

TAPE SUMMARY INDEX FOR
LONG ISLAND TRADITIONS FIELDWORK PROJECT:
BAYSHORE TO PATCHOGUE

TAPE 004:
EDWARD (LOWELL) OCKERS
JULY 6, 2000
Interviewer: Steve Warrick

Lowell was born in West Sayville and has lived in the area his entire life and worked on the bay and will still do small jobs for fishermen such as hanging a net or making sinkers. His father was a baymen and Lowell bought traps from his father to get started in the bay. Lowell sold his nets in 1990 because the fishing was bad and finally ended his career on the bay in 1992 when he was working with a younger fisherman but they really could not make a lot of money. He remembers skinning blowfish with his father and they would get two dollars a bushel for the fish. He recalls his father and the pound fishing industry and describes the process of this type of fishing. Lowell did not participate but was allowed to pick fish to go to market. He speaks of the area in the bay where his father had the traps and the best trap was the furthest one west. Lowell started working full time in the bay after returning from the Navy in 1957 and started fishing and catching eels with traps purchased from his father. The eels were kept until Christmas in cars because the Italians would use the eels in a traditional holiday dinner. The traps were basically small pound nets the Lowell eventually converted to nylon from the cotton so he would not spend a lot of time making repairs. He would also cut and trim his own poles to set the nets and this work would take place in the winter. He would catch eels for about eight weeks and then would turn his attention to flounder and other types of fish. Lowell fished as many as twelve traps at a time by while doing all of the work himself. Discusses the differences between the type of fishing his father did and that of what he did. Sometimes his traps would be full of crabs that made it tougher and when clamming was good he also had trouble finding extra help. Most of the traps were in about six feet of water near the shoal—some traps were in four feet of water. Lowell would pump all of the poles in by himself. During the winter he would find work bulk heading, cutting ice and digging clams to make some grocery money. He also did some scalloping and crabbing using a dredge. If the bay froze before Christmas it meant for a long, hard winter. Sometimes they would go to Bellport just to sail on the ice. Describes what sailing on the ice was like and that if the wind blew between 10 and 15 MPH it was a lot of fun. They also did some racing on the frozen bay and most of the participants were all baymen. Describes how they rigged up the boats for sailing. Would also set flounder fykes and recall when he first started the fish wasn't worth any money and this type of fishing would last until March. Lowell would spend time clamming in between the fishing and eeling. Speaks of how some baymen would stick to clamming while others would do a little bit of everything. Lowell considers all of those who work on the bay as baymen because "you still have to get up in the morning and once you have stuff in the water you are kind of married to it". Lowell discusses what a typical day of working on the bay would be like. He would gage his day by the way the wind was blowing. Lowell suggests maybe he worked too hard on the bay and he would dock his boat on the creek but eventually the price became too high. Gradually times changed over the years and people went to work on the mainland. Discusses how health insurance became a major issue and also had to by insurance for his traps because he did not think he could deal with anyone suing him. Recalls how he had a little trouble once with someone trying to put him out

of business because of his traps. When Lowell was working on the bay he did not worry about competition because he was the only one doing this particular type of fishing and he recalls some of the men and the places where this type of fishing and eeling was performed. Lowell was the last person to use fish traps in the Great South Bay. Speaks about a boat that was filled with eels and floated across to Europe to sell. He states that Germany was one of the biggest buyers of eels. Lowell discusses the advent of fish and eel farms and how it would be difficult to for him to compete against this type of industry. Lowell never believed he would be one of the last baymen doing eeling and he would catch 10,000-12,000 lbs. of eels each year. Discusses the market price of eels and how they were shipped. The last year he fished they were only able to catch 1,000 lbs. of eels. Once he left the bay Lowell missed it because he was his own boss. Lowell could tell by the weather patters as to whether he would have a good day of eeling but you would never catch eels on a full moon. You could catch eels on a heavy frost because they would start migrating. He liked to watch the sun come up in the morning and like the independent life. If you had a bad day you wouldn't take it home with you but would leave it on the boat. Lowell describes how he started making sinkers. Before he started using and making sinkers he used chains on his nets for the weight. He bought a mold and began putting the lead sinkers on his traps. A friend of his use to make them for some of the lobstermen and he retired so Lowell took over his customers. He now makes sinkers for a few people including fishermen who do trolling and gill netting. He learned how to do this from another fishermen and Lowell is happy to stay small scale in his sinker-making endeavor. Lowell stays connected to fishing by making the sinkers and going down to the docks and reading some of the commercial fishing publications. He still stays in touch with a group of friends that were fishermen and they try to stay in touch especially around the holidays. He speaks about the government regulations against the commercial fishermen of today. Other than regulations Lowell states the biggest change in the area is the population. He doesn't believe it is worth it to go into the bay at this point in time and you would have to be diverse in what you would be doing in the bay: clamming, crabbing and fishing. Lowell concludes by saying there are other, easier ways to make money.