

Nancy Solomon: Today is November 28, 2007. This is Nancy Solomon talking with fishermen Bill Tunney of East Patchogue. So, Bill, how old are you?

Bill Tunney: Forty-four.

NS: How did you get into fishing?

BT: I grew up in Bellport village.

NS: You look at the road.

BT: Clamming was really big back then in the day. It's just something I wanted to do. When I was around thirteen, I bought my first boat. I mowed lawns when I was a young kid, bought a boat, and I just started clamming. One thing led to another. I'm not a second, third generation, just something I liked and stuck with it.

NS: Did you have friends who did the same thing with what you are doing now?

BT: Yes. I had quite a few friends in high school. That was a pretty big thing, clamming on the bay, in the Great South Bay.

NS: Was there anyone in particular who kind of showed you the ropes?

BT: You know who helped me out a little bit? You might even know him. You know John German?

NS: I know of him, yes.

BT: He's the president of the lobster association. He helped me and a couple of my friends out when we started scalping on the bay. So, he was probably an inspiration, more or less like a mentor at times.

NS: Did you grow up in East Patchogue?

BT: Right next to East Patchogue, Bellport village.

NS: Bellport?

BT: Right.

NS: How many commercial fishermen were there when you were growing up?

BT: In Bellport?

NS: Yes.

BT: Probably half of that marina at Bellport used to be clam boats, crabbers. Put a number on it. It might be hard for me to say, but it was quite a few of us. Now, I'm the only boat there, the last clam boat.

NS: So, you were saying that you have the last clam boat in Bellport. Is that where you keep your clam boat?

BT: Yes, that's right.

NS: What are some of the different kinds of things that you do?

BT: What are some of the other things that I do?

NS: Some of the different fishing activities.

BT: On the bay?

NS: Yes.

BT: I dredge crabs. We do that right here Moriches Bay and down the bay shore. I used to dredge scallops on every floor. I would you we haven't had scalps for so long. Last year, we had a few. I didn't get time to do it. We're right from gill netting to dredging crabs so I didn't get to go scalloping last year.

NS: What kind of crabs are you dredging?

BT: Blue crabs, blue claws. I potted blue claw crabs probably fifteen years when I was younger. Probably in my twenties into my early thirties, mid-thirties, I potted crabs along with the clamming. That's right about the time where I started working on the ocean.

NS: How long have you been working on the ocean?

BT: Let's see. It must be twelve years now, maybe fifteen. Some of them overlap.

NS: Had you worked on anybody's ocean boat before you went out on your own?

BT: Yes. I worked on some clam boats in the [inaudible], the surf clam boats. I worked on a couple of gill net boats out of Shinnecock and that's the way you learn.

NS: Was there anyone in particular that really showed you the ropes who was a mentor to you?

BT: Yes. He was a friend of mine, Richie LaRocca. He helped me out a lot. Again, I don't know if you know him or not. Him and his brother, they're second generation, they've been doing it for a while and they helped me out.

NS: Did they trust you at first?

BT: Did they what?

NS: Did they trust you?

BT: Did they trust me?

NS: Yes.

BT: What do you mean?

NS: Well, there is usually like a certain period where you have to earn somebody's trust.

BT: When I went on my own, I had known him long enough where he respected me anyway. It wasn't a problem. But the other gill netters on the ocean, I had to earn my respect from them. That was a tough goal, but it was all right. After a while, they realized you're just out there to make a living and not cause trouble, you fit in.

NS: What are some of the ground rules when you have different fishermen all working with the same [inaudible]?

BT: As far as where you set your nets?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, when I first started out, you really can't be too aggressive and you have to completely work around the people that have been there for years and years. I found my own spots, few areas that other guys didn't work in that I seem to like so I got comfortable with some of those areas. Then it seems like when things happen like when you break down and one of those guys comes over and tells you or vice versa like when they have problems and you go out of your way, you stop if you're doing for the day, after a while, they accept you, but it took a while. It probably took five, six years before they didn't try to intimidate you. Some of them, tough luck.

NS: How can you describe your work? First describe your boat.

BT: My what?

NS: Your boat.

BT: My boat?

NS: Yes.

BT: I'd say, it's a thirty-eight-foot [inaudible]. It was built in Maine. I had a thirty-five-footer before this. I had a thirty-five-footer for ten years. I had this one built to order. It's something I've been working on for a long time. So, it's a typical lobster boat that I use for gill netting. I

think it's the best way to explain it.

NS: After we are done here, you will maybe tell us how you changed it.

BT: How I what?

NS: How you changed the boat.

BT: We're just going to stop here, drop a few turns off.

NS: This is one of your customers?

BT: Yes. You know Mastic Seafood?

NS: Yes. So, we were talking about how you got into the gill net fishing business. What prompted you to go that route?

BT: To go gill netting?

NS: Yes.

