

Narrator: Don Bevelander

Interviewer: Steve Warrick

Location: Sayville, New York

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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.

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Abstract: This oral history interview, conducted on July 1, 2000, by Steve Warwick for Long Island Traditions, features Donald Allen Bevelander, a long-time bayman from Sayville, New York. Born on June 17, 1912, in West Sayville, Bevelander provides a detailed account of his life and experiences working on the Great South Bay. He discusses his early life, including moving to Sayville in 1940 and his service during World War II. Bevelander recalls his involvement in community activities, such as organizing the Sayville Little League and serving in the Sayville Fire Department for several decades. Bevelander's narrative covers the hardships and routines of a bayman's life, from starting work on the bay at a young age with his father and brothers to the various fishing and clamming techniques employed over the years. He describes the challenges faced during the Great Depression, the importance of self-reliance, and the impact of environmental changes on the bay's ecosystem. Bevelander reflects on the evolution of the bay, noting the decline in clam and oyster populations due to pollution and commercial pressures. He also shares anecdotes about the camaraderie among baymen and the changes in the community and bay over time. The interview provides a rich, first-hand account of the cultural and environmental history of the Great South Bay, illustrating the life of a traditional bayman and the significant transformations in the bay's ecology and local industry over the 20th century.

Steve Warwick: This is Steve Warwick, working with Long Island Traditions. I'm here at the Great South Bay. Today is July 1, 2000. I'll be speaking with Don Bevelander today, a longtime Bayman. We will be at Don's house, recording here in Sayville, New York. [RECORDING PAUSED] Could you tell me your full name?

Don Bevelander: Donald Allen Bevelander.

SW: Where were you born?

DB: Born June 17, 1912, in West Sayville.

SW: How long have you lived in this area?

DB: I lived in West Sayville until I got married in 1940. Then we moved to Sayville.

SW: You have been living in Sayville since 1940?

DB: Yes. Well, no, I had four years – I had to move to an apartment in Bayport when I was in service.

SW: Were you married then?

DB: Yes, I just got married. February 4th, 1940. Then, I had rented a house in Sayville. But Uncle Sam called me in, and they wouldn't give me a new contract for a year. So, I was lucky to rent an apartment in Bayport. I lived there for the entire time that I was in the service. Then I had to move and look around to buy a house, and that's how we bought this one.

SW: Have you been here since?

DB: Ever since.

SW: Do you have any children?

DB: I have one son. Went to high school. Went to Springfield College. Graduated. Taught in Melville High School for twenty-seven years, which he retired last week.

SW: How would you describe this area to someone who has not been here?

DB: When we moved here, I think this was a great place, but now, for the summer months, I don't like it. It's too much commercial business going down to the Stein's Boatyard. We're just a free parking place. See them cars ahead of there? They just pull and park. They don't care. I'm lucky that there isn't more there – have my driveway open yet.

SW: What were some of the activities you were involved in when you were younger?

DB: I helped organize the Sayville Little League, which was forty years ago. I was a member of the Sayville Fire Department. Joined 1951. Became an officer. [inaudible] as an officer for forty-two years. I made the circle round from a company officer to chief. Then, I formally joined the desk – assistant secretary trustee until 1992. Then, I retired from the office. Still a member. I have six more years to go for fifty-month service in Sayville. I have twenty in West Sayville, which would be seventy years as a volunteer foreman.

SW: It is a long time.

DB: I know it is.

SW: That is a long time.

DB: I know.

SW: When did you get started in the bay?

DB: I don't know how to start this. [laughter] I came from a broken home. We lost our mother when I was nine years old. From nine years, for the next three years, we had my sister keep the house, [then] my grandmother. When I got twelve years old, my father and the three brothers – two other brothers and myself – went on the bay. We left Friday morning at 6:30, went to work on the boat, and stayed there until Friday afternoon when we came home. I was learning the clam, cook, and pick out the clams. I was just breaking in. Every year, I graduated to more jobs. Then the third year, one of my brothers said, "Now, you're a full-time [inaudible]. Get to work." [laughter] Ed was the ball-buster.

SW: You did a lot of tonging. Were you doing a lot of tonging when you were working in the bay?

DB: Yes. Because at the end of the summer, I went to school. I went to school until 1930, when I graduated. From there, I went on the bay with my father at different times. Of course, when the weather was unseasonable, in winter, the bay froze up. We just stayed home. I enjoyed life. [laughter] I was young and single. I had nothing to worry about.

