in about thirty-eight to forty feet of water. I think we were in forty feet of water; our nets were about thirty-eight foot deep and of course, they were closed at the bottom. So, after the fish, the principle of a trap net is there is about a half a mile of a straight leader. It is all based on migratory fish. In the spring, the fish would migrate along the coast, and in the fall, they would migrate back in the other direction along the coast. So, these fish would come along, generally from the west, traveling east following along the coast of Long Island. They would hit a straight line of netting or with dip poles. They would want to go offshore in deeper water to follow around. They would follow along this half a mile of straight leader, as we called it. They would find themselves into another area, which was an opening, which we called the hearts. The hearts were circular, and they continued to want to go offshore in deeper water. The hearts would lead into what we called a funnel, which would be fifteen foot wide and converge down into three or four foot at it is end. The fish would be led through the funnel, wanting to go off in a deeper water, and then they would fall into the area, which we called the pound or the trap, and that is where it got its name, that type of fishing. It was like a big cereal bowl. It had a bottom to it. The fish could swim around and around and around, but they were not smart enough to find their way back out that small funnel, that opening. Basically, it would take about the month of March at least, to get the poles out there, and then it would take another few weeks to get the frames and the netting in place. We used to figure probably about a six-week period to get the nets out in place. Because by the second week in April, you wanted to have the nets fishing because that is when the first sign of mackerel and whiting and other things herring would start to come along the beach. Then the real production, the real spring migration would be about the first of May. But there was a few years where everything was in place. A few days later, a northeaster would come through and wipe us out, knock all the poles down, tear up all the nets. Then we could be looking at many week process to get the site cleared, get new poles out, and get new nets in. The advantage of pound fishing was fish were coming in twenty-four hours a day. You were constantly fish were coming in. All you had to go out there each day with the carrier boat and lift the nets up and bail the fish live. That was why trap fish brought the best price because they were quality. You were bailing live fish out of the nets down into the fish hole, so you had the best quality fish you could buy. The negative aspect to it is you were at the mercy of the ocean and storms. Hurricanes were our biggest threat. A hurricane could wipe us out overnight as which Gloria did. We lost everything over a hundred thousand dollars' worth of equipment to Gloria. Then there was another storm I remember back in the 1976. I don't remember the name of that one, but we lost everything back then too. In the last fifteen-year period, we have had two devastating, where we did a lot of damage to the plant here and there. But that's how much it took a lot of time to place these nets in. As the fish migration started to decline over the years, I

think a lot of it my own, I don't have any statistics to really back this up. But as more processors and trawlers were able to follow the fish stocks up and down the coast, twelve months out of the year, I believe they broke up that migration run. The stocks weren't there in any numbers anymore for the migration. Besides being at the mercy of the storms, the other negative thing about trap fishing is that you are not mobile. You are in a permanent site. The fish have to come to you as opposed to you going to the fish. If the migration runs along the beach like they were for decades, then we weren't going to catch the fish. That's basically why, in 1986, we decided to give it up. It became the end of an era because we were the last company doing it. We could not support the overhead of the operation anymore with the amount of fish that was being taken.

SW: Then after 1986, you went back to bait fishing?

LN: Right, After being in the bait business, growing up in it and doing that most of my life and still having a bait business going on here along with the ocean operation, I decided to go back into the bait business full time and that's what I knew. Also, as maybe other baymen have told you, I saw what was happening to the bay, with fish stocks, with all the regulations that we were facing, with the quality of the environment and the water out there. It just looked like not a wise decision for me to try to support my family and mortgage and all the other things that go along with it by just fishing off the bay. Sport fishing is growing larger and larger every year. Unfortunately, the commercial fishing seems to be dwindling. It seemed to be the safest direction for us to go in was to go back into the bait business, which we always knew, because that seems to be the direction. We see so many commercial fishermen today want to continue to work on the bay. But whatever they are catching, it is pretty much geared to ending up back in the hands of the sport fishermen for bait or for whatever use. But it seems to be the way of survival.

SW: What type of bait fishing would you be doing then?