BT: When I was working on the bay, pod clamming and crabbing, clamming is hard on your body. So, I was thinking, maybe, that's what brought me to really look for other things to do that might be a little bit easier. Plus, I like mixing it up. So, I did. I worked on some other people's boats and lobstering was very territorial. It's tough to get into. I worked on that. I've worked with somebody on a lobster boat. The surf clamming is such a huge investment. You need a big boat. You need several engines on the boat and dredges. I just didn't have the money for that. So, gill netting was really achievable. What I did was I found somebody that had a boat, a younger guy than me, and he was struggling. I approached him. I said, "Look, I know a little bit about gill netting. Would you like to do it for a few years, see how we do?" So, that's what I did. I approached together, had the boat, and I put together the net and he just clean his boat up a little and we did it. We did it for like three years together.

NS: Did you work on the boat together?

BT: Yes.

NS: What was his name?

BT: You know that boat that was down to Marina, the old gill net boat?

NS: Yes.

BT: That was the one that I started on.

NS: Wow.

BT: That was the boat that I had a partnership with for about three years.

NS: What was his name?

BT: His name is Eddie Schifoli. In fact, his father owned Mastic Seafood for pretty much forever. He just recently sold it. I used to sell crabs and clams to Eddie's father at Mastic Seafood. He's like, "Why did you approach my son?" "Because he's not doing good." He goes, "I know you don't have enough money to do it on your own." That's how it started. So, it was good. It just went from there. Eventually, I branched out on my own and we still fish together, me and Eddie. We are on the radio. We will talk to each other, helping each other out, but we just went on our own.

NS: How did it change for you having worked with somebody to working on your own?

BT: How did it change for me? Well, when you're working with somebody else's support, it's kind of like being married. It's a lot of give and take. I had some ideas that I really wanted to try that I couldn't really do while I was working with him. That's probably what prompted me to move on. It was the right thing to do. It was good. I fished a lot harder than he does.

NS: What do you mean?

BT: What do I mean?

NS: When you say you fished a lot harder.

BT: I have a family. I'm married with kids. He's not. So, he enjoys life a little more than I do. He's got a great work ethic and a hard worker buddy. I push a little harder than he does. So, I felt a little held back, but it was a great partnership. I can't say anything bad about him.

NS: I am not asking so much about your partnership. But what were some of the things that you started doing once you had your own boat?

BT: Some of the things that I did?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, I tried lots of things that I couldn't normally do. Fishing can sometimes be pretty frustrating. You have an idea and it takes money to try it. A lot of times, those ideas don't work. So, when I was on my own, it fell flat on my face over a bunch of things. But I felt like in the long run, I was able to try more things and I became a better fisherman. I didn't have somebody saying, "Well, I really don't want to invest in that right now." You know what I mean? It gave me some more freedom to do things. Am I answering your question?

NS: Yes. If you can tell me a little bit more about the specifics or some of the things that you tried that work, that did not work.

BT: Well, I made my nets a lot different and that experimentation takes a lot of money. I experimented with different weights on led lines, different thicknesses of webbing. It's a more of an experimental taper so I was able to do that. When I got my own boat, I put a bigger net rail on it so I could carry more net. That helped me out. I just tried things. I tried all kinds of things right off the bat that I normally wouldn't have done with if I stayed in that situation. But I guess, that's pretty much it, just trying different things. I'm just going to stop here and pack out again.

NS: What is the name of this business where we are stopping?

BT: This is called Blue Water distributors. A lot of the conch fishermen come here. In fact, they're probably cooking conch right now. They're probably shucking some kind of shellfish. The conch fishermen right here is going to take these crabs from us. This guy, Keith, works on my boat sometimes.

NS: So, we are talking about being on your own and trying different things. What is a typical day like for you on the boat?

BT: Typical day? It's an early start. I usually get up around 3:00 a.m., 3:30 a.m. Usually, I like to get on the nets first light and I spend about five, six, seven hours on the water running nets.

NS: How long do you tow a net for?

BT: You know what, I don't tow net. What we do is gill net. Gill netting is not dragging. We're setting it out.

NS: How do you set it?

BT: Excuse me?

NS: How do you set it?

BT: Set it? Well, it's on a big drum, on that rail on the back of the boat. We can run it right off, it'll pay out. The net is usually about twelve hundred feet long. They sink to the ocean floor. Then they have a float line. So, maybe they open up ten, fifteen-feet depending on what we're fishing for. Some nets only open three feet. Some nets open twenty-five-feet. It just depends on what we're targeting. Then we'll turn those nets. I'll usually bring about two nets with me and I'll bounce between those nets. I'll make maybe half hour to one and a half hours sets. The shorter sets are when we're looking for fish. Usually, the first three, four hours in the day, we're looking for a body of fish. We're trying to see a sign of where they might be or where they might make up and then we'll let the net fish a little longer. Hopefully, we'll make a day's pay.

NS: What keeps the net from collapsing onto the floor?

BT: The bottom of the net has the lead line. It's a long line, only about a half inch in diameter and it has inserts all throughout it. So, it actually waves. It's fairly heavy. So, that brings it

down at the bottom along the ocean floor. Then on the top one, we have floats spread out heavy five-six-feet. There's more plastic floats. The float line opens up the net and the lead line keeps the net from sliding on the ocean floor so it doesn't collapse.