SW: You said you were on the boat for a week straight.

DB: A week straight. We slept on the boat. We cooked on the boat. Wednesday night was a big deal. We went to Bay Shore for new food or steak dinner. We would leave Bay Shore 6:00 in the morning to go to our working grounds. My father then used to work until 8:00 nights. 8:00 nights. He felt this way. He made enough money in the wintertime. He didn't worry about the time when the bay froze over. He stayed home, worked around the house, took a week off, went here, went there. We was in school. Grandma kept house for us until she got too old. Then we went to live with my sister, and we boarded there, three of us: my brother, my father, and I. I lived there until I was married. My other brother was married a couple of years before, and they kept my father until he died.

SW: What would you eat on the boat? What was a typical lunch?

DB: [inaudible] [laughter] I was broken in as a clammer. They wait until I caught a half a bushel a day. That was my quota. I helped [inaudible] pick out the clams for my brother and father. By that time, the day was over. They used to get up at 6:00 in the morning. They never bothered me until 8:30, 9:00, until lunchtime. Then would call me, "Come on up and get your breakfast, and that's lunch." Then, I would take my tongs and go to work until dinner time. Help make dinner at 1:00. After I cleaned up, I went to work until about 3:00. I had my half a bushel caught. My father said, "That's enough for you. You worked long enough." Caught a half bushel. Made a big two dollars a day. [laughter]

SW: Oh, boy. What is a Dutch lunch?

DB: 9:00.

SW: 9:00.

DB: 9:00 a.m. We always went down for lunch for fifteen minutes. We had a sandwich or a cup of coffee or some fruit and then went to work until 12:00. We took a half-hour for dinner. We had a respectable dinner. Then we worked until 5:00. After five, we sit down, eat supper, and then my father and two other brothers would go back to work for a couple hours. The old man was always – we got to make it while we're there. Never know when the [inaudible] going to be. When we went to school, he would always pick up some man he knew who went on the bay with him for the rest of the year until next summer when we all came back from school; then, we went with him.

SW: When did your family move to this area? When did your father get involved in working the bay?

DB: I don't know how old my father was when he came from Holland. I don't know. He never said anything. The only thing he told us [was], "I'm out of it. I'll never go back." We lived here all our life. I don't know when he moved to West Sayville. I don't. None of us [inaudible] my sister. [laughter] He was very quiet about that, so we never questioned or anything. He never spoke the Dutch language. Spoke all English. But when my grandmother kept the house, she always spoke the Holland language. We eventually learned what she was talking about.

SW: Did you learn any customs from her? Any Dutch customs?

DB: No. She wasn't that strict.

SW: Okay.

DB: No. She was very liberal.

SW: After you stopped working with your dad, did you stay working in the Bay?

DB: Let's get this right now. Yes. I worked with my father until he got tired of working. He started to get all old at once. During [the] Depression, money was scarce. Clams were cheap. Oysters were cheap. A lot of times after the clamming season was over, we went down east and went oystering. We used to catch these oysters, sometimes the size of half a dollar. The shippers wanted to pay us a big fifty cents a bushel. My father said, "No way." Because he leased two lots of ground in the West Bay. We used to plant them on his lot. Two, three years later, catch them and sell them to the shippers at a better price than we had two, three years growth on them. So, out of one week, we probably had three.

SW: Did you work with any other members of your family?

DB: No, every one of us worked with my father on a boat. Except for the two older brothers, they were in the Navy, and they had different jobs. My brother went to college, worked summers. My brother (Red?) went to school until he graduated. He still worked with my father. He had bigger ideas. He went with somebody else with a fishing boat and left my father high and dry. He used to pick up so-and-so in the years that I wasn't with him. But after he retired and sold the boat, that's when I was taking these odd jobs in the summer on the ferry boats. In the winter, I'd go to work with the Blue Points Company. Finally, until I was made of a full-season man, I worked there until I got a boat with John Keeley, made captain of it. I had it two years before Uncle Sam wanted me in the service. I had to leave. So, that was four years of that. When I came back, I went to Blue Points. I applied for my job. They said, "Sorry, we lost a lot of oyster business. Your boat has been sold to a different division. We got a clam boat. You can run that after some thirty-six hours a week." I looked at him. I said, "I should work a clam boat, and your man on it for thirty-six bucks a week?" I told my brother, Bill, who owned a good [inaudible] boat, "Just come out with me for a week. See how you like it." [inaudible] I had a very good week. I think I made 120 dollars the first five days. I went back to Blue Points Company. I said, "I'm sorry." "What would you do in the winter?" "Don't worry about it." I made enough money until the end of December when the Bay froze up that I had enough saved up to sweat it out for the winter. That's when we started to go fishing, and the winter broke at springtime.