LN: Our bait fishing, some people call them minnows, we call them silver sides. But our specialty has always been the northern silver side, or spearing, as a lot of people call it. That's something that's caught with a haul seine is basically what we use. Very small mesh, you're talking three sixteen and quarter-inch mesh, very small because the fish are very small. It is done out of (sharpies?), eighteen, twenty-foot (sharpies?). It can be done with one man, but it is hard, generally, two-men crew. Basically, we are circle-setting around the bait fish. Then we have to be able to haul it back to a sandbar or beach. As opposed to a purse seine where you can set it in the middle of the water and haul back, the haul seine has to be taken back to some point of land. There is a big bag in the middle of the seine and the fish are forced into the bag and then brought up on the beach basically, and then bailed out into our boats. There is a spring run of bait, that starts around March, runs through about the middle of June, later June. Then there is another fall run again that can start, late August and September, and run all the way till Thanksgiving. We do that again in the fall, for that. But basically, so there is a spring and a fall run for the bait. The other thing that we did for quite a bit was the menhaden or the bunkers, remember the herring family. We use larger haul seines, the small haul seines for the bait. For the minnows, they run a hundred foot and ten or fifteen feet deep. For the menhaden, of course, we are fishing three and four hundred feet nets. That's thirty feet deep, forty feet deep for those. There primarily fished in the rivers in Eastern Long Island. Also, in the bay if it is close enough

to shore. But when they come up into the bays in the rivers, in the spring, primarily same thing, May and June are the two months. We are able to seine them in the rivers up there. The last four, five, six years though, we don't know what happened, but the fish just have not been showing up. Then we are fighting a lot of townships, the state gives us a license to do it, but the town tries to pass a local ordinance to say that we can't. So, it becomes in and out of court with the townships and the fighting of local ordinances. We fought with some towns and we've won the decision and we have won the right to go back and be able to do it. But it seems like we come back and we have to deal with vandalism. Someone has vandalized our boat trailers or our trucks while we are out fishing. There's a lot of harassment out there in the water. It's gotten to the point where most of us gave up the bunker fishing or the menhaden just simply because we just can't take harassment from the towns or the local. The local people are the sport fishermen. What's funny, because we are producing a product for the sports fishermen, and they want it badly, but yet they do not want to us fishing there. Everyone tells us, "Go somewhere else," and everywhere you go, we're supposed to go somewhere else. As one old fisherman said one time, he said, "Where are we supposed to go, up in the trees?" [laughter] Because that's it. So, basically, we've given up the menhaden fishery. But even with the minnows, with the silver sides, with the spearing, as much a demand as there is for it, we seem to be wherever we go, people don't want us there. Let's put it that way.

SW: Now, when you are setting your bait nets out, are you letting the fish come to you at that point? Are you looking for particular spots?

LN: No. The lifecycle of a silver side is probably only about a year and a half. I don't know, quite two years, maybe a year and a half. In other words, the fish that we catch this year, the fish that come back the next year are different fish. They not the same fish because the lifecycle is so short. But what is interesting is for some reason, they come back to the same areas, the same parts of the bay, the same islands, the same rivers. There is some instinct that is telling them they like that bottom, they like that area. So, basically, after a culmination for thirty or forty years doing it, you learn all these areas. So, basically, you go to these areas to look for the fish. It takes a keen eye with the bait fish. You have to be able to read the water. In nice weather, when the water is calm and the sun is out, these fish will jump on top of the water. They can be easily seen. In cold weather, they don't show. Sometimes it's just a little ripple against the wave. It's just a little nose ring, one little piece of bait might come up and stick his nose at the surface and make a little ring on the water. But if your eye can catch it, that is good enough to let you know that there's fish there. If it is cold weather and you know the fish are down below, you'll take a chance of what we call a blind set. We will set the net in the chance that we thought we read something that possibly there might be and sometimes we come up with nothing, sometimes a good catch. A lot of, I guess maybe [laughter] what I might be doing here is, I don't know, who hears it might be divulging a lot of trade secrets. Because a lot of the newer fishermen can go into a river ahead of us and not be able to see the fish because they simply cannot read the water. They cannot read the signs. They don't have the know-how. They can pass right over a big body of fish and never see them. We can come right behind them and have a good set. So, it takes a lot of keen interest because a lot of people that fish with me, if they not experienced, they don't see a thing. I'm saying, "Look right there, that's fish." They can't see it, they can't tell things. But I've been fortunate enough to have a few fishermen that are working with me now, and in the past, over the last 20 years. That are actually older than me, and maybe have not bait

fished as much, but they know how to read the water. They know what the bay is because they've spent their whole life on it too. They have become very helpful to me in my fishery now that way.

