Narrator: Charles Brower

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

Location: Baldwin, New York

Date of Interview: December 8, 1989

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

Affiliations: Long Island Traditions

Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting and Molly Graham

Abstract: Charles Brower, a former cod fisherman from Baldwin, shares his extensive experiences and family history in fishing. Brower, who began fishing at fifteen, comes from a lineage of fishermen, with his father and uncles also deeply involved in the trade. The interview delves into the evolution of fishing techniques and equipment, particularly the use of gillnets and the transition from cotton to nylon lines. Brower describes the process of gillnetting and cod fishing, highlighting the seasonal nature of these activities and the physical demands involved. Brower recounts his family's history, noting their long-standing presence in Baldwin and their contributions to the local fishing community. He explains the significance of Brower Avenue, named after his great-grandfather, and reflects on the changes in the local environment, such as the transformation of marshlands and the impact of urban development on fishing areas. The interview also touches on the socio-economic aspects of fishing, including the reliance on clamming during economic downturns and the shift to different types of fishing to adapt to changing conditions. Brower shares anecdotes about the camaraderie among local fishermen, the challenges of maintaining and repairing equipment, and the importance of knowledge passed down through generations. Brower's narrative provides a detailed account of the traditional practices and cultural heritage of baymen, offering insights into the life of a fisherman and the broader historical context of the Baldwin area. His reflections on environmental changes and pollution underscore the ongoing challenges faced by the fishing community.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon interviewing Charles Brower of Baldwin, a former cod fisherman, on December 8th, 1989. [RECORDING PAUSED] How old were you when you first started going fishing?

Charles Brower: Fifteen.

NS: Was your father a fisherman?

CB: Yes, right.

NS: What was his name?

CB: Charles, same as mine.

NS: Charles Brower?

CB: Right.

NS: How do you spell your last name?

CB: B-R-O-W-E-R.

NS: I just want to know.

CB: I have a hard job of talking.

NS: [laughter] Well, I know some are Browards, and some are Browers. That is why I asked.

CB: Well, I'm one of the original Browers. Now, Brower Avenue over on Oceanside was named after my great-grandfather.

NS: Did your family originally live in Oceanside?

CB: No.

NS: How come they named it after him?

CB: I have no idea. Well, my uncles lived in Oceanside. Sam Brower, he lived in Oceanside. Norman Brower, he lived in Oceanside.

NS: Were they also fishermen?

CB: Yes.

NS: Now, do you call yourself a fisherman? A bayman?

CB: Well, I would say bayman.

NS: So, how many generations of your family have lived off the water?

CB: Oh, I don't know. I don't know about my grandfather or my great-grandfather. I know my uncle and my father were net fishermen – clam fishermen. Now, during prohibition, or during the – was it '29 when they had that big crash? Now, that's all they lived on, those clams and eels and stuff like that. They used to ship all their stuff to market. Now, [inaudible] not half as much as they used to.

NS: Did they have a bay house?

CB: No. See, these were all bay houses along here where (Davey Koch?) is. They were all bay houses, or up until – you know where (Thompson's?) Deli is?

NS: Yes.

CB: Well, they were all bay houses up in there.

NS: This is all marshlands?

CB: Yes.

NS: When did they fill it in around here?

CB: Oh, I have no idea. Gradually, it got filled in and stuff like that. Like Mike's over here, that was just marshland there. Let's see. I believe it was [inaudible] who moved that barn there. I'm talking about years ago.

NS: Do you have any idea how long this was all marshlands? Was it before you were born?

CB: Well, when I was a kid, that was all marshland over there. From Northern Boulevard, south was all marshlands. There was nothing down there. Well, they had the Press Wireless [Manufacturing Company] down there. They used to get – the shortwave radio that went all over the world. I used to go down there, and they used to let me listen to them. They used to call Japan and stuff like that all the way from down there.

NS: So, your father was a net fisherman?

CB: Yes.

NS: What kind of nets? A gillnet? A haul net?

CB: Right, gillnet.

NS: Just the gillnet.

CB: Right.

NS: Now, I am not an expert. So, what exactly is a gillnet?

CB: Well, it's a net right now, which used to be made of cotton. They were in a square. We'll say a three or five-inch square. It usually runs about thirty meshes deep, and it runs about a quarter of a mile long.

NS: Wow. That is a long net. Did he make them?

CB: No, he used to buy them.

NS: Who made them?

CB: Let's see. To tell you the truth, I really don't know. But they used to buy them off of (Dows?), which used to be Dows Hardware. It used to be on Church Street. Then when that went out of business, and now – well, (Holly?) bought them out. (Holly?) built the store there.