SW: What type of fishing were you doing then?

DB: We were flat fishing. We set them up [inaudible]. If we got tired of waiting for the bay to break up, we chopped holes and set them under the ice. When the ice broke, then the nets were filthy dirty. We moved them over to the beach, where the tide was strong and [inaudible] that would clean all the dirt out. That's where we would fish to [inaudible], and we'd go back clamming. I stayed with Bill for either fourteen or fifteen years. We had a little disagreement. I had a boy who went to college, and my wife went to work. I said, "If you're going to work, why should I sit on my rear end in the wintertime watching you work and supporting kid to college?" So, I got my job on the oil trucks. I think that was the beginning of my [inaudible]. [laughter] But that's the way it went.

SW: You made your own fyke nets, then.

DB: We made everything. In the days before we could go anywhere, we worked out of my brother's cellar here. He had a beautiful full cellar. We could extend our fyke from one end to the other. Made new leads. [inaudible] We always had the old fyke rims. We would put new nets on. We'd fix them up, and we're ready to go. They were all set. We pack them up. The day we went out, we borrowed my friend's pickup truck, brought it down on the boat, and next day, we'd set them. That was the beginning of it.

SW: What was the fyke net designed to do?

DB: What?

SW: What was the fyke net designed to do? How would it trap the fish?

DB: You had a leader. You had a sixty or eighty-foot leader from one fyke to another. A leader was two and a half foot wide, had sinkers on the bottom, corks on the top, and that would lead the fish in the fykes.

SW: How many would that hold? What would be a catch from your net?

DB: Our fykes would hold easy a box. Easy a box. We had them [inaudible] them up. The three of us [inaudible] go out and fill the box right up. That was a pleasure to watch. [laughter]

SW: How much were you getting for a box?

DB: Anywhere from three to five dollars. If things were rough and the large boats couldn't get out in the ocean, provide them with fish in the market, we'd get [inaudible] ten, fifteen dollars a box. That's when we made a good dollar. We just prayed for a little water that we caught some fish then.

SW: Now, did you have to tar your nets or anything like that?

DB: We always had ice on the boat with us. After we raised one gear – for instance, if we had two boxes out of one gear, we packed them up, iced them up, and took care of them right away. We had room enough in the boat to store them. We got in, all we'd do was put them in the warehouse, tag them, and that was it.

SW: Where would you sell them at? Locally, or would they go to –?

DB: No, we would have a salesman around. Say, "Can you buy the fish from my company?" We usually sold to [inaudible] Brothers. A friend of ours was his agent. He'd give us a good break. So, we took care of him.

SW: The fish were always fresh.

DB: Yes. They jumped in the box when I opened them up in the market, I said. Well, you know what I mean. When you really caught fish, you had to preserve them. You just was going to let them lay in a box and die. We always had fresh fish. Always.

SW: How about your nets? What would you do to take care of your nets when you –?

DB: Nothing. The year was finished with fishing; we would take the fishing nets, put them ashore in the spare lot out down the shore, let them dry out, give them a good cleaning, and when they were that way, we'd pack them up, brought them home, put them in a cellar until the next winter. That's the way they were stored. No tar, no nothing. Everything was – if we had to buy new twine or new mesh or whatnot, everything was [inaudible].

SW: What type of knowledge did you have to have to be out on the bay?

DB: Well, you had to take an interest in it to know where you were going and what you were doing. We just [inaudible] half-assed baymen, like there was plenty of them [who] just went for five, six months, then went in the oyster [inaudible] for the winter. They were afraid they wouldn't work long enough to make a living, but my father never did that. That's why we used to work long in the summer, save us money, and hang on to it. When the winter was bad, we didn't have to worry. We did the same thing.

SW: So, you learned a lot from your father?

DB: Yes. My father and brother were good teachers. Especially my brother, who was a couple of years older. He was a smart bayman. He always had new ideas, things to do, make it easier or more presentable. Of course, the old man was born and brought up in the old school. Sometimes, he didn't swallow that. That's why I had left with another boat. But that wasn't my business.