SW: You think that is an important quality that you need? Do you really need to know the bay?

LN: We have a lot of good men here in this bay, especially Great South Bay. It's a large bay, there's a lot of things going on. There's a lot of good men here that really study. Some fellows just go out there and haphazardly set nets or pots or that and just hope for a good catch. Then there's men that study like we do over the years. We keep records. We keep books. We study the fish, we study their habits, we study the bay. These fellows are the ones that are most effective. Because as fishing gets harder, you have to be able to really read these fish more effectively if you are going to stay alive and continue in it. It will also mean fishing more gear if the law allows it, fishing more pots, and fishing longer nets to be able to catch everything. That's what happened in Japan in short. Twenty years ago, we were almost bought out by a big company in Japan with the pound nets. They wanted to bring over larger nets, and they wanted where it took us five or six or seven men to fish a net, it took them thirty or forty men to fish a net because they were much larger. They wanted to bring them over here. They felt at one time it was profitable for them to bring these nets over, buy out the company and fish them. For some reason at the last minute, they forfeited a down payment and we never heard from them again. We don't know the reason why they gave it up. But I bring this up because the reason is that they overfished their areas and the only way that they could stay alive was to fine-tune their nets, make them more effective. One man stated so is, "If we are down to just very few fish stocks, we have to make our fishing techniques and our equipment to the point where we are able to catch every last fish." Of course, where does that leave the future? Nowhere, and that is why Japan has looked to other countries and other areas of the world to supply them with fish. This is what a man has to do to stay alive here. No, we are not going to catch every last fish. But if we are going to stay alive, we have to be more effective in the type of gear that we use. Of course, that effectiveness is restricted by the laws. We are limited to mesh sizes, to the lengths of nets, to the amount of pots and things like that, that we have to do. All we can do is maximize what we have and still be within the law in the legal limits.

SW: Now, are you buying in your nets? Are you making that yourself?

LN: We make them ourselves only. My father made his own nets, showed me how to do it. I fished with an Italian gentleman who really, I would say back in the 1930s and [19]40s, the immigrants from Italy did a lot of that overseas. They were the first ones to really come here and get involved in the bait business. Because don't forget, back in the 1930s and [19]40s, there was not that much sport fishing. We did not have sport boats. It was all commercial men out there. It was until I would say probably the early, mid-1950s before there became some kind of viable sport fishing industry, of which my father started to get into the bait business. Sunrise and white cap right here also followed suit in the late [19]40s and early [19]50s where there became some sport fishing industry, starting to get developed. That's basically how it got started anyway in that direction.

SW: So, how do you go about making your nets?

LN: First of all, you have to buy the material. We're not back like in the sixteen hundreds where you had to get a ball twine and make every mesh. The material for the netting today is all made on machines. It's all knitted and done on machines. But you buy the material, buy the pound in roll or bulk. Then according to the type of net, like where we are using a bait seine, we have to cut it. We have to cut it to the dimensions, to the height and length that we want it. Then after everything is cut, then it has to be what we call double salvaged. In other words, we have to double strength all the edges in plain language. When there is strain put on the net, it isn't pulled apart. It doesn't come apart. Some people will just get lazy and cut it and then try to hang it together. After a little bit of fishing or strain, it just all starts to tear apart and come apart. But so, after all the edges are double-needle, as we call it, or double salvage is the true term, then they have to be sewn together. All the sections are sewn together. The wings, which are just straight pieces of netting, and then you have what we call the pocket where the bunt, where the fish go into. Sometimes that is tapered or sometimes it's like in a square box. But that all has to be sewn together. After the net is all sewn together, it has to be stretched outside for weeks because cold and heat and rain and sunlight, the material, which is all nylon today. They started originally back in the centuries ago with linen, and then linen, turned into cotton. Cotton nets were only good for two or three years. Cotton rots, they fell apart. By the early 1960s, that's when the pound nets out in the ocean. Our bait seines started coming up with nylon, synthetics. That was great because if we repaired a net and took care of it, we could make a net last for twenty to thirty years as opposed to two or three years. That is just what we did, how long our nets lasted. If you did not stretch the net, once it was hung to the cork line and lead line, after fishing it for a few weeks, it could get all pulled out of shape because it was not tight or stretched properly. You could get a lot of sags. A lot of fishermen that don't know how to do this, complain that their net gets all out of shape and would not fish right and that is because they are not taking the proper procedures. So, after the net is stretched properly, then it gets hung onto a top line or float line, which enables the net to float at the surface. Then the bottom line is a lead line, which enables the net to bring it to the bottom. If the net doesn't float at the surface and it does not sit on the bottom when it comes to the seine nets, the fish will go over the top or under the bottom, simple as that. That's the same procedure. Cutting it, sewing it, putting the sections together, stretching it, and then putting on your corks and lead. Once that's done, then you have the finished product.