NS: But he had to know how to fix them because –

CB: Oh, yes. They was all stripped net, and then the rope was a 5/16 rope. They used to make their own leas for the bottom.

NS: How did they make the leads?

CB: They just have a mold.

NS: What kind of metal did they use?

CB: Lead.

NS: They would melt that down.

CB: Right.

NS: Where would they get it?

CB: Well, in the junkyards. They used to buy all junk lead.

NS: How is a gillnet different from a haul net? Those seine nets that they –

CB: A gillnet, they set them out of a boat. Now, with a seine haul, they usually start on the beach. They go out and make a half-moon circle and then haul them on in.

NS: A gillnet?

CB: Now, gillnet, they just set them out, and where they see fish is set around, or they'll haul them out like [inaudible. They call them [inaudible]. They used to send them out, and the fishes [inaudible].

NS: So, you would stake them down?

CB: No, no. Used to drift.

NS: Okay. Would you go in a straight line?

CB: Almost in a half-moon.

NS: Like the haul net.

CB: Right. But it used to be out in the middle of the water.

NS: So, you would do this offshore?

CB: Right.

NS: How far out would you go?

CB: Well, they wouldn't go past thirty, forty foot of water. That was about the most that they get out. It was close to the beach that they did it. It used to be probably sixteen foot deep. That's how long the width was.

NS: Why did they call it a gillnet?

CB: Well, a fish has gills. They swim into it.

NS: So, it gets stuck on the gill?

CB: Then they get caught, right.

NS: When would you go gillnet fishing?

CB: Well, you start in May, and you'd end up in September. You'd go for bluefish, weakfish – well, that's about it.

NS: So, for summer fishing was the gillnetting. What would happen after the end of that season? Then you would start cod fishing?

CB: Getting prepared for cod fishing.

NS: Now, what is involved in cod fishing?

CB: Well, you got to – I'd say snell; that's prepare the hook on the line. It's a three-foot line. It's typically one-eighth of an inch – three. You had to make three to four thousand hooks. Now, see, like Danny Koch, he used all cork line. Years ago, they never used it.

NS: How come?

CB: Well, there was enough fish around here that you could set flat lines. They used to lay right on the bottom. Now, they bring in the cork [inaudible] because it carries the bait up the top and lays it like that.

NS: So, it attracts the fish from the bottom.

CB: Right.

NS: Now, how did you used to do it?

CB: I used to do it with a cork line, too.

NS: When did that start becoming more common?

CB: What do you mean? Cod fishing?

NS: No, with the cork line.

CB: I want to say thirty years ago.

NS: Is that pretty much what people do now who are cod fishing?

CB: Yes, right.

NS: Now, before that, you used to just sink down a hook line? Is that what they called it?

CB: Well, yes. It would be like that. They'd run about two miles long of cod fish. That's a long way.

NS: Would you go out in a boat and place each line?

CB: Yes.

NS: You had about three thousand lines?

CB: No, no. Well, about three thousand hooks.

NS: So, it is one line with three thousand hooks?

CB: The hooks on the main line would be every eight and a half foot apart.

NS: How long was one line?

CB: A quarter of a mile.

NS: What kind of boat would you use?

CB: Well, they always used a Verity skiff. Now, they use anything – all of them.

NS: Would you use a trawler, or would it be a small boat like a Garvey?

CB: No, no, it wouldn't be a trawler. No, it would be, on average, twenty-five to thirty foot long.

NS: Was it a flat-bottom boat or an ocean boat?

CB: Ocean boat.

NS: Almost like a dory? Is there a name for the boat?

CB: Yes, a Verity skiff.

NS: Oh, okay. So, they still use that?

CB: In fact, (Grover?) builds them; they're fiberglass today.

NS: Right, I know that.

CB: But they're not half as good as the old wooden boats.

NS: How come? Do you have any idea?

CB: For one, the fiberglass don't hold the weight.

NS: They're too light?

CB: They're too light. They bob around too much in the water. The old wood boat used to lay flat. Years ago, when they had the cod fish boat, they used to put what they call a centerboard, the same as what they use in a sailboat. Well, with the tide and the wind – steadied the boat. They used to use a tiller instead of the steering wheel that they use today.

NS: So, how long would the cod fishing –? When did it start? When did it end?

CB: It started the week before Thanksgiving and would end in March.

NS: Was there a peak to the season at all? Was there one time when you would catch more fish?

CB: I don't know. I'd figure January would be the peak of the season.

NS: Was the best time?

CB: Right.

NS: What time would you start and what time would you finish?

CB: Oh, well, you've seen yourself [inaudible]? We would start at 4:30 in the morning. You go set your line. You'd let them sit for an hour.

NS: Then you would pull them in?

