

John Kochiss: July 31st, 1979. We are at Mr. Edward Ockers' home at 86th Division Avenue in West Sayville. I am John Kochiss, and we're talking about your life on the water. You said that you were a navigator.

Edward Ockers: Well, I did very little oystering or clamming. I've done mostly fishing, trap fishing or pound net fishing in the Bay mostly. Eeling went along with that, seasonal, fall. That was in September. From Labor Day to Thanksgiving Day is when we caught eels. Do you want to know about the eels?

JK: Yes.

EO: The season was, as I said, from September. We started getting the poles ready. Our nets were all repaired during the winter before. But to get the poles in and the nets in, it would take about maybe six weeks before we would have a net fishing working in between our fish nets and the eel net. Do you want to know about what the...

JK: Well, maybe I ought to start too by saying that you were born in this area, I presume. You were born here.

EO: Yeah, I was born here.

JK: You are in your seventies, I presume.

EO: I'm seventy-five.

JK: Seventy-five. My father is seventy-six. He just turned...

EO: I don't know how far back it went. Same name and all.

JK: Yes. Did your grandparents or parents come from Holland?

EO: My grandparents did, on my father's side. My grandmother was born here on Long Island, wherever she was born.

JK: Your mother's maiden name was...

EO: Van Popering.

JK: That is a well-known— they had an oyster company, did they not?

EO: Yes.

JK: Was she related to them? Well, I guess they were all related.

EO: Well, I guess some ways back, I don't remember how they were...

JK: But not directly related.

EO: Yes. My mother and the Van Poperings that had the oyster house, they were cousins somehow in there. Now, I could just remember the Van Poperings having an oyster house. They wanted somebody to run their [inaudible].

JK: A lot of those companies sold to the steam ship companies. The old Blue Points [inaudible].

EO: Well, nobody owned any ground, but Blue Points. They owned this piece across the bay. The rest of them rented property or rented oyster lots from the town. That's the only way they would've stayed in business. They didn't have no ground of their own. It was all rented ground. Now, Blue Points, now, they may have rented some out, but I don't know nothing about that. But they kept it pretty well for themselves. Jakob started this, and he bought this piece [inaudible].

JK: Was your father a bayman?

EO: Yes.

JK: Did he own sailboats? Did he work off of sailboats or what?

EO: He died when he was thirty-six years old, and I was only eleven. So, I don't remember much of him. I know he was in the oyster business. At one time, he had a place down the shore there where Kingston is now. In that west part of Kingston, he owned a piece in there. Or owned or rented or what, I don't know. But that's the only oyster business he was in. Then I guess he had clams – a lot. Everybody had a lot, what they call an oyster lot or a clam lot, on west of Nichols Point. He probably had some in there. Then he went in the fishing business. Then he started South Bay Fish Company. That was in 1913 that he started that. Then he died in 1914. So, he was only there the year, but then he went with my two uncles. Well, he went with one uncle and his brother, investments. Then my father died. One of his investors died maybe within the year. Then another uncle of mine, he [inaudible] sisters over to the investment, one investment. [inaudible]. So, that's how he kept that in the family there.

JK: How long did the fish company last?

EO: Well, it lasted up until [19]58.

JK: When your father started, did he operate a sailboat, or he owned?

EO: Well, I guess they had power in it sometimes.

JK: Do you remember the names of any of his boats?

EO: All I know from the book that Taylor took from here was the name of *Morrissey*. The boat by the name of *Morrissey*. I don't know but I think they had the *Louise Ockers*. Now, who owned that before he bought it, whether it was Jake Ockers – I would imagine it was Jake Ockers

because *Louise Ockers* was named after her. She was a sailboat converted into a motorboat. He had a little motor engine in that. That's what they went pound fishing with for years.

JK: When you say book, what kind of book was this that Taylor has?

EO: The book of when he started business and the first year he was in business and what the price of the fish were.

JK: Oh, it was like a diary of some sort or –

EO: Well...

JK: – ledger?

EO: Like a daybook. So, he kept track of the days, what kind of weather they had at times there, and what they've done, whether they went fishing or clamming or laid down oysters, took up the clams or what. He put that all in the book and what he got for them.

JK: Now, there was pound fishing in the bay as well as out in the ocean.

EO: Yes. Pound fishing.

JK: Oh, my gosh. What kind of fish did they get in the bay here?

EO: Weakfish, bluefish – weakfish mostly, flukes, kingfish, lot of oysters. But that was the main catch.

JK: Did they have...

EO: And bunkers. They caught a lot of bunkers for the farmers. The farmers used to come down with wagons and horse and wagon and take them up and put them on the fields.

JK: And the others, you sold to a market in New York or something?