SW: So, you really have to know what you are doing with the net.

LN: You have to know what you are doing. I fished for about twenty years with an Italian fisherman who was one of the immigrants, one of the early starters. He is eighty years old today and still fishes for me. He still fishes for me. He basically showed me all these secrets on how to put a net together. He still does make nets for most of the fishermen that are involved in the bait fishery or has made nets for everybody. My always joke to him though is he's putting everybody in the business. Every time he makes a net for another guy, it's just more competition for us out there on the water. There's too many now for the little bit of bait there is. Because everybody engaged in the bait fishery is all out there in those spring months or fall months. They're doing it, so we still have a lot of competition to put up with. But like I said, I learned from him. I have made now for the last fifteen years of all, now I have made most of all my nets myself. You can go down south Mississippi, Louisiana, you can go to Tennessee, and places like

that, and they will make your seines. But they cut corners, they do not double salvage. Instead of hanging a cork every six inches or something, they will hang it every so many feet. Basically, to me, I call them play nets. You get around fish, the fish go over the top, they go underneath the bottom. They just don't fish well at all. But if a fisherman does not have the know-how, putting his own net together or having somebody that can make a good one for them, he has to go to the net shops and order one. But they are really not good. Any good fisherman that knows what he is doing usually makes his own nets.

SW: This is Steve Warrick continuing my conversation with Lenny Nilson. This is tape 008 and we are on side B, July 15th, 2000. Besides just knowing how to make the nets and you have to know how to set the nets and where to place them. Now you think that is a lost art in a sense, or you think enough people are learning?

LN: I don't know if it's a lost art. People are still learning as long as people are willing to teach them. We still have in the bait business here because a lot of other fisheries are closed or dying. The need for the bait and sport fishing, a lot of fishermen have gotten nets. That is why we said before, we have more and more competition. More fellows are saying, "Hey, this is one avenue that's possibly still alive." They have a boat already. They go get a net and then they have no idea what there are doing. They think it is so easy just to go out and catch bait, but they find out that there is an art to it. There is a lot of knowledge to be effective. Anybody can get lucky one day and catch a big catch. But it happens even for us that know what we're doing, those big catches come far and few between maybe once or twice a whole season, do we really have what we call a big catch? We're in the right place at the right time. A lot of that is just plain luck, not knowledge. But without the knowledge, I could not think of trying to do it today and try to make a living or be effective at it. Because you do need the knowledge, but then again, how do you get the knowledge? You got to spend time out there in the water. If you are lucky enough to have an older fisherman help tell you like I had my dad help me and some other older fishermen help me in the beginning, you are fortunate. You can learn on your own, but it is a long, hard process and frustrating. You have to have the patience to be able to stick up with it. But for a fisherman to start off with this, like is in any other fishing, to think he is going out there and asking other fishermen on the dock to tell them where to go and how to do it, they have another thing coming. Fishermen are not going to divulge information because it's only going to hurt them. It's only going to take away from them. It is only going to cause more competition. I have been trying to be helpful over the years to people, and it has sometimes hurt me because I have divulged a little bit too much. But at the same time where we are in the bait business and we buy from most of these fishermen, I try to be helpful because it will benefit me. If they can catch the fish, then I can get the product that I need to supply my people with. So, it is twofold. Sometimes, it's a situation that fishermen do not like because although we are buying the bait from the fishermen on the water, we are also out there fishing ourselves. Fishermen are apprehensive sometimes to bring us the bait for fear that if I learn where they caught it that day, I will be out there tomorrow. But out of respect, we usually know where these fellows work, and we usually go in a different direction, or we usually have an agreement. "Okay. You fish east and I will fish west, and we'll not get in each other's way," because I am only going to get their product anyway. But sometimes there is a conflict and sometimes fishermen tell me that I shouldn't be out there on the water. I should be back here at the business. But I've been out on the water longer than most any of them. So, I feel I have a right to do it as much as they do.