SW: What do you think about the bay today compared to when you were working the bay?

DB: Today is ruined today. Ruined. When you dig in the bay six to ten inches of earth, unravel it, and turn it up to a sewer system, you will never have a set in this great South Bay as long as the conditions are that way. Now, I hear [from] my friend that the brown stuff can come in the bay, and I don't think he said, "I'll be allowed to go clamming for three, four days." I don't think they want to bother. All I caught is a bushel and half of the highest. Worked my tail went off for six hours. The money was there, but the price was a hundred dollars a bushel. We used to get three, four. But we caught a lot of clams. Sometimes, the bay was like the bottom of that road, cultivated, kept in good conditions. Pardon me. The oyster companies used to plant thousands of bushels of their broken shells [inaudible] shell pile, and by then, they would send the boats out and scour them, sharpen them up. At the end of June, the first week in July, if the weather conditions were right, we got a set. Now, last July would've been the season. We had calm weather. The weather was warm, but we had no oysters or clams to spout [inaudible]. That's the answer. There was nothing to [inaudible], and there wouldn't be as long as the bay is in that condition. I know I'll never live [inaudible] to see it, and a lot of other people wouldn't either. It was through politics that the Blue Points Company got control of majority of the bay, their lands,

lots that they said they claimed, and a few extras, and sent these clambers out with these conveyors and disturbed the whole lot.

SW: Did people respect boundaries in the bay when you were working out there?

DB: They were supposed to stay within their boundaries, but plenty of times, they went over the line, and they thought it was a big joke. When their ground was completed, they would go for other grounds, which was the public ground, which hurt us. There wasn't enough of us baymen to form an association to fight it.

SW: So, everything was wide open.

DB: Wide open.

SW: It was public.

DB: Public was wide open. Plus, the boss of the Blue Points was a big contributor to the Republican Party. So, say no more. I don't want to say anything that came off that tape where they cut me. [laughter]

SW: Then, when you were all working out, say all the baymen working on the public ground, did they work next to one another or did they stay in a certain area? Or were you going where the clams were?

DB: Well, when we were clamming, and all the boats were out from Monday to Friday, you could practically walk across from deck to deck from the shore to the beach. That's how many boats were working. [inaudible] guys used to come up to the bay – West Sayville, few from Sayville, very few from Sayville. West Sayville had Baymen and Islip and Bay Shore and Babylon. That bay used to be – we'd say, "Where the hell do they all [inaudible]?" That's the way it was. But today, my friend tells me I'm the only boat on the whole bay clamming. Not a soul. The only company I have is a seagull, he says. [laughter] It's amazing.

SW: Did you have a specific area of the bay you worked a lot?

DB: Yes. Some days, we would say we're going to lead today. That's the areas we called them. It was a good clam place to work. Then West Island – or we'd go up on the flats when the weather got rough, blowed hard. We'd go in shallow water, go on the flats. Still, we'd work. Otherwise, we'd always worked around fourteen footers. Eventually, we worked in deeper water. It was sixteen when we found more grounds west of the bridge. It was a terrific set over there. When the bay opened up in August, which – let me get this straight. You'll have nice weather until the first hot day in [inaudible] comes. Then the bottom [inaudible] up and the clams go down. They stay down until August, the mild weather and your clams come up. They'll come up, and they'll stay up until your first cold, northwestern of the fold of year. Then the bottom hardens up, and down they go again. They stay there until next spring. People don't believe that, but it is true. During the month of May and June, we got all the clams we wanted, but we didn't get no money for them. There were a lot of production. Labor Day, they were

hollering for littlenecks. Well, Labor Day was a big picnic there [inaudible] whatnot. That was a good time. [inaudible] the first cold snap come through, then the prices come up because they would be scarcer. It was [inaudible] quality and product. That's just the way the fish were. When the market was cleaned out, you got a top dollar. When the market was loaded, if they went right, the sooner they paid you what you wanted, and that was it. [RECORDING PAUSED] Those places are raising oysters, but they're having water with colored water, too, now. If that stuff sets in, that's the end of that. Well, look what happened in the lobster business. I see the lobster outfit got a ten-million-dollar grant to find out what's going on. Well, about time. They can help the farmers. Why not the men that worked the water?

SW: You never saw a brown tide when you worked?