NS: Is there something at the beginning and the end of the net that keeps it stationary?

BT: Ye, we anchor both ends.

NS: With what?

BT: Excuse me?

NS: How do you anchor it?

BT: How do we anchor it? Well, we actually have small anchors. They're about twenty-five-pound anchors. On the surface of the ocean, we have what we call highflyers. They're flags. They're about, I don't know, twelve, fourteen feet high. Then we have a big flag material with a radar reflector on it and then it sits upright. It goes about six feet into the water and we have weights on the bottom of it. So, we have both ends of the net with a big flag and anchors on the ocean floor. So, it doesn't move. It stays right there.

NS: Did the nets ever get ripped?

BT: Yes, they do. Sometimes when setting it, there happens to be a wreck there. You just never know what you're going to run into. Then we're holding it back and it'll get hung up real bad. Sometimes we can get it off, but sometimes we can't. We'll tear it. Some of the draggers sometimes pull right through the net in a foggy rough day if they don't happen to see it. Sometimes by accident, they'll tore through. That doesn't happen too much, but it does happen.

NS: So, what happens when you get a rip?

BT: What happens when you get a rip? You don't have to repair the tear in the gill net. It's okay to have some holes. But what you don't want to is you don't want that loose material. Because when you're holding it on the reel and you set it off, that'll fed you up. So, what you do is you just cut it clean. It's okay to have a few holes in it. That doesn't have to be completely perfect with fishing when you're going to get out. It's not that type and you kind of understand what I'm saying?

NS: Yes.

BT: The way you catch fish with a gill net is the net is stationary. The fish actively move. The fish can be there and they're not moving, then we won't catch a thing. They have to be either feeding or migrating or moving to shallow or deep water. They have to be on the move otherwise, we won't catch them.

NS: What are some of the different kinds of fish that you catch with the net?

BT: Let's see. My year usually starts around April. We go for flounder and fluke. We'll catch some sundials also. Then around May, the monkfish will show up. We'll catch some skate, some monkfish, in May, June, and July. Then in the summertime, we'll switch over to the smaller mesh. We'll go for blues. We'll work on some bonitos and Spanish Mackerel, few weakfish. Then in the fall, we return back to the monkfish. That's what I'm doing now, though. They're going to return migration and then we'll go offshore. We catch a few striped bass along with the monks.

NS: Have any of this, the Magnuson Act, affected what you catch when you catch?

BT: There's a lot of things driving the regulation. You have the Magnuson Act. You have politics. You have the federal government setting quotas and the states are allowed to implement that. It's effective.

NS: Can you give me an example of how it has affected you?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: How has it affected you personally like before and after?

BT: I don't know how much time left. [laughter]

NS: I have lots of time.

BT: I tell you what the regulations and a lot of the changes that have come down because of the Magnuson Act. What it does is it puts you on your heels. Because when the regulations come out and they'll declare a certain size, you just constantly have to change gear. So, it's a little nerve-wracking when it takes six to eight months to order, special order gill net, and have it made. Then something shows up in the mail that says you got to do it differently. So, really, I wish there was more of a lag time as far as when the New Year comes around and these regulations come into mail and then you have these meetings. So, really, the biggest effect is just uncertainty of what you can and can't catch. You don't know what your income is really going to be because the regulations are changing all the time. Then the most frustrating thing is just you having to change gear and react to those. They say you can't use this size mesh on monkfish anymore and you got a whole backyard full of it. It's tough and I'm pro conservation. I think a lot of the regulations are good, but a lot of them are too driven by politics. I keep saying that politics, but some of them aren't good. It's tough. It's scary. It's what it is. It really is.

NS: Were there some things that you used to catch routinely that you no longer catch anymore?

BT: Well, the one species that we can't touch anymore is sturgeon.

NS: Did you used to catch a lot of it?

BT: We used to catch a few, yes. They used to give us tags just like the striped bass. We're not



allowed to work on sturgeon anymore.

NS: Ever?

BT: Ever. They tried to take striped bass away from us. Actually, we successfully fought it. There was a push for gamefish status here in New York, probably ten years ago, maybe fifteen years ago. We fought it. We were lucky we had a lot of support from the draggers, from the lobsterman. So, we almost lost the striped bass. Even though it's a limited fishery now, it's important to us.

NS: So, before that regulation, how many pounds of striped bass would you catch in a season if you had to pick a number?

BT: Before the regulation, it was a free-for-all. I don't think that's the right way to do it. I think you should have regulation. I really do. They regulated the fluke. It came back in tremendous numbers. We're benefiting from it now. But now, they say we have a tremendous stock, but we're overfishing and so, they're calling us back. So, right now, they're tweaking that. So, we're hanging in there, though. They've given us some fluke, but the bass used to be a free-for-all and it was only fish. I'm not going to say it wasn't. They protect it and it came back. Thank God, they gave us something to work on. Sometimes when they shut something down, you're afraid you're never going to get a piece of it again. Really, sturgeon is the only species that they outright took away from us. But everything's regulated now, the bluefish, the big fish. We're back to where we started. You want to come to the house? I hope I'm giving you the answers you're looking for? I don't really know.