SW: I wanted to ask you about boundary lines and if people do cross them or if there is a certain code of ethics among the guys out there fishing.

LN: There is a code of ethics, whether it is bait fishing, whether it is setting crab pots, gill netting. With most fishermen that I have known my whole life and how they work, there is like a common respect. The bond is that they're both doing the same thing. They're both on the water. They're both on the same side. The enemy to them might be the sports fishermen. The enemy to them might be the public or that person that has built a new house on the shoreline that does not want to see them anymore. That could be the enemy. But there is a common bond, among commercial fishermen. But at the same time, it is very competitive. There are out there trying to make a living and even though this fellow next to them has a common bond at the same time, don't get in my face. Don't get too close. You kind of set imaginary boundaries. With the crabbing that we have going on in Great South Bay now, yes, there is imaginary boundaries with each crabber. They hold the same area every year as in the lobster industry. But every once in a while, one will feel that it is better over there and then try to infringe upon his territory. There'll always be that one fisherman. I can name a half a dozen, and I am not going to name names, but we all know people out there that get in each other's face or try to overtake someone's area with a lot of gear to try to push them or force them out. They do not hold respect for the rest of the men on the water. So yes, in general, we try to set imaginary boundaries, but at the same time, we have to understand the water is open to all sport fishing commercials and no one owns it. So, you are free to go wherever you want to go. But we have to try to live with each other out there, so that's why we try to set boundaries.

SW: Now, besides the economic importance of, say somebody who you have taught to make that and there are out there fishing, is there anything else you get from teaching them? Is there any satisfaction that you have shown them something?

LN: Yes. I think the one thing is that we do not want to see commercial fishing become a lost art, to see it become extinct. Just like whaling, whaling came to an end. It's here for many different, economic reasons. Just like the pound fishing we talked about earlier as far as the ocean goes and what we did, that was an end of an era that came to an end. Older fishermen that did it, as myself, look back at sadness to see that it no longer going on anymore, that it is gone forever. It is only what photographs and documents that we have on it. So, I would not want to see everything disappear commercially. People realize not only their bait that they use to go fishing comes from a commercial fisherman. The fish that they find in the retail fish market comes from commercial fishermen. Someone has to catch those fish. So, there is satisfaction in trying to teach somebody hoping that someone will follow up. But in most cases, those of us that are involved in commercial fishing today don't want to see their families continue on it. We have sons or daughters or whoever, we don't like to see them continue on simply because we know how hard it's going to be for them in the future to make a living. How hard they have to work, how many hours they have to put up, how many frustrations they have to deal with to try to make a living. We encourage the younger people to get an education, to get a job, and follow on. All of us commercial fishermen and all of us that work on the water usually depend on a wife right now with a job that has benefits. Because most commercial fishermen do not have and cannot afford the health benefits and the retirement and the other things that go along with a land

job, if you want to call it.

SW: Now, before you had mentioned in the past a lot of different ethnic groups that were commercial fishermen, people involved. How did they all get along? Your Scandinavian background and Italian and of course, the Dutch.