EO: Well, they used to ship to New York, but the surplus, they had – well, they all used to be a lot of peddlers. We used to call them peddlers. These guys would – probably, if someone had a horse and wagon. When they started, when I was a kid, they used horse and wagon. I remember one guy by the name of [inaudible], he used to have a bicycle. He used to carry a big barrel – well, a flower barrel on his handlebars. That's how he peddled fish in that. So, I guess he had as high as hundred pounds [inaudible] in that. Then whatever their surplus, I guess they sent to New York.

JK: So, these peddle [inaudible], did they have leaders and everything closed? How were they?

EO: No. There's a certain trap area in the back where they had to set the trap. I always say you always would be able to put the pole down in the old hole last year. That's how fast we could get

them. With a leader, we always set a net. This is the leader. This was your first pole of the leader. When we pulled that pole up in the fall, we put a buoy right down alongside of it around that same hole. It went right down in the hole. So, that buoy was there in the spring when we come there. So, that's where we worked from. So, maybe it was 6 inches, 2 or 3 inches off, but that was all. So, it was always in the same spot.

JK: These poles, were they cedar poles or something?

EO: They were hickory poles. Some were probably 2-foot long. From 6- to 8-inch butt to 3- to 4-inch top. That was the longest pole.

JK: How deep was the water at that time?

EO: Well, we had one in 10-foot of water, to 18-foot. We had five nets eventually.

JK: Were these areas specified by the town?

EO: The interior water department, the Department of Interior. We had to get a permit every year from them [inaudible]. You had to get a permit every year for that.

JK: Now, what year...

EO: It was like a number.

JK: You are talking about what years were these permitted that you had to get these permits?

EO: Well, as far as I can remember back when they first started with that, I can remember the numbers that we could get were the trap areas.

JK: Were there many people that went trap fishing? Did they have their own traps there?

EO: Well, they were the only ones in West Sayville. But there were two that I can remember in Bay Shore had traps. Now, whether it was Moore or not, I don't remember.

JK: Who were they? Do you remember their names?

EO: Probably the name of Benjamin and (Hans McDell?). I don't know what Benjamin's name was. He was an old man when I was a kid doing trap fishing.

JK: What about the east of here? Did they have traps along there?

EO: No.

JK: Why did they go to these particular areas? Fish liked those areas or simply because of the loss of the...

EO: Well, the inlet was closed. The fish had to come in the river. That's the only way they got in and out.

JK: How far away from the inlet was this?

EO: Well, it was just beyond the lighthouse when I was a kid. [inaudible] I can remember going out the inlet when it was down, oh, quite well, this side of the Sore Thumb here. Now, you have to go past the Sore Thumb. [inaudible] Probably the beach, probably [inaudible]. The inlet was probably 4 miles – I'm guessing about 4 miles from the lighthouse.

JK: So, you didn't have them right off of West Sayville then? The traps?

EO: Well, I would say there was one about a mile and a half off here when we first started at this – it was like a hole in the area. It was all shallow water around it. There was what we called a double header. It had a net on both ends with the lead in the middle. So, the fish could climb both ways. Otherwise, you have a fish net. You should have the leader on the shoal end going into the deep, with the trap on the deep end. The fish would go to the deep end. I would say that was about off the coast, just kind of southwest from here. Then we had more down the channel. There was two down the channel. As the fish dropped out, got less in the bank, we gave them up. The other people went out of business, and we took over their sets, their best sets. That's how we got them. So, eventually, we were the only ones fishing in the bay. We only had five nets all together.

JK: In the whole bay?

EO: Yes. There used to be one or two nets down the West Channel years ago. We had one down off [inaudible 0:13:22] and it couldn't do nothing down in the water. Had one also east side [inaudible] beach off on the south side towards [inaudible]. We couldn't go up there [inaudible] amount of fish.

JK: Why have the fish disappeared? Do you have any leads?

EO: No.

JK: Why has it gone down low?

EO: I don't know. It's a cycle. I would say it's a cycle. But now, the weakfish came back. The weakfish came back. Years ago, when I was fishing, you couldn't catch a 200- pound of big weakfish any day. That was a big day of 200 pounds of big weakfish, 200 pounds. Now, they go gillnet diving and catch 4,000 pounds. Not now, but in the spring when they come and dive. Out in the ocean, that's all they're catching, the big weakfish. Some of those big companies have done good this year. In the last six years, they've been done weakfish. Now, bluefish, well, they're dropping out. Years ago, there was a lot of bluefish. Now, this year, they say there's no bluefish in the ocean.

JK: Now, these nets that you designed, do they vary with the types of fish you expect?

EO: No.

JK: How does it change? According to where you are or are they all the same, the nets, the traps?

EO: They're all the same principle, all the same shape.

JK: Could you make a drawing of what that might look like?

EO: Draw the...

JK: Top of your head.

EO: You want the bay net?

JK: The bay net, yes. Or what other...

EO: This is the shore water. This is your leader.

JK: How long would that be about?