DB: Never. We always had a lot of seaweed, and the bay was clean. There wasn't too much pump sewage in the bay than there is now. You take these big restaurants like on the end here, lands' end. My brother was in the [inaudible] department, and their sewers ran right out in the bay. He condemned it, but they knew somebody. Well, that's part of condemning the product. He knew where they were, what they did. These big [inaudible] sewer they have. Good thing that goes in the ocean, not in the bay. Otherwise, the bay would've been done [inaudible].

SW: Did you make your own tongs, or did you buy them from –?

DB: No. We used to have a fellow in Patchogue. Every Friday, we'd come home with the boat [inaudible] three, four broken tongs. We had a little small boat – small engine. Take that and go to Patchogue and go to (Squeezy?), get them fixed. He finally died. Then we had one of our local men, old – I can't think his – I don't know his last name. (Cole?). Got to go see (Cole?), get a new pair of handles. You do them overnight. We bring him on the way home from work nights. “(Flannel?)” –his nickname – “could you fix that for us?” [inaudible] Sure. How the hell he ever survived that? Well, [inaudible]. But he was our right-hand man. Our tongs, we used to go to (Bunk?) [inaudible] machine shop in Sayville. Then, we finally had a man in Bay Shore on Brentwood right across the cemetery. We got a good deal there. He was very good. He practically had all the business. But we – my brother and I – were the first ones to have an iron oyster tong made. My brother had designed it. We went to somebody in Patchogue; I can't think of his name. He was a welder. He fixed out the details, and we made a tong that big. It used to hold a water bucket of oysters.

SW: So, it is about eighteen inches long?

DB: Yes. Eighteen footers we had made.

SW: All metal.

DB: Iron metal. They worked easy. They caught everything.

SW: How about the handles? Do you recall what the handles were made of?

DB: Actually, I don't know what they were, fur or what? They weren't too heavy. They were light material.

SW: A light wood.

DB: Yes. Had a pin in it. Good pin. We could adjust the pin where we wanted if it was too tight or too loose ourselves. But the tong maker, when you order complete tongs, bring the [inaudible], and you put the handles after he made them. He set the pin, tighten them up, and we'd work. If it's too damn tight, we'd take a wrench and loosen the nuts, put another knock on it, and lock it. [inaudible] If you had a tong [inaudible], one another [inaudible] was over.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SW: What was the important thing? Was the important thing to be independent?

DB: Yes.

SW: Be your own boss.

DB: Yeah. That was my father. My father used to hate to take orders from somebody unless it was within reason. The old man was an independent Dutchman. One of my brothers followed suit. But he was a smart boy. Brother Ed.

SW: Looking back on it, what does it mean to you to have worked the bay? How do you feel about it?

DB: I'm sick of it. I'm sick the way the conditions are on the bay. I talked to my friend every night on the phone. "How was your day, Jerry?" "Same old, darn business, Don. I got my bushel and a half. Thank God. I'm tired. I'm disgusted. Three days a week of that is enough." He says, "Good thing you don't have to do it anymore." [inaudible] but I would like to go out there. "No, don't come," he says. "You'd only be sick all over again." He's the fellow that's seventy-two years old. Three days, he says, "You know, I'm tired." He's a pusher. That's the way we did all our life. We needed Saturday and Sunday off to come through. When we came home from bay, my father took one of the boys and worked on the boat all day. My father was particular with the boat – "Paint this, clean this, clean that." My other brother and I stayed home. We mowed the lawn, hoed the garden, the other cleaned the house. Not that it was so dirty because we didn't live there long, only weekends, but we had the wash and whatnot. On Sunday morning, you get a tail to church. That was it until Monday morning. You start all over again. Get by the store and get groceries for the weekend. Go down the shore with our – we used to call them ten-cent baskets. They were about that big with a handle on. Two, three of them full. [laughter] Yes. They were the good old days.

SW: How do you think working the bay has shaped your life? Were there certain things that it instilled in you?