NS: No, this is very helpful. I am just trying to learn more about how you do, what you do, how it has changed over time. Are there any special memories you have when you first started out that were learning experiences for you?

BT: There's lots of them. What are you looking for?

NS: Something where you really learned something important.

BT: Let's see. But there's been so many lessons. [laughter] I tell you one thing and it applies to anything that you do on your own. We just have to stay focused and motivated, whether you're a fisherman, whether you're a carpenter. I think now that I look back, the only reason why I have made it and it's been a tough business. We had a lot of hard times. Really, you have to stay focused and motivated. Even when times are bad, you got to just keep plugging away. But let's see. Special memories. When I was younger, as a teenager, I loved clamming on the bay. It was probably the most simple, fun thing that I've done because you're young, you're full of energy. I used to jump on a boat in the summertime, 7:00 a.m., 6:00 a.m. I used to close up around 1:00 p.m. Sometimes I would come home. Sometimes I will go to the beach and hang out with my buddies. It was just a lot of good times.

NS: What kind of boat did you have when you first...

BT: A twenty-foot Garvey. In fact, I still have it. I probably should have taken you to see it down. But I had one built, just like I did this after a while. I had an old boat when I was younger.

NS: Where did you get your first boat?

BT: I think there was a rental place here in Moriches. It might have been Silly Lilly's or something like that. I used to rent out little fifteen-foot wooden doors with little ten horsepower engines on it. I bought one of those old boats and it leaked like a sieve. I just had all I could do to keep it. Every year, I had to caulk it and it was a mess, but it worked out. It was my first boat. I had it for five or six years probably with a small engine. So, those are good memories.

NS: Where did you go clamming when you first started?

BT: Bellport village. I had my boat and I worked in Bellport Bay. Bellport Bay and Patchogue Bay.

NS: What were you using to harvest the clams?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: What kinds of clams were you harvesting?

BT: Hard clams, little necks, and cherrystones. Some guys used to jump overboard and they used to work with their feet and scratch rakes. But I never really got into that. I always stayed on a boat and I use the clam rake, long rake, they call it, with aluminum handles. I did a lot of crabbing in the bay. Those are some good memories, too.

NS: What kinds of crabs were you getting?

BT: I was potting blue crabs. I used to do both. Well, I went to college and high school, by the way. I've got a mechanical engineering degree.

NS: From where?

BT: Walden University. I graduated with honors, believe it or not.

NS: I believe it.

BT: I didn't apply myself in high school. I could have done much better. It was very easy for me. I was a math, science ed, but I did all right. I was like a C, B student. But when I went to college, I had mixed emotions about going to college. I wanted to stay and fish. But my parents, it was a good thing what they did. They said, "You're young, you'll be able to fish and clam for the rest of your life." They helped me with school and I'm glad I did it. I went away to school. It gets you away from home and makes you grow up. You meet a lot of nice people. But I did end up coming back to fishing. But I don't ever regret taking those four years off to go to school

and make sure I'm more well-rounded person. A lot of people don't have the opportunity, but I did.

NS: So, getting back to the crab.

BT: I'm sorry. It did take time off to go to college, I have to let you know.

NS: That is a very interesting part of your life.

BT: Crabbing was good. I used to work out of a little twenty-foot skiff Garvey and I had a young boy who's probably like fourteen, fifteen years old, a friend of the family. He used to pick the cribs for me. He used to work all summer long with me. This was after high school. This is even after college, obviously.

NS: How many pots did you have?

BT: I used to run about one hundred seven-five pots and one hundred fifty to one hundred seventy-five. I'm sure that's your next question, right? I used to catch between ten to twenty bushel a day. It plumped away, did all right.

NS: What did you use for bait?

BT: I use bunker. That's probably my first experience with gill netting. Because a couple of the other crabbers, they would set a little bit of net in the morning and catch their own bait. So, I talked to them and they told me how to do it. So, I started doing that. I started catching my own bait and that's when I first started gill netting in the bay.

NS: You are using gill net. How long did you have to set the net for?

BT: As the water warmed up, sometimes you leave it overnight. Sometimes you just set it for four or five hours and you'd have your bait. Sometimes I would run to pots and then pick them up on the way in and I had my bait for the following day. I just put it in the freezer until the next day. So, I didn't mix gill netting up a little bit with the crabbing. But I used bunker and bluefishes, fantastic bait, but it's a little expensive to use. But sometimes when you set the gill net in the bay, you had a couple of crabs that would eat a couple of bluefish that you didn't want to sell so you use those for bait. What a great bait bluefish was, I guess, because it's wily.

NS: You are crabbing. You are clamming. Were you doing anything else on the bay?

BT: Yes, I was scalloping.

NS: What kind of equipment were you using for the scalloping?