LN: Right. There was Italian, the Scandinavians the Dutch was a big group here on Long Island. Scandinavians got divided between the Swedes and the Norwegians even. If you were Norwegian or you were Swedish to each other, you might as well have been Greek or Italian or something else because there was a lot of rivalry between it. Norway, of course, even though we are from Sweden, Norway is the bigger of fishing because they have a much larger coastline exposed to the sea, whereas Sweden only has the lower Southern part. But yes, on Long Island and back in the 1920s and [19]30s when my dad immigrated here, it was to Long Island, especially, I would say the Scandinavians and the Dutch. The Italians came maybe a little bit later in the [19]40s and stuff like that were involved. It's just from my knowledge of what I know. But there was a lot of rivalry, a lot of rivalry ethnic-wise that way.

SW: Did it ever go over and spill onto the water?

LN: Yes, of course. There was a lot of not only shouting and hollering at each other. But there was fist fights and hatchets thrown at each other. Attempted strangulations that I know of attempted drownings. These are all stories that I have heard and been told from the generation before me that I fished with, and that I knew well, of what went on the water back then. There was an intense rivalry, maybe more than now. They felt that certain areas and things were theirs, and don't you get too close to me. There was a lot of fighting going on fighting ashore. If the fishermen did not feel the man at the packing house treated him fairly and gave him the right price for his fish that day, there was big fights. Back then it resorted to more fist fights than just verbal. So, there was a tremendous amount of rivalry that way and it was more than just verbal.

SW: Now, has there been any fishermen that you know including yourself, or that have stories or legends associated in with them about, being the best fishermen or anything like that? Anybody achieved legendary status?

LN: I guess there was people comes offhand here is the Scalper family which was the previous owner here of the Sunrise Fish Company. They were three generations since almost the turn of the century in the pound fishing. They came over from Holland. The Scalper family as they were called was well known by everyone on the South Shore here because of the size of their operation. It was a very large family, there was four brothers and a father active, and then an uncle before them with the father. Then some grandsons took over after that. Eventually, I was in partnership with them. But the Scalper family would be legendary because they were in it for sixty or seventy years. They had a very large operation. They were very hardworking people. They spent their entire life on the ocean. Of course, across the canal here, (White Catfish Company?) was the (Lundstedt?) Brothers they were Swedish. What was interesting about them is they came from the same area of Sweden that my father did, and they immigrated over here at different times. But my father ended up in Bay Shore with his fish business and Bay Business. They ended up over here in the next town of Islip with theirs. They go back as twelve and

fourteen-year-old kids in Sweden, knowing each other and fishing with their families together to knowing each other over here. So, the (Lundstedts?) again became very famous over here. They were also pound fishing like the Scarper family. There has been some books and documentation done by them. One of the (Lundstedt?) brothers wrote a book one time, I don't know the name of it about his life on the sea and how they came over to this country and everything like that with some photographs. They were also the first one here on Long Island to put up a freezer. This property crossed the canal and was known as Bailey's Lumberyard. That went back to the 1800s. They converted the lumber mill or sawmill into an ammonia plant, into a freezer warehouse. They were the first ones to sense that rather than being at the mercy of the fish market by sending their catches in fresh and taking whatever the market was to pay for that day, they could take their products and freeze them. First of all, have a supply when things got scarce later in the year, and also command more money for it. The (Lundstedts?) over there were probably famous because they put up the first freezer. The Sunrise Fish Company followed suit in 1950, about five years later. My father followed two years later in 1952 with putting up his freezer plant in Bay Shore, which was Nilson's Frozen Bait. So basically, we had three freezer warehouses, if you want to call it in the same town or same area here. All in the fish business, all in the bait business at one time or another all distributing. They were competitive in one way, but yet they also all worked with each other that way and that. But I would say, right, there is the Scalper family here, and the (Lundstedt?) brothers over there in Meyer now and Long Island, on the South base. Each town has its heritage with so many generations of this name family. There's been books and Billy Joel had done stories about things such as the [inaudible]. There has been a lot of documentation about them. But in this area here, you would look at these places here those families that would be about the best.

SW: Now, being in this area and working on the bay and the ocean, how has that really shaped your life? What do you think it has instilled in you?