DB: I think it made more of an individual, independent man that didn't have to depend upon everybody and everything. The hell with it. We go ourselves. When the oysters [inaudible] we got oyster season open in October, that was it for the clam business. My father would say, "That's it. Now we're going to oyster." We went oystering until the bay froze up. Then he'd stay home, and he'd work on the nets for fishing, flounder vision. When that was over, he'd go back, maybe scalloping. He was a good scalloper, had a good boat. We had a good shack ashore. We used to come in nights. We had a float by the dock. We put them in the float. My brother Ed and I used to get our tail out of school right away, get home, and eat dinner. Grandma had dinner ready for us, and we'd have three other fellows, and we'd [inaudible] on the float [inaudible] responsible for packing them up, weighing everything, clean the [inaudible], put them out for the truck to pick-up at night. That was our work. So, we were born and brought up there. Saturdays was work down the shore all day. We had no days off. He used to bitch if [inaudible] unless he caught a load of scallops, [inaudible] scallops [inaudible] vacation. [laughter] Leave it to them fellows. "Where'd you get them?" "Never mind. [inaudible] I got work for you guys." That was all right.

SW: So, when you worked, you showed up to work?

DB: Yeah. It affected our studies. When the hell do we have time to do homework? We worked down the shore, [inaudible] scallops every night. We used to have a certain crew we could depend upon. They'd be there 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon. They knew their place on the bench. When they filled the pot up, we had butter tubs that we shipped them in. I think a butter tub held eight gallons. That would be ninety-something pounds. We'd mark them on the cart, ship them to Sears & Roebucks. But one day, I'll never forget it. My brother was down in there, forking out the scallops, and this fellow come by. He says, "Get those things damn things out of there, and don't ever put any more in there." My brother Ed says, "And who the hell are you?" He gave no indication who he was, so he opened his shirt, and he had a badge on – conservation, Board of Health. That was it. So, when Pop come in – "Come on, we're going to throw them ...". "No," Ed said, "We can't do that." "Who said so?" "The Conservation Department." "Oh, them sons of bitches," So, haul the float out, put it ashore, and that was the end of it. Then, the scallops went directly to the shop. Let them stay there all day. At nights, we would open them up. If we had a day off from school – down to shore. [inaudible] The scallop season was short. I mean, from late fall to early winter. When the bay fall was over, that was it. But sometimes, when they couldn't get where the scallops were in shallow water, they couldn't go to the boat, they used to walk with them and pull them with ropes over their backs. Talk about work.

SW: It sounds like hard work.

DB: Yes. Jackass work. That's what they did.

SW: Now, do you think the people today would do that type of work?

DB: Never. Never. Never. The people today – sometimes I'm glad I'm not twenty-one to start all over. But today, I see nothing with the generation. I see nothing. When I worked in the oil company, I broke in fellows for driving the oil truck – what to do, how to do it. "I know, I

know.” Then, they go on the road and screw up everything. I told the boss, "This isn't my fault.” “No, I know." I brought his son in for a week. He was the best oil driver he’s ever had and will have because he was shown how to do it and do it right. I had to learn from scratch. I paid attention to the fellow that broke me in, went with him on the truck. When I went to Ronkonkoma, I thought it was Brooklyn. God, I never been to Ronkonkoma. Five Smith Streets, four Pine Streets. Geese Louise. Look at the tickets. Oh, God. It took me a year, believe it or not, to learn all Ronkonkoma. You go up – what’s that road? Vanderbilt Road. They had a development up there. I used to call it “up the mountains” – side streets. They were all summer homes, but people converted them to be year-round homes. The boss had a lot of accounts there. Good God, you go up there in the snow. Geez. Many a night, we worked to 10:00, 11:00 o’clock, plowing driveway [inaudible] not like today. But I learned the hard way, and I learned right. I have no regrets of it.

SW: How about storms? How bad of an effect would the storms have on the bay and on your work when you were working the bay?

DB: Storms?

SW: Yeah.

