

Narrator: Bob Kaler

Interviewer: Steve Warrick

Location: Patchogue, New York

Date of Interview: July 12, 2000

Project Name: Long Island Traditions

Project Description: Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders, and other maritime tradition bearers.

Principal Investigator: Nancy Solomon

Affiliation: Long Island Traditions

Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting

Abstract: This oral history interview with Bob Kaler, conducted by Steve Warren on July 12, 2000, documents Kaler's life and experiences as a crabber on Great South Bay, Long Island. Kaler, born in 1945, has spent his entire life in the area and has been crabbing for over 20 years. He discusses his entry into crabbing, his daily routines, and the logistics of the trade, including licensing and equipment. Kaler describes the freedom and satisfaction he derives from working on the bay despite the job's physical demands and the challenges posed by fluctuating crab populations. He notes the substantial increase in recreational activities and competition on the bay, which is impacting the livelihood of commercial crabbers. Kaler emphasizes the importance of understanding the bay's ecosystem to succeed in the industry and recalls the community and camaraderie among local fishermen, who often help each other in times of need. Reflecting on the future, Kaler expresses concerns about environmental issues affecting the bay but remains optimistic if pollution is controlled. He acknowledges the shift towards technology-driven careers but maintains his dedication to crabbing, planning to continue full-time. Kaler's narrative provides insight into the traditional lifestyle of bay workers and the evolving dynamics of the industry.

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

Bob Kaler: [laughter] Bob Kaler.

SW: When and where were you born?

BK: In Patchogue in 1945.

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

BK: Same street.

SW: Same street?

BK: Yes. Different houses, but same street.

SW: Are you married?

BK: Yes. Everybody's married to something or somebody. You got to be married.

SW: Do you have any children?

BK: Yes. A son and a daughter.

SW: What's your occupation?

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

SW: How did you get into crabbing?

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

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

BK: [inaudible] clams.

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

BK: Yes, yes. In Spring, I work on the North Shore for bait mussels.

SW: Bait mussels?

BK: Yes. That's another job. So, we have all kinds of neat things to do.

SW: What do you like about working on the water?

BK: Freedom. I like freedom.

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

BK: I got my deckhand, Sky. He does all the work. [laughter]

SW: How long's Sky been with you?

BK: [inaudible] he does all the work. Right, Sky?

(Skyler?): Right.

BK: [inaudible] on and off for twenty years. [inaudible]

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

BK: Oh, yes. Crab license [inaudible]

SW: Is it one you have to renew?

BK: What's that?

SW: Is it one you have to renew?

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

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

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

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

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

SW: What type of boat do you have?

BK: From Virginia – Chesapeake classic [inaudible].

SW: How long have you been running it?

BK: This one? [inaudible]

SW: A seventeen-footer?

BK: Yes. If you don't improve, you're doing something wrong.

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

BK: [inaudible] bait your basket [inaudible] four weather gear.

SW: How important is the [inaudible]?

BK: It's real important, right, Sky? He's number one.

S: Most important of the boat.

BK: Besides the gasoline [inaudible] number one.

SW: Does it take a lot less time for two people?

BK: No. [inaudible] in between [inaudible] you have to cull and everything; it's a little longer. All right.

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

BK: I guess living by the bay.

SW: Did any of your family work?

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

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

BK: You learn as you went. You know what I'm saying? We were little kids with the boss over there. We had to catch little bait fish, and you'll get seventy-five cents for a tub this big.

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

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

SW: Now, if you are going crabbing, what type of pot do you use?

BK: I get [inaudible] from Virginia.

SW: Why do you like those?

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

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

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

SW: Full-time in the bay?

BK: Full-time.

SW: Did you ever clam full-time?

BK: Yes, I clammed full time. Had a factory job for twelve years, too. [inaudible]

SW: [inaudible] Why do you like crabbing better than –?

BK: Working in a factory? [laughter]

SW: [inaudible]

BK: [inaudible] freedom, I guess, like we said before. [inaudible]

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

BK: For bait, you mean?

SW: Yes.

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

SW: [inaudible]

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

SW: [inaudible]

BK: [inaudible]

SW: You were you saying earlier – on a windy day, it's a little better?

BK: Yeah. [inaudible].

SK: How many pots do you keep on a line?

BK: About fifty.

SK: Fifty?

BK: On these lines. Fifty. Fifty. Fifty. [inaudible] Fifty. Two [inaudible].

SK: Two hundred? And then you rotate?

BK: [inaudible] and on the weekend, you [inaudible] them all.

SK: Why do you need to rotate?

BK: Well, it gives it time to pot better. You know what I mean? [inaudible].

SK: Why do you think this has been such a good year?

BK: No idea. None [inaudible]. Went to the [inaudible] whatever happened [inaudible].

SK: Can you remember when there was a bad year?

BK: Yeah. [inaudible] Last year at this time, we had one bushel at a time. [inaudible]

SK: Really?

BK: [inaudible]

SK: Right. What do you do with your craft after you get your catch for the day?

BK: They go right on the truck and right to the market. [inaudible] customer. Got to get them in the cooler quick. Humidity is the worst thing for crabs.

SK: Humidity?

BK: Oh, yeah. When you get them [inaudible].

SK: So, the crabs don't like the [humidity]. What else don't they like?

BK: Mainly humidity.

SK: Mainly humidity.

BK: That's it.

SK: Do you have to store them a certain way to get them there?

BK: We put bags on them and wet the bags to keep them wet.

SK: How about in the bushel itself? Do they need to be right-side up?

BK: Brown side up. White side [inaudible]. I don't know if they drown or something. Their lungs fill up.

SK: You had an expression the last time I talked to you about where the crabs are going when you take them into market. What do you tell the crabs?

BK: Oh, to go – [laughter] – to go to the hot tub.

SK: Go into the hot tub.

BK: Or the sauna. Their choice. Tell them to go into the hot tub. That keeps them calm. [inaudible] pina coladas. Enjoy themselves.

SK: Are there any other expressions you all use out here?

BK: There's plenty of them, but you can't have them on the recorder.

S: What about the brown tide? We were getting so many crabs that brown means green. We were getting all this brown tide [inaudible].

BK: [inaudible] clam diggers.

SK: Right. Crabbers. Brown means green, huh?

BK: I don't think the clam diggers want to hear [inaudible].

SK: Yeah. Is that why you got out of it way back?

BK: Back in the late '70s, it wasn't real bad. [inaudible] myself ...

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

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

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

BK: No, I try to avoid that. [laughter] After Thanksgiving, I don't work until March, when I start doing the bait mussels again.

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

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

SW: What do you get out of it?

BK: Fun, freedom, and more fun.

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

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

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

BK: Oh, it'll stay good. It'll be good as long as they don't dump too much junk in it. Computers are where the money is, though. Or folklorists. They got the money, them guys. [laughter]

SW: What does your family think about you working out on the bay?

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

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

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

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

BK: Some guys do, but they're the younger guys. Clam diggers – they put a big day in.

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

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

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

BK: Yes, and it smells.

SW: What do you like about where you dock here on the Swan River?

BK: No one bothers you. Perfect place to be.

SW: How long have you docked there?

BK: Here?

SW: Yes.

BK: Twenty years.

SW: Twenty years?

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

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

BK: Yeah. Everybody's friendly.

SW: They look out for one another?

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

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

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

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

BK: Yeah, many times. Just had one last week.

SW: Why do you do that?

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

SW: Yeah.

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

[Recording paused.]

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

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

SW: You're still going to stick with crabbing?

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

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

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

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/26/2024