BT: Just small dredges, little twenty-four-inch dredges. You put four of them. Right over her in Moriches, it used to be real good. I used to have a trail. I used to trail out to Sag Harbor and go scalloping out there in the fall. Bay Shore, we had a few scallops set up in Bay Shore. So, I used

to do a lot of traveling with the boat in the form of trail.

NS: Where did you get your dredges from?

BT: I bought them. Good question. Remember that gentleman I told you, John German, the older fella?

NS: Yes.

BT: He got me dredges from somewhere. I don't know if they were his or if he got them and I paid for him, but he set us up with scalping.

NS: How many other people were doing scalloping during that period?

BT: A lot of people. A lot of baymen used to scallop. It was something we all looked forward to. It was a break from what you were doing. We always look forward to that fall opening. We talked about it at the coffee shop. It was a lot of fun. When they opened it, they had a ten-bag limit or whatever the limit was. It was a nice short day. It was just a nice break from the routine. Whether we were crabbing or clamming, that's probably one thing that's a good memory. We're looking forward to the opening of scalloping season. It's just like recharged the battery and it was a lot of fun. But we don't have scallops anymore. It's sad. I can remember twenty, thirty boats right here in Moriches just plugging away on scallops. We go out to Sag Harbor and we'd see fifteen, twenty boats. You'd read about it in the news all the time, the catches. That was good stuff. Dredging crabs is fun, too. Not too many guys do it.

NS: What kind of dredges did you use?

BT: It's similar to a scallop dredge, but they have long teeth. They've got about six, seven-inch teeth in them and they spread very wide apart. It's maybe a cross between a clam rake and a scallop rake, fairly heavy. We do that, I guess, right around the summer. You could start now. You could probably start dredging some crabs if we get a little more cold weather. That was something else we look forward to, too. I guess, as a fisherman, we look forward to change. We went from one season to the next and nobody really wanted to pull in a clam rake all year long, but some guys did. But we look forward to change. It's good.

NS: How many months out of the year were you able to work on the water?

BT: I worked out every month. When the bay froze over, we used to go out on the ice and cut holes in the ice and clam right to the holes. Have you met anybody that did that?

NS: Yes.

BT: We work right through the winter. Obviously, not as productive as it was during the warm months but keep plugging away. Sometimes when the bay froze up real bad out here in Moriches, the ocean water wouldn't freeze quick. So, some of us will run out here and do a little bit of clamming, dredge the crabs, or we trail to the north shore harbor. It doesn't freeze as

quick as the bay. We would bring our clam rakes over there. We went through over there if it was real bad on the south shore. So, we moved around to try to avoid the ice. But sometimes the ice was just fine. If it got thick enough, we would walk out on the ice and that was fun, too. Not too many people could say they did that, right? [laughter]

NS: Yes. So, these days, how much time are you spending in the bay? How much time on the ocean?

BT: These days, I'm spending a lot of time in the ocean. I spend probably eighty, ninety percent of my year in the ocean and not too much time on the bay anymore.

NS: How come?

BT: How come? Well, it's just that the bay isn't as lucrative as it used to be. It's tough going on the bay. It's really tough. The climate is pretty much over on the south shore. I shouldn't say that. There are a few guys hanging on, but it's just marginal. It's very hard work and it's just that the clams aren't there. I don't know. They don't seem to spawn out. They don't seem to take it for whatever the reason. There hasn't been many clams on the bay for a long time now and it just won't come back. So, I guess, probably my move to the ocean was out of necessity financially. Although some guys do well on the bay. The crabbing has been good. The crabbing has been decent.

NS: When you do go on the bay, is that what you are doing?

BT: Yes. Right now, my activity on the bay would be dredging crabs or dredging scallops. Mainly dredging crabs. I haven't clammed in a while. I haven't dug (hog?) clams and probably, the last time, I dug (hog?) clams was in Port Jefferson. That was a while ago. I have to think about that, probably ten years ago.

NS: Let us talk about some more about the ocean. How far out you do go and how long does it take you to get there?

BT: Right now, I'm fishing in state waters. I stay inside the three miles. So, I don't go out very far, but I travel east and west. Right now, my boat is in Moriches. Sometimes back in August, I was fishing off Bridgehampton and down in Montauk. So, I would have a long ride. I would come to the boat at 2:30 a.m. and it takes me an hour and a half to get rows going before I even started fishing. So, I travel a little bit. But for the most part it's a half hour, forty-five-minute ride to the nets, sometimes an hour.

NS: Are you fishing mostly off of Fire Island?

BT: Yes. Right now, Moriches area is where I do most of my fishing. But yes, I'm right up against Fire Island, excuse me.

NS: Do you do any gill netting in the bay?

BT: I used to. I used to gill net in the bay. We used to be able to gill net in the bay in the month of May. We can't do that anymore.

NS: When did that change?

BT: I have to make a few phone calls to find out what.

NS: Roughly, what year, [19]80s, [19]90s?