CB: Right. The time you set them all out, that would take another hour. So, it would be two hours set. Well, the last line you put out, then you run back to the other end, pick up the line.

NS: The first one.

CB: Right, and then work your way up.

NS: So, what time would you end up finishing?

CB: 12:00 in the afternoon.

NS: Wow, that's a long day.

CB: No, you got to go back and bait [inaudible].

NS: Sure, for the next day.

CB: Right.

NS: Now, tell me, why would you start so early in the morning? [laughter]

CB: Well, more or less, that was when people had dock trades. When they had –

NS: To get it to the markets so that somebody could pick them up.

CB: Right.

NS: That is always one of those questions because the fish do not know what time it is. I thought, "Why do they start so early?"

CB: Today, with the cork line, if you notice that – well, I've noticed that fish seem to come from offshore in towards the beach. Then, in the morning, they go back down again. Well, that's my opinion because we used to fish right at the edge of the inlet. But if you were there in daytime, you'd never catch nothing.

NS: Right. So, you had to do it before they started going back so that they would –

CB: That's my opinion.

NS: Now, the lines were originally made out of cotton?

CB: That was years ago.

NS: What do they make them with now?

CB: Nylon.

NS: When I saw you, I know that there was a process that you made each line.

CB: What do you mean? You curled them?

NS: Yes.

CB: Well, with the eight-and-a-half-foot piece in between each hook, that would leave just three coils in the line.

NS: So, you would almost braid it?

CB: No, you tie them.

NS: So, you would leave that space and put the hook in as you were tying the line?

CB: Right. When you started, that was the hard part.

NS: How come?

CB: Well, you started off, I would say, in the fall. You started with tying all them hooks on. Today, they leave them on at all times. Years ago, they used to change.

NS: They would rust, and you would have to replace them.

CB: They used to rot, too, because of the cotton.

NS: The line, sure.

CB: Right.

NS: So, you had to do this how often? Every year, you would have to make a new set of lines, or more often?

CB: Not with nylon, but with cotton.

NS: With the cotton.

CB: Right.

NS: But one new line would last you the whole season?

CB: No.

NS: How often did you have to make a new line?

CB: Well, in the middle of the season, you had to change it.

NS: You had to change everything again.

CB: Right.

NS: So, how long would it take you to make the lines?

CB: Well, really, a man could make one line in about a full day.

NS: Wow. How many lines did you set out?

CB: Five. They're about a quarter mile a piece, so two and a half miles.

NS: Now, what kind of bait did you use back then? Still the clams?

CB: Yes.

NS: What kind of clams would you use?

CB: Skimmers.

NS: So, you would go out in the ocean for those?

CB: No. Well, years ago, the cod fishermen never had skimmer boats around here. They used to go tong their own.

NS: Oh, my God. So, how long did that take to get all the clams?

CB: It would only take an hour. But then you can catch clams. Now, they're gone.

NS: So, that is why they go out in the ocean now.

CB: Right.

NS: I did not know that. I thought skimmer clams were only in the ocean. So, you would spend the morning getting the clams – or when would you get the clams? When you came back after you pulled them in?

CB: When you clammed from pulling in your lines.

NS: You would go out in the bays here with the tonging? Did you work with anybody doing that?

CB: What do you mean?

NS: Did you work in pairs clamming, or did you do it alone?

CB: Are you talking about skimmering or clamming? That's two different things.

NS: Then I am talking about skimmering.

CB: Skimmering, you used to tong them on the bars out in the ocean. Clamming, you – well, everybody knows what clamming is.

NS: I am talking about before you had to go out in the ocean, though, and you could get skimmering here in the bay.

CB: No, you couldn't catch skimmers in the bay.

NS: Oh, that is what I was just asking you. So, for the cod lines, you would have to get skimmer clams, or could you –?

CB: Yes, right.

NS: So, would you go out in another skiff and just get the clams?

CB: No, no. The guys would – after they've finished fishing, they used to come up and pull up by the bar, and then they'd started tonging. That's years ago now, though. Now, they got it easy.

NS: So, after you would get the clams, then you would tie your lines, you would have the hooks, and then you would have to put the clams on. Would you do that in the morning before you left or the day before you set out the lines? When would you put the clams on the hook?

CB: After you're back from fishing.

NS: I was not sure if you had to do that right before you –

CB: You had to open your clams. You had to wash them. You had to –

NS: Right, I saw. That is what I wanted to know. So, that was cod fishing. How many of you worked together, setting the cod lines?

CB: Two.

NS: You and your dad?

CB: Yes. Well, me, I found my own boat, and the other guy – well, like (Kurt Smith?) used to go cod fishing with me. It was him and I. I have pictures around in some places. I don't know where they are.