EO: Five, 600 feet. This would be what they call a heart. This was what they call the funnel in the net.

JK: Into the main pole.

EO: Yes. We had the two poles here to pull the funnel out. There was a bridle along here. Pull it on here. This was...

JK: The bridle went into there?

EO: Well, one on each side. This bridle here, this one came onto here. There was a light on here on this pole, and down here, there was a sign. There was a pole –

JK: What was on the sign?

EO: – pole here. These are all poles and what they called had a whiffletree from here – these stake here, it was nine stakes here. From here, there was a small whiffletree. Then the big whiffletree – it was a big tree, a log. It was a tree where you hung your net up, and everything worked from that too. When you pulled your funnel up, the whiffletree went right across from – a little whiffletree here and a little whiffletree here, and the whiffletree went right across here. Your net was just hung up on a whiffletree to keep it out of the water. When you hold it back, you had the cringles in here. So, you pulled everything back out of the water here. The fish always swam against the tide. When it hit something like the lead here, they would go towards deep water. They wouldn't go through the shallow water. Always go to deep water.

JK: You say the depth of the water there is from 10 to 18 feet?

EO: Anywhere from 10 to 18 feet, yes.

JK: Oh boy. Did this net wiffle –

EO: Whiffletree.

JK: – whiffletree, the net there, did it interfere with the funnel?

EO: Oh no.

JK: It was just out of the water.

EO: That was above the water stakes. The stakes stood straight out of the water at about, on average, 6 feet. Then this was all above water.

JK: Yes. But the next drop down into the water.

EO: Yes. Yes.

JK: But there must have been a hole in it to allow this funnel to go through.

EO: Oh, this was all one piece of net. Whatever here up to here, that's all one piece of net.

JK: How wide?

EO: That was 24-foot square.

JK: And these would be...

EO: Well, I think these were 9 feet apart. Nine times nine, so 80 feet long.

JK: Oh, each side is 80 feet.

EO: But here, on this third stake, there used to be a net in the bottom here. This was a net. From this stake, there was a rope going across the bottom here, until up to the funnel. It was net. You had to have something to go up into the funnel.

JK: Oh, it was up on...

EO: Yes. That was the principle of it. The net laid that way and went up the other net, into the funnel. But this was a piece of net that stopped it from going underneath the bottom. This was all pulled down. Each pole had a cringle on the bottom with a slat in it. You just put the slat alongside the pole and tied a rope up and down. Tied one end of that rope through the net and to

the top of the stake and pull these all down in place.

JK: You said slat?

EO: Yes, a slat, a wooden slat. Well, it's about a quarter by four, with a cringle in the bottom. The rope went through, went up, up, well, like a little pulley, over the side of the pulley. The trap was always in the same spot. So, whatever fish came along, you caught or thought you caught anyway. You had no choice.

JK: How often did you tend the nets?

EO: Every day.

JK: Morning, noon, or night or what?

EO: No. Just once a day. Morning.

JK: Morning?

EO: Yes. Once a day. Sometimes, we'd skip a day. Sunday, we never fished.

JK: How did you get them out of the traps then?

EO: Well, these stakes on the side there had ropes in them to haul down. Haul down, we used to call them. These two had a haul down line here. No, it was no haul down line on here because the tide kept that down the Chesapeake. The tide runs this way.

JK: Which way was that?

EO: The tide runs that way.

JK: That way?

EO: Yes, and well, vice versa too. So, there was no haul down lines here. If the tide was going where we are now, we'd put the boat on this side of the net right here. The boat would be over here.

JK: Down tide. Yes.

EO: Down tide. This would come loose, and that net would – a strong tide would take it right out. See? Then the fish would come towards the deep water.

JK: Oh, I see. Yes.

EO: Then we'd go inside with a smaller boat. We had an 18-foot boat. We'd go inside with three men, and with that, you got these pulled all up. We had to pull this funnel up here to get

the funnel out of the water. So, we'd cut the fish off. Unless they go all over the funnel, you wouldn't be able to get them out in the deep water. So, we tried to get this up as high as we could here on these. That was the idea of the whiffletree too. There was a rope here on top of the whiffletree to the bottom of the net and over here. So, you pull this neck – we would call that the neck. Pulled the neck up, and then the fish wouldn't go underneath the funnel and in the deep water. You'd come here and just wade your fish over towards this place with the three men and then bail them out in the net.

JK: In the early days, what did you use as a boat? What kind of boat?

EO: Well, I guess she was a 32-foot [inaudible]. In the South Bay, we had built, and she goes down the creek here now. You know where Harry's Marine is?

JK: Yes.

EO: Go down Harry's Marine, go around the shop here. As you come up going this way to around about two bends, the South Bay lives right here. She's about 38-foot, 39-foot boat. Quite wide and quite high.

JK: Where was she built?