BT: It was probably in the [19]80s, but that was a last-minute legislation. It was stuck to something and it went through the midnight hour and boom, the bay was closed out. It's real bad. It really did. They could have regulated it without shutting it down. You know what I mean? But anyway, back to the gill netting in the bay. In April, the bunkers show up in force and we used to go bunker fishing. There's a lot of fun, too. [laughter] We used to take that little twenty-foot Garvey and just load it to the rail with bunkers. We used to sell it to the lobstermen. The lobstermen used to come down when lobstering was a real up and going business. They used to come down with their barrels and we soaked up the bunkers. It was fun and a lot of fun. Then towards the end of April, the weakfish would come into the bay. In the beginning of May, the blues would come in. Then we would switch over. We would switch over from the bait and we would target the blues and the weakfish. But when I took them on [inaudible], all we could do is go for bait. It probably helped me show me into the ocean when they shut the bay down.

NS: How can they do that? What was the reason given?

BT: Politics. Probably, the drive behind that was just a lot of people didn't want to see gill nets in the bay anymore. It's a shame that they did it, that they got away with it.

NS: Was it the sports fishermen?

BT: Yes.

NS: The boaters?

BT: Yes, sport fishermen. They got it done. It's tough to get it back, too, once that legislation is passed.

NS: Now, can you set your net in the other months of the year?

BT: Yes, you can come back into the bay in June. Yes, you can. But the weakfish, the water heats up, the fisher by the inlets, they're just not in the bay or the Great South Bay, it's pretty much over. You get a couple of weeks in June. We can catch a couple of blues in a couple of weeks and then it's a real struggle. Then the crabs come out. The crabs become active right in the beginning of June. Then gill netting is very difficult with the crabs because it just jumps right on the fish. So, it used to be spring thing.

NS: So, you are mostly offshore within three miles?

BT: Yes.

NS: How long does it take you to get there?

BT: To get where?

NS: To where you want to fish to set your nets.

BT: It's about a ten-minute ride to the inlet. Today, let's see. I went about a forty-five-minute ride in the ocean, maybe forty minutes. So, it took an hour to get to the nets. I'm trying to think, the inlet is at 420, I was on a 498. Yes, I only went eight miles. I went eight miles to the west once I get to the inlet. It wasn't bad.

NS: Are the fish as plentiful as they once were when you first got into offshore fishing?

BT: Some are, some aren't. There's more fluke than I can ever remember. More bass than I can ever remember. The monkfish seem to be coming back. They're doing a lot to protect that. That's a unique fishery. That's more of an offshore fishery, offshore, twenty, thirty, forty, one hundred miles out. The big boats used to target them there. They're coming in down a little bit. It seems like the fish is a more healthy stock. Blue fish, they come and go. I can't figure them out. Right now, they're healthy. There's not an overabundance of blue fish, but I have seen more blue fish in the past than what I see now.

NS: Can you get a decent price?

BT: For blues?

NS: Yes.

BT: In the summertime, you can. You know what, what they're doing now with the blue fish is good. They regulate it. They have it on a certain poundage per day and it's actually helped the price because blue fish can be caught in the market and it's not a very desirable fish. So, that's working. We see it in between sixty and ninety cents a pound in the summer. It's a difficult fish and the regulation does help. I think to someone we had a two-thousand-pound limit for a while and then it went down to fifteen hundred and that was perfect. Fifteen hundred pounds was just right. You don't always get it.

NS: For how long, per day?

BT: Yes, per day.

NS: We went to two places where you went to your customers. Who are some of your customers?

BT: Who were some of the other customers?

NS: If you could just tell us.

BT: We've stopped at Mastic Seafood today. They buy some of my fish. But the reason why we stopped there today was because I have a truck that goes to New Bedford. He's a wholesale and he also stop there. So, I dropped some fish for that trucker. The name of the gentleman is Milligan Seafood. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

NS: Was it hard to get customers?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: How did you get your customers?

BT: Good question. I guess that's another thing you have to learn. When I was working on the other boats as a deckhand, you try to take it all in. You try to figure out how they're catching the fish, but you also have to see where they're selling fish. It's not that hard to figure out how to find your buyers. You just get to know a couple of them and they'll help you out. They'll give you phone numbers and it just happens pretty quick because people look for the fish. They want it.

NS: Was it hard to get reliable customers?

BT: Yes, I've taken some months with that. A lot of the fish goes on consignment. Like Mastic Seafood, when you go there, they want it, they pay you right away. It's not on consignment. But what I shipped into the city today is on consignment. I have a good rapport with the fella that I shipped to. But sometimes when you're new, when you're not really well-known, they won't pay you what they should. So, you have to stay away from those people. You figure it out over time. You just have to be careful. You can't put all your eggs in one basket. Then you get a feel for what the price is all local. So, when you ship into the city, that's a wholesale setting. So, yes, you got to be careful, but you can get burned. The any other buyer we went to was Blue Water Distributors in Mastic Beach. He bought some stuff. He ships a lot of stuff to the West Coast. He fires a lot of stuff out of Kennedy. It's a good way like when we catch a lot of fish, I give him fish. He goes to the West Coast and then the remaining fish goes to New York. So, not all my fish dumps into one hub into New York. But I have a guy that goes to New Belford. I got a guy that ships to the West Coast. I got to New York and some local fish markets here.