DB: Well, we were fortunate. We didn't have that big storm until 1935. Then, I was working for the Blue Points company, and I was in it. It was soft rain the morning, and the Blue Points clammers didn't go to work. They wanted clams, so the boss came to me; he says, "Don, take my boy. You take [inaudible] and the boat. Go to [inaudible] Point, get us some clams. I said, "Okay." For once, I had the hatches closed. I always had them open. So, we went there with the northeast wind. It wasn't too bad. We turned around, threw the anchor. I threw my [inaudible] overboard [inaudible] clams in, and I moved it. I grabbed again, and they were gone. The tide was [inaudible]. Running terrible. So, at noon time, it increased hard – northeast. My brother-in-law – I said to him, "Come on, Freddy, we're going to have lunch." This is going to be lunch. [inaudible] My brother-in-law was a clam buyer. He came along on his boat. He says, "Don, you'll never get to West Sayville with that rake. You didn't have enough power in. Turn around and go to [inaudible] park.” By the time we had lunch, it was blowing hard [inaudible]. I just about had enough power to get the anchor. If one wave hit me – it was an old barge [inaudible]. Anyhow, that's what they called the clam boat. Turned me right around. Down with the wind, I went. [inaudible] Creek – they had a pier. I veered [inaudible]. I said, "I can't go for that and turn around and make a right.” Rule me out. When I made the swing to come in, I just hit the jetty, and I bounced my way in. The old watchman who was on top of his boat, waving me in, waving me in. So, I go up to his boat, turn around, tied up. That sun came out. Dead calm. “Well,” I said, “I guess we can go home. You'll never leave there. "Just look at that weather glass. Never saw it in my life,” he says. Geez, within fifteen minutes, that southwest wind came in. You could see the water come up. Luckily, there were some state troopers down there. Says, "You guys want to go home?" They took us through [inaudible] park [inaudible] trees, ground, everything. So, we got back to Blue Points, and one of the bosses in the office come down. He says, “Where's your clams?” So, the kid who worked me, the boss’s boy, said, “Thank God we're home without the clams.” [inaudible] The next day, we went to [inaudible] park. Got the boat. Oh, they sent another boat out to look for us – my uncle in one of the other boats. He

wound up in Bay Shore. He come back. He didn't see anything. But at night, the tide come up. Three or four of us [inaudible] to work all night to keep the boats off the dock. We put the big poles down. I was one of them. We worked all night. Lights were out. Everything. We were staying on the docks where Long Island Fish Company was; they had a platform. We went there, and there was no water. By the time we left, on the top of the water [inaudible] deck. We said something had happened to the beach. We saw a boat out there that was in distress. John Greek was the chief of the Long Island Fish Company. [inaudible] boat wreck. He said, "Come on. How many men can I have him go out with?" We looked at him. "Come on. You, you, you." I was included. "Here's an ax. We'll put a line on him. If things get rough, take the ax and cut it." Well, he maneuvered our thing in Green Creek in West Sayville. It hit the the dock as it come in. He had that thing wide open. He was one of the smartest boatmen that was around. Come back to the basin, tied her up, that was it. Nothing [inaudible]. We saved those guys' lives, boat, and everything. And I had to work the whole next night. Then, I went over to Cherry Grove to see what happened there. One of my bosses had a house and property over there. Good god. He said the only thing I can find is an ax. He was completely washed out. The only thing stayed there was the old Cherry Grove Hotel. Both sides of it were gone. Christ. It had very little surf, but that eye of the storm hit us. Hit Islip and Sayville [inaudible] blew a living gale for three hours. Eventually, she died out, but all of those and everything [inaudible] down east – I went to Hampton Bays. Yes. Three days later, they get an oyster boat from the [inaudible]. It was a sight for life what we saw on the shore – the damage. Boats in the water. You had to watch out how you came down. Well, they said there was a tidal wave hit there. There must-have. We had no warnings. One guy had warned of a hurricane. He threw his weather glass away. [laughter] We had nothing on the radio or anything. Just happened. Now, we hear the forecast – good gracious. Sit and look at the television. You're going to have a severe thunderstorm, this and that and that. The more they keep that stuff off, the better it is for the people, I think. I do. [inaudible] prepare for yourself. You've got to listen up for a couple days.

SW: How about working in the ice? Have you ever had a late freeze or anything that's disturbed the fishing?

DB: Well, the last year we went fishing we had that severe cold spell in March. We couldn't get out for ten days. We got out – everything was on top of the ice, wrecked. Completely out of business.

SW: That was your nets, your fykes.

DB: That was it. It would've cost us a fortune to set up again. Brother Bill said, "What do you think?" I said, "I got enough of this." Come out and work all your life and have this? No. There isn't enough in it every year for us to do it. We had our good years, and we had our bad years. We said, "That's it."

SW: How deep were your fykes at that time?