LN: I guess it has instilled in me the same things I guess that my father instilled in me. That you're only going to get out of it what you put into it. If you're hardworking and you give it your best, there is rewards to come from the water. It's always been good to me, it's always been rewarding to me. If you're that type of person, and we do have them, that likes to get out on the water at 8:00 a.m. or 9:00 a.m. and come home at 2:00 p.m., you cannot expect much. Our typical day starts at 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m., sometimes 1:00 a.m. or 2:00 a.m., but 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m., 9:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m. You have got a figure a twelve to sixteen-hour a day minimum for what we do. But what it's done for me is instilled that hard work because we will reap our rewards that way. For me, it's always been an honesty thing. We've always had a reputation of being honest and never cheating anyone. I've always tried to live my life that way. Most fishermen, of course, work seven days a week. My dad taught me a long time ago, he said that if you can't earn a living and you cannot make it six days a week, you're not going to make up the difference by working on Sundays, at seventh day. He always instilled on me that way. As far as my opinion, my body, after working sixteen or eighteen hours a day, six days a week, my body needs a physical rest on Sunday. Also, spiritually, have been very active. As a lot of fishermen, a lot of your Dutch fishermen have been very active in West Sable with the Dutch Reform Church. I have been very active with the Christian church for twenty-five or thirty years now. My parents always brought me to church. My dad was not much of a churchgoer, my mom was. But I learned that the body needs a

spiritual rest and it needs a physical rest on Sunday, and this is what the Lord intended. So basically, I can see it in my life because there is a lot of fishermen that have worked seven days a week. I have worked six days a week very hard in my life, and I am just as far ahead financially, if not more by doing it. So, we need to take a break once in a while, we need to take a rest. Of course, like some fisherman's wives said is, well, they have all winter to sleep. Because January to March or those January, February and March are hard months on the water. That is when everything comes to a halt as far as abatement goes. If you want to go out there and scratch some clams, okay. But that is why fishermen have to work as hard as they do. You have to make two days wages every day if you are going to pay your bills and get through the winter. But myself, personally, I do not care how busy and how much fish there is to catch, I can't do it seven days a week, I cannot do it. I have to take a break, that one day a week. But the rewards besides the hard work ethic and the honesty part of it, and not everyone is honest, the other reward is the independence. I think that is what we value more than anything. As I said before, you can get up as early as you want and you can work as late as you want. Everyone has that opportunity on the water if that's what you want to do. So, no one can ever begrudge someone else for making more money because he wants to work harder at it. But the idea is you do not really have to answer to anyone. You are not punching a clock. There is that independence that I think most of us would not trade. I love doing what I'm doing, even though I've been doing it my whole life since a kid. I still enjoy being on the water and I can't wait till that first spring thaw when the ice breaks. We know that first few fish are going to start showing up. We can't wait to get going. I think most fishermen you talk to, the independence is a very important thing. That's what keeps us going. Very difficult now that we are coming to a time where it is hard to make a living on the water. We're just facing now this decline of the lobster industry where most lobstermen have to getting jobs on the land to try to survive. It kills most fishermen. They've never really worked for anybody before. It's very hard to sit and listen to somebody maybe we are too independent. We don't like taking orders from people. We don't like coming and going by the clock and things like that. But reality is, if I have a family, I have a mortgage, I have kids, I got to do it to pay my bills. The bills are there, you have to do it. But if you are fortunate not to have to, like some of the older fellows that their kids are older and their mortgages are paid off, they can afford to be a little bit more independent. They can still try to stick it out in the water. But I think those are very good qualities of learning how to work hard, how to be honest at what you do. Working with your hands to me is nothing better. I know we need our brains for a lot of things today, especially in business. But still, I know a lot of people said that my place is in the office running my business from here, the chair, and not being out there on the water. But there's still an aspect of us that tells me I want to be out on the water. My therapy, I need to be out on the water to get away from this place at times. Not only that is I can't sit here and learn what is going on in the fishing industry by being at my desk. When I am out there on the water, I'm seeing what is going on firsthand with the fishing, with the fishermen. When someone tells me over the phone that this is that way and that way, I know whether they're telling me the truth or not, because I am out there with them. I think we need to be out there and be a part of the industry that way. Those are the type of rewards that stand out most for all of us and those are the ones that are hard to give up. We just do not want to give up that independence.

SW: Now looking back on your occupation and what you have done with doing a lot of commercial fishing and bay activities, what would you consider yourself, a commercial fisherman, a bayman, and why?