EO: West Sayville.

JK: Who built it? Do you know?

EO: Henry Otto.

JK: Oh, Otto?

EO: Otto.

JK: When was that built?

EO: Where?

JK: When?

EO: 1929.

JK: You call this a bay net, a trap.

EO: Bay net or a pound net. The pound net is what they used to call it.

JK: You said bay. Now, would that be different than an ocean net? Was that another ocean pound net?

EO: Oh, that's [inaudible].

JK: Is that why you mentioned a bay net to distinguish between the two?

EO: Oh, yes. Well, the ocean net is a whole lot bigger.

JK: Yes, and deeper, of course.

EO: Forty feet of water. The poles, I guess, now, a pole would cost you \$500 to put one out there.

JK: How did you drive these poles?

EO: What?

JK: How did you drive them in the...

EO: Water pressure, a lot of times, it drives them. Jet them in.

JK: Jet them in. Yes. What about before they – well, like your father's days, how would they have driven the poles?

EO: Well, they had a jet too, but then the mud in this place and in the bay where we – like this one night, he was talking about the [inaudible] and it was all mud. Sticky mud. We'd get them in about 4 or 5 feet of water and 4 or 5 feet in the bottom. Just keep pounding them up and down, keep working them, pull up and down. Every time you'd come down and give them a little extra pull. Eventually, you got them in about 4-foot, 5-foot. But after you got them in, boy, you couldn't get them out. [inaudible]

JK: Did you have to take them all out at the end of the season?

EO: Every once a month.

JK: That was by law, I presume.

EO: Yes. Well, it was for our own benefit. I used to take them all out and cut them all up.

JK: That's tricky. Yes. You used them over and over again.

EO: We'd take them all out.

JK: Hickory, I understand, maybe I'm mistaken that hickory rots very easily. But obviously, it does not.

EO: No. Well, hickory – there used to be a lot of worms in the bank, borers. They used to eat that wood. We used to paint all the poles. So, we'd take the bark off before the – on a new pole,

we'd just take the knots off. We'd smooth all the knots up and just paint the knots. The worm wouldn't eat them through the bark. They just go in where the wood is. Then the next year or two years later, you could peel that bark off. Then we'd have to paint the whole pole with copper paint.

JK: Oh, regular bottom paint?

EO: All these big poles are copper-painted.

JK: That was expensive, was it not?

EO: Well, it...

JK: Today, it would be expensive.

EO: Copper paint, I think was \$4 a gallon or something like that.

JK: It was \$40 – \$30, yes.

EO: It's a little bit different now too. But the copper paint in them days, it was like mud in the bottom of the can. You had about that much thick, and it would set a while, say, a month set in there. That would be dry. You dump the oil off and look in there and scrape it. It was just as dry as a bone. There was, I guess, copper flakes or something. I don't know what they call it. But now, it's different. It's plastic and a lot better today. But these poles had a...

JK: Oh, yes, the leader, how many poles did that have?

EO: I think it was forty-nine poles altogether in the neck between here and here.

JK: Including the leader?

EO: So, the leader, see, they were 15 feet apart. The poles were 15-foot apart. There were eighteen poles in the leader. From here, they had this hedge – what they used to call hedging. That was a small pole. You set that about a foot apart and then jet them down.

JK: That began about halfway down?

EO: Yes. Well, more than halfway. I would say maybe two-thirds or something like that. It varied on how far you could get into the deep water with this end and where the shoal waters – you stopped on this end. But these poles, the worms would them eat more off. Sometimes, you'd save a pole and save maybe half a pole and bring it back in. The next year, put them back in. The worms were the ones that ate these poles up. That's why we had to get new poles out there. It used to cost a little about 15, 18 cents, years ago, for a 20-, 30-foot pole.

JK: You are talking about the hedging?

EO: Yes, the hedging.

JK: Did you mention that kind of wood there was different? Was it still hickory?

EO: Yes, the hickory, oak.

JK: The same as the rest of the...

EO: That's what we always wanted, hickory or oak.

JK: Even for here too, huh?

EO: Well, these are mostly hickory. [inaudible] poles.

JK: This is called a heart. What is this square part called?

EO: That would be the...

JK: Just the pound?

EO: The head, we would call it.

JK: The nets themselves, how deep were they?

EO: Well, whatever depth...

JK: 12rom there, it would go all the way down to the bottom.

EO: Yes.

JK: So, it would depend upon the depth of the water.

EO: Well, then it was out of the water about 2 feet. See, if it was 18 feet of water, it got down about...

JK: So, your net really depended upon how deep the water was.

EO: Yes. But this part you could –

JK: The head?

EO: – it was maybe 3- or 4-feet shoulder length apart. Because that's why this net was here to –

JK: To go up, yes.

EO: – lead them up.

JK: Did it vary in depth from the beginning to the end?