NS: When you were first breaking into the fishing industry, did some people really extend a hand to help you?

BT: Did some people?

NS: Yes.

BT: Some people did. Probably the one fisherman that did help me out was Richie LaRocca. I fished with him. He was always a phone call away. If I needed help, he would help me out. But



there were some gill netters that when I showed up in the ocean, they showed up at my front door kicking it down practically. They did not want to see me out there. They gave me a hard time. They would set their nets right over my net. They would run them over. You had to deal with that mentality, too. But for the most part, I have to say it was okay. There was just a few bad eggs.

NS: What was the hardest thing for you to learn?

BT: The hardest thing for me to learn?

NS: Yes.

BT: That's a load of question. [laughter]

NS: Really? I was not meaning it to be.

BT: The hardest thing to learn.

NS: We all have our challenges in any profession that are hard things to learn.

BT: Probably the hardest thing to learn was just how to make those nets right. When I first started gill netting, I made all my nets. When you go from working on somebody's boat and you think you understand what they're doing to really having to make your own nets, I stunk as a fisherman when I first started. [laughter] I did. I just knew that when I see them put forty cartons over the dark and I get six, then I'm doing something wrong. You know what I mean? [laughter] The learning curve is tough. You've just got to hang in there, but I did. It took me two, three years before I really even – seriously, maybe even four years before I really turned a profit and thought that, okay, I'm going to make it. That was the hardest thing for me, figuring out how to make those nets to catch. Once I got it, then you're still building and I'm still changing things. But it was nicer once I got to the point where I can make a living. Then you start focusing on other things, but that was the hardest thing for me.

NS: So, that leads into the question, what makes a good net?

BT: A good net is a net that will catch fish and that will pick easy.

NS: Obviously.

BT: Now, I built nets in the past that catch fish, but you can't get them out of the net because they're all tangled up. Some nets just catch dirty. If you use the wrong size webbing, you'll catch grass and mud. So, you want the net to fish clean and you also want it to catch the fish. So, there's a delicate balance between catching fish and being able to pick them and catching fish and having a tangled mushy unit. So, otherwise, you can't turn your nets over.

NS: So, how do you make a net so it is easy picking? What do you have to be able to do?

BT: You have to have the right size webbing. For example, when I'm blue fishing. When I first started blue fishing, I tried like two, three different size nets. To go blue fishing, you need three- and three-quarter inch, you need four-inch, you need four and an eighth, you need four and a quarter, you need four and a half, you need four and three quarter, you need five, you need five and quarter, you need five and a half. You need all these nets ready to go. Then when you start your season, you go out there with four or five. Maybe I shouldn't say four or five. Maybe three or four different sizes and you got to figure out what fish are going to be there for the year. So, you see how these nets catch. It takes you a couple of weeks to figure out what's that. You know what I mean? So, you see these nets are not catching, you take that off. So, you bring back the next size.

NS: Is it related to the size of the fish and how fast they are swimming?

BT: Yes. If the fish is too big, it'll bounce off. If the fish is too small it'll swim through. So, you really have to find a delicate balance so that you need the fish to engage into the net and get caught. If the webbing's too heavy and the fish lays on a net, they won't catch it. It'll retreat. So, it's an art. I want to say it's an art.

NS: Yes, it is.

BT: So, you have to have the right size net so the fish gets caught properly and doesn't bounce off. But if that webbing's too thin and not strong enough, those bluefish are forced off. They'll stretch that webbing and swim right through it. So, you got to have it strong enough, but not too thick where it'll bounce off. Do you see what I'm saying?

NS: Yes, exactly. How long have you been using monofilament nets? What came before that?

BT: Well, I've never used anything monofilament. I know they were nylon nets years ago, but I've never used them.

NS: Do you know when it changed from nylon?

BT: No, I honestly don't. I can't really add much to that. Different color also. We've tried different color nets.

NS: Does that matter?

BT: Yes. I bought a net where one year I ordered a whole load of net for the summer, I couldn't even use it because it was the wrong damn color. It wouldn't catch. It was too dark. Thank God, I didn't throw my net out from the year before so I went through the whole summer using last year's net and I learn as a fisherman to learn something. But I guess, I learned something the hard way. But yes, we use different colors. We use light green, light blue, light gray, pink, clear.

NS: Which colors work best for which kinds of fish?

BT: I strongly believe in light green.

NS: For everything?

BT: Yes. I usually like green for everything. I have had luck with light pink and icy blue color, like a light blue. But I tend to go with the light green. I think that works good for me. You're hanging in there?

NS: Yes. How about you?

BT: Yes.

NS: We were talking about this marina here and getting the dock space here and you were talking about Shinnecock. What happened in Shinnecock?