LN: Would I consider myself a commercial fisherman or a bayman? First of all, a bayman, to me a bayman, knowing what a bay man is. A bayman is a bayman. Anyone who works the waters, the local bays and rivers and streams or whatever you want to call it. That can include whether it is clamming, shellfish, or fish, any type of netting. But most people look at a bayman as a clammer. Most people out there are uneducated about the fishing aspect of the bayman. They see a Bayman and they say, "You're a clammer." When we pull up in a gas station to get fuel for our boats, they say, "You're going clamming." They have no idea even though our nets are right there in the boat, that what we do. I do not like the term bayman, even though it is correct a bayman, anyone working in water. I do not like the term bayman because of the connotation that you're just a clammer, people might disagree with me. But the term commercial fisherman, that includes that includes the fishing. A bayman to me sometimes just includes the shell fishing aspect of it. But if we are commercial fishing and we are restricted to the bay, then I guess maybe we are a bayman. But commercial fishing also includes the ocean and where I have spent a good part of my life in the ocean as well as the bay. I would like to classify myself if you are going to have a classification as a commercial fisherman, including the bay and the ocean. Most of us, even though bait fishing and haul seining has been my primary thing, I have done just about anything that you could think of on any type of method of fishing on the bay at one time or another. Simply because you have to be diversified. You have to be able to switch from one method to another if one method is poor, or if that type of fish is not around this year, you have to be able to switch to something else. So, that is why over the years you do end up being versatile and doing just about everything. Most bay men that I know have, very few people have done just one thing their whole life and the one that stands out to me would be the clammer. Some we have long-time clammers who have just clammed all their life. But if we started getting into the fishing aspect of it, commercial fishing, most fishermen have done just about everything. Whatever lucrative at the time that way.

SW: Now, what would you like people to know, who have no idea of what you do, what would you like them to know about yourself and the people who have worked on the water? What would you tell them?

LN: First of all is before you are so quick to annihilate us, before you are so quick to tell us to get out of where we are and go somewhere else to realize that we were there before you. Most of us that have worked at bay and are my age have been on the water for thirty or forty years or more. We were there first before we had development on the island, before we had all this large group of sport fishing. Yes, we're willing to share it with you. We realize that we do not own it but realize that we were here first. Give us a little bit of respect. Because we are not looking for sympathy, we chose to do this for an occupation. So, we are not trying to cry on anybody's shoulders that we have to work eighteen hours a day to make a living and work so hard. But understand what we really have to go through to make a living as opposed to someone sitting in an office. I don't begrudge anybody getting an education because I have a college education, like I said, marine biology. I have a degree in computer programming and so I don't begrudge anybody with going out and getting an education and not having to work so hard for their living. That's okay. But understand that we do have to work hard and don't make us look like the bad guy out there. Like we are out there stealing and raping and taking everything from the water. There is going to be a bad apple in every bunch. There is always going to be a few commercial

fishermen or bay men that are going to take things illegally that are going to take more than is allotted. But it's not fair because of what they do to generalize all of us as committing these crimes or all of us as doing these things. Most of us out there are trying to earn a living the honest way and working hard. I would want them to realize that we are just out there making a living. But yet, people are uneducated about what we're doing. The first thing is we're always doing something wrong rather than ask in a nice way, what are you doing? The first thing is you're illegal, right? You can't do that. They don't understand the laws. We try to educate them to what the laws are. In most times, they call the authorities on us anyway. Then the authorities being the DEC, which is what we have to live under, has to educate them to who we are, what we are, and that we are legal in doing what we're doing. But that does not change their attitude about us. They still do not want us around. So, I would just hope to educate people what they would want to know is we're there. We were there first and we're trying to make a living and leave us alone. Too much of our equipment is vandalized out there. I could give you many, many instances of people's nets being cut up because they don't want them there. All their crab pots being opened up and all their catches being emptied out and dumped back in the water. There's been a tremendous amount of vandalism. The more people we have on the water, the more vandalism. A fisherman can't get sleep there with his equipment, but this is what it is getting the point to. I've been fortunate enough, the type of fishing we do in the same fishing, our nets come home with us on the boat every day. But a lot of gear stays out there overnight, and that is prone to vandalism.

[end of transcript]