EO: Oh, yes. This one, the 18-foot water one, 18 to about 4-foot of water, yes. Four to eighteen. That was right off of Ocean Bay Park.

JK: How far from shore would that be?

EO: Oh, that one was about –

JK: Like a leader.

EO: – across a thousand feet offshore.

JK: Oh, you mean for a thousand feet, you wanted 3, 4 feet of water? I am from Long Island Sound and that just does not seem right. [laughter]

EO: [laughter] No. Well, this place is – I'll get you to go two miles to walk out. One place down east here off back here, I guess you can walk halfway across the bay. [laughter] There's a shore here that keeps the edges up. Not much water down there.

JK: So, you would make up your net depending upon where the net was going to be placed.

EO: Yes. It'd be different sizes.

JK: You had floats on top and weights on the bottom of the net.

EO: Just a haul down line.

JK: No floats or anything?

EO: No floats. No nothing. Just the haul down line.

JK: On each pole? How would you attach it to each pole all along the way?

EO: Well, on the bottom, it had this slat.

JK: The same as you described before.

EO: Yes.

JK: Each one would have one of those?

EO: This is a round pole going up this way. That slat was alongside here. Say, the pole went up this way. The slat went alongside of it here. But there was a cringle down on the bottom here, brass cringle. It had a little point on. So, this was the bay bottom. You shoved this point down

in the bottom so no net would get underneath this point. Your rope would come down here, go through this cringle up. This would be a top pole. You could tie this piece to the top pole. This would tie to the bottom of your net. As you haul that down, this net came down to this cringle. That's what kept it in place on the bottom.

JK: All right. Now, let me see this. This would come all the way down here and through the cringle like a pulley and up.

EO: Right.

JK: Now where was the net tied to this part or this spot?

EO: Well, the one closest to the pole, you would tie it to the pole. This one would be tied to the – as you pull this net down...

JK: When you say pull down, you mean you pull up on it?

EO: Well, the net would be fastened here.

JK: Oh, it would be fastened under there.

EO: It'd be fastened here, and as you hauled this down or pulled up on this rope, you pulled it through the cringle and pulled the neck down to the cringle, which is the bottom of the bay. It stayed there, see, and tied the top rope all on a pole.

JK: This would be the top of the net, right? Come out like that?

EO: Yes. This would be the bottom of the net.

JK: That would be the bottom. How would this not kind of sag? I suppose the next pole would take care of the sagging.

EO: Well, no. We measured them pretty accurately. Everything was measured. Say if it was 9 feet here, it would be 9 feet. So, you set the pole 9 feet apart. They would be taut. They wouldn't be – very, very little sag in them. There wouldn't be a half inch sag, I don't think, in a pole. You could eliminate that by putting it from being straight, just lean it over the other way. Then pull it back, pull the pole up, and you straighten the pole up.

JK: This had meshes.

EO: Yes.

JK: What size mesh?

EO: Two-inch. The heart, if it was 3-inch, this was 2-inch.

JK: The head would be 2-inch square. If that is three, that would be two.

EO: That's right.

JK: What about the leader?

EO: That was all rope, probably a six-thread rope, 6 inches apart up and down.

JK: So, it was like a fence?

EO: Just like a fence, a rope fence.

JK: Could the fish not go in between there?

EO: We had net on that too. They claim the net fishers, little net leader fish is better than the rope leader. Then eel net...

JK: That is a lot different.

EO: An eel net is built exactly the same as that. Same type only it has less poles. It's only 10-foot square. An eel net is only 10-foot square.

JK: Whereas the other one is twenty-five, you said?

EO: Twenty-four. That's the pocket. Well, we call it the pocket.

JK: Or the head, yes.

EO: The head or the pocket, whatever you want to call it.

JK: But was it shaped – did it have a heart in it and all that? The eel net?

EO: Yes. It had a heart. Same as that. Exactly the same.

JK: How about the number of poles here and the number of poles in the...

EO: Well, this is only 10-foot. There's one pole on each corner on an eel net.

JK: Then how about the heart?

EO: The heart is here. One pole here in the heart. But this, on the eel net, would straighten out more.

JK: Yes. It would not be as curvy because you are not...

EO: Then there'd be a pole here, a pole here, and a pole there.

JK: Now, would there be a pole here or this comes directly?

EO: No. No. None there. This is where that apron goes across to the other pole here, and then up to the corner in the eel. That's square [inaudible] going down.

JK: How about here? How did this net attach to this? Oh, you had your – what did you call it?

EO: Yes. Well, we called it hanging on a net.

JK: Oh. It just hung on the net.

EO: It's all ropes. Wherever there's a corner, there's a corner rope going up and down. There's a rope in each corner going up and down and all around the bottom and all around the top, wherever there's an edge. To hang your net on, it has to be onto a rope. So, that was all here. There are up and down bands going here from top to the bottom.