BT: Shinnecock, it's fine now. It's not that I was asked to leave or anything. I just started fishing in Moriches. I did well down here and I liked it. Another reason why I like fishing here is because we're away from the (dragger?) fleet. There's a lot of (draggers?) out of Shinnecock. The gill net and (draggers?) can work together, but it's easier if we're away from where they frequent work the most. So, I found a home down here. The people around here are pretty receptive. They're actually really nice. You know what, when we come to the dock, we always offer them fish. We really try to let them know that we're normal people and that we're not trying to kill everything in the ocean. A lot of people see us come in with a truckload of fish and they look at us and they say things and they look away or they shake their head. That's tough, but we do get that sometimes. But here, it's okay. There's a lot of down earth people.

NS: Do you have to work on your nets a lot?

BT: Yes, a lot a lot.

NS: Where do you work on your nets?

BT: In my backyard. When the season's over, I guess I'll take a week or two off, but then I'll get right working on the gear in my backyard. It takes probably four to five weeks to strip out the nets that I'm not going to use and prepare to make nets for the new year.

NS: What is stripping out?

BT: The nets, how we discussed there's a lead line and a float line?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, the webbing is what gets all torn up and eventually it gets stiff. It doesn't last long. Maybe two seasons is the most I get out of a net. Usually, one season and I have to make new nets.

NS: How long is a typical season for you?

BT: The monk nets, I use in the spring and the fall. That's all for them. I'm not going to make all new nets for the following year.

NS: How much does it cost you to make a net on average?

BT: Monk nets, thank God, there's not a lot of webbing in a monk net and we pay by the pound. Excuse me.

NS: You were talking about how much a typical net might cost.

BT: Well, I get to reuse the lead line and float line. There's a lot of expense that goes into the nets. Let me tell you how it works now with the money. Right now, I don't make my nets anymore. I have somebody make them. So, I spend more time fishing than I used to. I used to spend ten weeks hanging nets in the wintertime, just hanging nets, making no money. That's when I was trying to figure out what would make next work. So, I would make all kinds of different nets and then I change again in the fall. Now I know what I want. So, it'll cost to make one monk net, twelve hundred-foot, just in labor, the hanging part is about...

NS: How much do you spend on an average?

BT: How much a year do I spend on nets?

NS: Yes.

BT: Fifteen thousand dollars.

NS: So, one net would be about how much?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: What would the cost be for one net, ballpark?

BT: For one net? For a monk net, it wouldn't be that much. The monk net would only be five hundred dollars. But a bluefish net would be very expensive. It'd be a thousand dollars, maybe fifteen hundred dollars because there's just tremendous amount of webbing.

NS: Would that be the most expensive net that you would spend money?

BT: I spend more money on monk, yes, because I use more monk nets than we do for bluefishing and striped bass fishing. But, yes, the heaviest part of our investment is in monk nets. We lose a lot of nets. We lose them to storms. We lose them to dry against scalpers. So, we've got to deal with that, too. Last year wasn't a bad year, but I had a horrible year about two years ago, maybe two or three years ago. The Montauk fleet showed up for squid. Before the spring was over, ninety percent of my gear was hit by draggers. You try and mend it. You try to

just try to hang on for dear life with a situation like that. That was horrible, but that happens. When they tore through a net, maybe it's a twelve-hundred-foot net, they'll tear on the foot of it up, you'll mend it up. Sometimes a little fish, sometimes it won't. Sometimes you just have to bring that net home and bring another one back out. We do have bad years like that.

NS: How long will the net sit while you are trying to catch?

BT: The monk net, we fish overnight. We tended every day. When a storm comes, we get that net. That's why we have a big net rail on the boat. We'll get them [inaudible] on the boat, let the storm go by, then we'll go back out and set them. So, we fish overnight for the monk. For the bluefish, it'll sit anywhere from a half hour to an hour and a half. We just constantly bounce between two nets. Then we take those nets home with us. So, with striped bass fishing, striped bass, bluefish, weakfish, bonita, those nets aren't on the water for more than an hour and they come home with us.

NS: Do you use poles to anchor the nets with the ones that are sitting overnight?

BT: We use anchors, heavy anchors. Real heavy lead line, too, because they're out there in all kinds of weather.

NS: How many gill netters are there around now in your geographic?

BT: In our area?

NS: Yes.

BT: There's four of us here in Moriches that fish in any ocean. We're not talking about the bay, right?

NS: Right.

BT: For Moriches, there's probably four out of Fire Island. Probably six out of Shinnecock, maybe seven. Maybe another three out of Montauk, maybe four. What is that, fifty, twenty tops bait.

NS: Do you have a sense how many there are on all of Long Island?

BT: There's probably the same amount in the bay, I would say.

NS: What about the western part of the island? Do you have a handle on any gill netters out there?

BT: If you get down to Rockaways, there's a few more boats. Probably another four or five in the ocean. So, maybe that would make twenty in total.

NS: So, most of them are around here?

BT: Yes. Most of them are in this area.

NS: In the eastern part of the island?

BT: Yes. It's hard to say how many guys in the bay do it. A lot of the crab is catching bait so maybe there's another fifteen, twenty guys in the bay that do gill netting for a long time.

[end of transcript]