DB: We set them off [inaudible] place off Cherry Grove, northeastern Cherry Grove. The deep water would come to the shallow water. We'd set them in about eight foot of water, and they

would gradually come off the shoulder, and the fish would always hit your deep water first and follow your gears right along. So, it was a good place. A lot of tide there. Would clean your nets out good. Your leaders were clean. We set our lot of nets over there. One year, two days, we pulled one up to see what was happening. We were amazed – the fish we had and how clean the nets were on a Friday night. No use raising the rest because they don't ship until Sunday. So, we went out Saturday. I think we had twenty-eight boxes that Saturday. [inaudible] and a good dollar for them. We had a good year that year. We had a good week that whole week. When they died out, that was it. We cleaned. We hauled them up, threw them in the lot, let them dry out good, and took them home. That was the end of that year. That's the way it was. But that cold March ruined us. March can be a very tricky month weather-wise. [inaudible] We used to hate March. You never know from one day to the other what's coming. You get them severe nor'easters; they'll last three days, damage everything.

SW: So, March was the worst month to work in.

DB: [laughter] We used to try to predict our own weather. Well, we used to do it pretty well two or three days in advance. But not for months like they do now. I don't think they're right either.

SW: How would you predict your own weather? How would you know?

DB: My boss [inaudible] oil business, "What's the weather going to be next month? How could we going to get?" I'll look at the bay, the creek before I come down. I used to look. The tide used to be down is you going to have cold weather. That was a sign of cold. When the tide come up, then the mild weather would come. You're going to have a cold week. Good. All right. Depend upon it. [laughter]

SW: So, you watch the tides a lot?

DB: Yeah.

SW: Did you use the tide to tell the weather for your fishing? Did you depend on the tide more than the time?

DB: Yes. The tide used to be our life.

SW: After your experiences out on the bay, is there anything that you would like people to know about those who worked in the bays?

DB: Well, it was self-employment. You had to know your trade. You had to know the parts where you wanted to work on the bay, what to expect. If you were just a land lover, you had to go to somebody to make a living. A greenhorn was lost. We had a lot of greenhorns. Thought that was. I used to watch some of these fellows come from Europe, from Iceland – tongs way over the head. Christ. They come like that. Dig. You think they're digging in China. That was a murder to watch them. [laughter] Well, I give them credit. They made themselves a living. They couldn't get a job at shore. So, they went to bay. They thought the bay was the gold mine,

but they found out it wasn't. They had to know what they were doing before they made a respectable living. That's my answer. If you didn't, you didn't belong there. You could stay onshore and work for somebody else. Self-employed, you had to know what you were doing or don't or forget it.

SW: Now, did you have other names for the new guys other than greenhorns?

DB: Yes. We, we used to call them – [laughter] oh, I don't know. My friend used to have a name going. I can't think of them. We used to call them the greenhorns. "Here comes another ...". You could see the way he handled a boat and whatnot before he threw the anchor. Then, when he got up, good God, he threw a tong where he could work with a twelve [inaudible]. He had sixteen, and he'd opened that thing and haul it backwards, arm over arm, instead of the way he should. I say, "Watch this. Jesus," I said, "I'd be dead if I had to do that. But maybe they couldn't get work ashore. I don't know. Never asked them. They never said anything, and we never brought it up.

SW: So, what do you think about the term bayman itself? Do you like that term? Is it a good term to describe those who worked on the bay?

DB: Well, we were known as baymen.

SW: For as long as you can remember.

DB: Yes. My father broke me in, and there I went to my own boat. Little brother. We were known as commercial/professional baymen. We knew. We were brought up with it. Of course, we had a nickname for someone that went, thought that there was promised land – land lovers. [laughter] Worked on the water and lost their jobs and went on the bay. So, they can make a go of it, and they found out it was different.

SW: Was there a good camaraderie among the guys who worked the bay? Do you think they all got along pretty well?

DB: Yes. That I will say. Yes. There was no griping. If one guy anchored a little too close to suit you, you just look at him and say, "Well, Christ, ain't the bay big enough?" We had one guy, especially, in West Sayville – he would anchor his boat, and he knew where the tide was going to be this way or that way and where it was. Sometimes, he would sheer you right off where you were. He was a smart bayman. He had to be a smart bayman to do that. But that was just damn meanness. The bay's plenty room for everybody. Everybody. My brother Bill used to hate it. "Oh God. Here he comes," he said." "Why don't you work on the [inaudible] Work on the [inaudible] of the boat [inaudible] stern." "Well, you don't own the bay." "No, we don't own it." But after all, when you are there and making a good day's work and know you can come back and do the same next day and have somebody [inaudible], that used to gripe us. We never did that to anybody. We figured there was always room more for somebody else. [inaudible] kid calls me up every day he goes now. He says, "There's room for everybody. For everybody."

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/10/2024