JK: Up and down what?

EO: Band.

JK: Band?

EO: A band. That's from the top of your net. That's the top and this is the bottom. In your net, there's a band going here, like in the corner here, up and down, top to bottom. Each one of these poles had a band in it.

JK: The netting was what type?

EO: Yes. On both sides here.

JK: I mean, what sizes?

EO: This is an inch and three-eighths. This is 2-inch.

JK: I mean, one in three-eighths was the head, and two to a pocket.

EO: That'd be an inch and three-eighth stretch mesh is what we called it.

JK: Was the other stretch?

EO: Yes. The other would be to stretch too. It should be 2-inch square mesh. A 2-inch mesh is 1 inch square all around. See, when you pull it out, it's 2 inches. One inch...

JK: Yes. One inch, but it is stretched out, the diagonal.

EO: One-inch square is 2-inch stretched. Take them out towards you. When you stretch it from this corner to this corner, pull it out, it's 2 inches towards you. This is an inch three-eighths stretched. This is 2-inch stretched, and this is 2-inch stretched on the eel net. Getting back, you said fish goes through that rope leader. Eels will go through 3-inch net. You won't catch any. My son, he said, "I got a chance to get some Japanese woven nylon net." I said, "Well, why don't you try it on a leader?" So, he made a couple of leaders. He didn't even catch a quarter of the eels, but the other nets would catch. So, he had to go back to the 2-inch, and he caught the eels the same day.

JK: On that, before I forget, these other sizes of the mesh of the bay net or pound net, you said this was a 2-inch. Now, is that stretched?

EO: Two-inch stretched.

JK: And the other 3-inch was –

EO: Stretched.

JK: What would that be? One and a half or something?

EO: Yes, one and a half square.

JK: What about the length? Going back to the eel traps. How long were the leaders?

EO: It was a 120-foot – These are in three sections. They're 120-foot long.

JK: It had three times 120. Wow. That is long. That is 360.

EO: Yes. Well, the time you lap them over and –

JK: Oh, yes. You lose some.

EO: – you lose some. But they're about 325 feet long. We set them right close to shore though.

JK: About like how many feet?

EO: Within 20 feet. If there's deep water there on a bulkhead or something like that, you set them right on a bulkhead – off the bulkhead. So, the bulkhead, and the last choice is the leader, end of the leader. They'd go right close the shore within a quarter and a half of water. Because the only time you catch eels is when the wind blows on the land. In this kind of weather, you won't catch an eel. You've got to be in a fall, after fall sets. Then you've got to have a southerly breeze for this shore because the northwestern won't catch no eels.

JK: Do you have any reason for that?

EO: Well, maybe known to an eel, but I don't know. [laughter] Yes. Well, fish is the same way.

Fish will go on a lower shore. Get more fish on a lower shore than you will on a winter shore. That's the only time you'll catch eels in the fall, when the wind blows from the south. From east, goes around this way to southwest. Southwest, I think, is the best wind for eels in the bay.

JK: Did you say even an east wind?

EO: Yes. You will start off with an east wind, works around –

JK: It works its way around. Yes.

EO: – eels blown on the land. They claim that the eels roll. I've never seen it. They roll.

JK: You mean like a tire?

EO: In a ball.

JK: In a ball?

EO: Yes. They've seen eels. I've never seen it, but they've seen eels come in the bay like in a big ball, rolling like that ball. All working into a big ball.

JK: Is that not weird?

EO: Yes. What happens in the fall, because it's dirty, you never know, but they go on the shore somehow.

JK: By the way, how long are the poles there?

EO: Well, these poles are 14-foot. These vary from 12 to 10, 8-foot. Twelve to eight, say.

JK: And it is a hickory or...

EO: Well, we only catch eels in, say – October 1st to the 10th of November is the best eel period. Now, the season may vary a little bit. If you have a cold fall, early fall, you'll catch eels earlier. If you have a late fall with warm weather, you'll catch them a little bit later. But they catch a few fish with these, and crabs, in the sands along the shore. Few flounders maybe. I'm sure you wouldn't average two weakfish a day in these eel nets in the fall because the season's very near over. But fishing is usually finished when you have the line storm – what they call the line storm. That's September 21st. Sun crosses over the line. Season changes.

JK: That is my birthday, September 21st. [laughter]

EO: Oh, yes. [laughter] That's from summer to fall. There's usually a storm at that time. Northeastern.

JK: Had the [19]38 hurricane then.

EO: Yes. It was just 21st. [laughter] Of all our five nets, we had fourteen poles left of this in the fish traps. Fourteen poles that would be used. Well, we cut some of the longer ones off using the [inaudible]. But we lost, I don't know, maybe say twenty-five poles out of five nets. Had to get a hold of the rig. Then we saved most of the nets. Of course, we did a lot of repair work on them.

JK: Do you call this a pound or a trap for the eels also? Which one do you use? Trap or pound for the eels?

EO: What they call it?

JK: Yes.

EO: We call it an eel trap. It's a trap. So, [laughter] I don't they think call it an eel pound. An eel net. We call it a trap. That's what we call it.

JK: I may have asked you this, but how many people – no, I did not. How many people actually had eel traps around here?

EO: Oh, there were quite a few of them.

JK: Oh, really? Of course, he had more – are you the only one that is doing it now?

EO: My son.

JK: Your son.

EO: Here in West Sayville. There's one guy in Patchogue, and there's a guy in Brookhaven doing it.

JK: What is the man's name in Patchogue?

EO: Called the name of (Duffy?)

JK: And in Brookhaven?

EO: In Brookhaven, Eddie (Cornell?). He lives in Sayville somewhere.

JK: How about west of here?

EO: No traps that I know of.

JK: This design of the traps, was that very old in your father's day?

EO: It's the same as when I was a kid.

JK: Really?

EO: The same as when I was a kid.

JK: And you painted them the same way. Did you use bottom paint when you were a kid?

EO: No. We used tar. We used gas tar – what they call gas tar. You'd be able to get it out of the gas works. It was something that comes off when they make gas. But they ask to send for it now to Jersey City (Olson?). He sends it to Olsen.

JK: You mean you still use this tar? You do not paint it with heavy falling paint. You only do that with the fish nets?

EO: Well, eels are only fished for six weeks. In the fall, if it's real early, sometimes you'll get a growth on there. But it don't seem to hurt fishing. Only they get heavy. That's all. Sometimes, if it's late fall, you'll get a set of barnacles on the nets. The nets will be printed white from the barnacles, a little bit of barnacle heads all on ropes and all over. But if you take a barrel of tar, of course, \$22 freight now from Jersey, and \$50-some for the tar. \$77, I think for a barrel of tar.

JK: But here, you did not tar the nets?

EO: Oh, we tarred all these bay nets.

JK: In the old days?

EO: Yes. We tried copper painting them too. We used to have a copper net paint piece. It was just a copper paint, and you fit it out with kerosene. Then the years, they had a cotton net. You take cotton and kerosene don't mix. Kerosene will eat up cotton right up. There must be heat or something there. But the [inaudible] doesn't make any difference. You can put anything on that. Out in the ocean, they use those copper paint thing. There's copper oleate now.

JK: But you said before that you would paint them all with this bottom paint or the underwater paint.

EO: Only the big poles. Not the little ones. Just the big ones.

JK: Then with this, you do not use the copper paint. You use the tar?

EO: No. Nothing.

JK: Oh, you do not use anything?

EO: We don't use nothing on them.

JK: Oh, nothing on the eel nets because the season is on the poles.

EO: The seasons are short, and they're pulled up every year too. He's easier or more fussier than I am about his traps and stuff like that, my son. Real fussy.

JK: They started off with cotton in the old days – cotton nets. You bought the nets in the...

EO: No. Well, if you wanted 144 meshes deep, which is an eel net, you ordered 144-foot piece of net. So many meshes, one in here. Ten foot is what? There'd be ninety meshes in here, say. You ordered just what you wanted. And so deep, they would make it up for you. Otherwise, if you wanted to take it out of stock, it's standard. Say, it would be a hundred meshes deep or 200 meshes long. Then they would cut off what you want. They'd probably get a [inaudible] eleven, maybe a thousand pounder at a time, they have in stock. If you want so many meshes, they cut so many meshes off, or so many pounds or whatever you want. They cut it off.

JK: But in the old days, it was cotton. Then they went into nylon.

EO: It was all cotton. But a gillnet was linen. Years ago, it was linen gillnets. But now, it's all nylon. But I always fish cotton. They were starting to get into nylon when we got rid of the nets. It wasn't perfected like it is nowadays, the nylon.

JK: The cotton, how did you treat the net itself? With anything or just – it was tar or whatever, but you bought it.

EO: It was tar with – gas tar. I know we did, but I can't think of it. Coal tar. Coal and corn tar, we used. About half and half, that was the first dip. That was supposed to preserve the net in the coal tar. Now, they got the coal tar from – they used to order it from some company. That was to preserve it. But to preserve the rest of it, we always put the gas tar on – what they call regular tar and net tar, gas tar it was.

JK: Did you have a big cauldron or a big...

EO: Yes. Years ago, they used to have a great, big pot. I think it was 5-foot across this way and about – I guess it was about two and a half feet deep. It used to hold, I guess we'd get three – 150 gallons of stuff in there. This was bricked up, round circle. We had a fireplace in the middle here because you had to heat the coal tar up. You had to have it very near boil at a certain degree temperature. Then it flew on the back here. Then we had a rock here, a pole up here with a couple of blocks, and that pulled the net out. Pulled up and then take them. That was all done by hand. When I was a kid, everything was done by hand. [laughter] Now, today, everything's machinery.

JK: How long did a net last?

EO: Oh, four, five years, cotton net. That was pretty good. Nylon net, they tell me the other day, they got one fourteen years old they're fishing in the ocean with. They've done a lot of mending on it, but it's still fishing. The body is still good.

JK: Two years' mile stone?

EO: The net came in thread sizes. If you ordered an eighteen-thread twine, you got the eighteen threads in the net. If you ordered twenty-four, you got twenty-four threads in it. The nylon net goes by the same way. So many threads and size. [inaudible] Each piece of twine had three strands in it. If you ordered eighteen threads, you got six strands in each one. They were more like the cotton a little [inaudible] or what was used they used in sewing was used in that size. But it was softer and nicer. The gillnet is the same gillnet. Not on that, it's the same size in all.

JK: Going back to the gillnet, you mentioned gillnet. Did you do any gillnetting?

EO: No.

JK: That was just a thing kind of floating the water, and it would catch the fish as the fish swam by.

EO: Yes.

JK: Was this in a circle or straight?

EO: Well, they do it two different ways now. A regular gillnet is, you take and go out – a fellow goes out at night here, just before dark, and sets his net. Anchors it one end. Runs it out. Anchors the other end. Sets it there overnight. Goes back the next morning and picks it up. Now, some of these fellows, they'll go in the daytime. They'll see a bunch of fish. Like when weakfish was pouring up here on East Island, you'll see them making circles when you fish. Gulls are playing around, and they'll run that net around there. Then they'll close that up so the fish can't get out because it's only shallow water. It was only about 4-foot of water. They'll go in there, and they'll thump – what they call thumping. They'll have a stick, a flat stick and [hitting sound] like that on the back of the boat. That thump [inaudible] they scatter going off on the water. Then fish scatter, and that's them going through the net.

JK: Well, the net drags along the bottom. So...

EO: Well, the net is on the bottom. It doesn't [inaudible] with tar.

JK: Yes. It is not like a purse net where it is curved at the bottom.

EO: No. It's just a straight piece of net.

JK: It has got floats on the top and weights on the bottom, right?

EO: Yes.

JK: How long would these things be long, I suppose?

EO: Well, one guy, I guess he had two, three miles of it set out. But they're ordinary. I guess

they're only, what, 600 feet long. That's about the gillnet.

JK: In the old days, did they use both methods and circle them and also just straight out? You said they were two methods.

EO: Well, they used a purse seine when they go by the circle, and they pursed the bottom.

JK: Did they do that in the old days? Do you remember that?

EO: Yes. They pursed in the bay. Yes. Go around a bunch of fish and purse the bottom up. They caught a lot of fish that way. But these guys don't – there's no purse seines in the bay.

JK: What about in the old days, gillnetting? Did they just string it out?

EO: They'd just strung it out. If they saw a bunch of fish, they would probably circle the same.

JK: When they set it out, you said they will do it in the morning or something at the back of night or in the afternoon. So, they would pull the net back into the boat. As they come across a fish, they just put it...

EO: Yes, the next morning,

JK: Next morning?

EO: Raise it up and – some of them, they pull the whole net right in and come ashore and pick the fish out. It depends on the weather too, I guess. When the weather's rough, they'll want to get the net in. Otherwise, most of them will pick the fish out right out there.

JK: I believe they do gillnetting now? Today? These days?

EO: Yes. I don't know about here, but in the bay, I think it's pretty late. I guess there's somebody doing it.

JK: But when is the season for it?

EO: They're gillnetting. Because I talked to (Phil Scopper?) the other day. He said they're gillnetting – caught some bluefish, gillnetting.

JK: What kind of fish did you use to get? Any kind that will...

EO: Whatever swims. Mostly weakfish and bluefish. That's it.

JK: Is gillnetting a – I suppose it is easier and quicker than setting traps or pounds.

EO: Oh, yes. Well, a trap net, you're fishing twenty-four hours a day, or twenty-three and a half hours if I'm taking a half an hour to raise it. So, you're fishing twenty-three hours and a half a

day. Gillnet, you only fish one [inaudible] boat. Of course, you don't have a moldboard. Nowadays, it's too warm because there's too many boats in the bay. Cut it up, go through it, you lose a lot of net. Steal them, steal the whole thing, buoys and all.

JK: What other kind of fishing did you do?

EO: I've done some dragging.

JK: When was that? Not in the bay. They do not drag in the bay. Do they?

EO: Oh, you can drag in the bay. There's no law against it. Well, the only dragging I ever done in the bay was when I was a kid. We used to go for flounders in the wintertime. Where the mud is, mud streaks, and flounders used to lay in them. We used to take the flounders, but it was done in a couple years.

[end of transcript]