NS: I would love to see them one day if you can look for them. So, how old were you when you started working apart from your father?

CB: Worked in the bay?

NS: Yes.

CB: Apart from my father?

NS: Yes.

CB: That would be fifteen years because I spent fifteen years in the Army. Then I got out of the Army, and I started clamming, and I started fishing. With the flat line, they weren't catching no fish. There was nowhere to [inaudible] no more. Then, all of a sudden, old Lenny Koch and I decided to take and make the cork line.

NS: Right. To see if it worked.

CB: Right, and it did. So, after they found out, him and I ended up all cork line. Then now, everybody else was into it. Really, old Lenny Koch and I started back to the cork line.

NS: Were the first ones. Did everyone try and find out how you were catching all these fish?

CB: Oh, no, they would –

NS: Everyone knew that that was the way to go?

CB: Yes, because years ago, they used to take a flat line and make a flat line, and then, every once in a while, they'd put a cork on one.

NS: So, people kind of knew that that might work.

CB: Right.

NS: How many other people went cod fishing around here when you were growing up?

CB: Well, at least thirty.

NS: They were all here on Milburn Creek?

CB: Yes.

NS: Who were some of the people that you worked with?

CB: Well, "Hike" Verity. There was really about five Veritys that used to work out of Baldwin then. There was the Seamans [inaudible] Carman, [inaudible] Carman. Let's see. I'm trying to think of all the old names. (Walt?) White.

NS: Was that Herb White's father?

CB: Uncle.

NS: There was another guy Herb used to work with on one of the boats. That does not matter. They also went cod fishing? Everybody went cod fishing?

CB: Yes, right. Now, Herb used to go cod fishing. Now, there's a guy right down here that's died, Dick Abbott.

NS: That is who I was thinking of, right. I knew it began with an A.

CB: He lived right there, two doors down.

NS: Did a lot of fishermen live right over here on this street?

CB: Not really. Most of them lived off the water. Now, Dick Abbott, he did live on the water. Now, he never had a bay house, either. The people who owned the bay houses were people who lived up north, people from out of the city, and stuff like that.

NS: So, it was more of a vacation kind of thing rather than a fisherman's –

CB: Yes, right. That's what it was. They came because they would run in the water.

NS: So, your father, he taught you pretty much all the different things.

CB: Yes.

NS: What was the hardest thing about learning about the bay and the –?

CB: Well, it just took a lot of common sense. You had to read real well – well, years ago, they never had radars and all the stuff like that. So, now, when you set a line, you just set them like – there's certain grounds that you had to set the lines on. If you noticed Danny Koch, when he was going, sometimes he was going for a full day because he was running way offshore. The biggest thing was you had to know how to read a range – put two objects together and line them up, and that's where you should start. When you finished, you read another range. There's two different ranges you're going to read.

NS: So, you have to have a good sense of space and being able to locate.

CB: Right.

NS: What are some of the other things that were really important to learn?

CB: Well, really, that was it.

NS: What about making the lines and the traps?

CB: They used to go lobstering around here too.

NS: I am talking about you. Did you trap killies and eels?

CB: No.

NS: You did not trap fish?

CB: I trapped eels.

NS: What kind of trap would you use?

CB: Well, I used to make a regular eel trap. It was nine inch by ten inch by three foot long.

NS: What did you make it out of?

CB: Wire and wood.

NS: What kind of wood would you use?

CB: Oh, we used a regular layout, one by two.

NS: Would you buy it or just pick it up?

CB: Well, you buy it. Very cheap, then.

NS: [laughter] The wire, did you have to do anything to the wire?

CB: No. We used tar. We used to get tar and heat it and add kerosene to it and make it loose, because all that you had was galvanized wire then.

NS: Right, that is what I was wondering.

CB: You used to dip it in tar.

NS: Then let it dry out?

CB: Right. When you're all done, then you're going to have to age – I used to throw the eel pot over in the water and let it age. Well, [inaudible].

NS: How come?

CB: Well, the eels wouldn't go into a fresh-tarred eel pot.

NS: So, how long would you let it sit in the water?

CB: Over two weeks.

NS: Now, what kind of bait would you use?

CB: Horseshoe crabs.

NS: Would you get those on the meadowlands?

CB: Well, in the spring of the year, at full moon – actually, May, the horseshoe crabs used to mate, and it would be full of eggs. Then you'd take them, and you'd –

NS: Pick them up and –

CB: [inaudible] head for sandy bottom.

NS: Did you have cars where you could keep the horseshoe crabs?

CB: Yes, right. We used to make very little pens.

NS: Where were the pens?

CB: On the water.

NS: Were they by your dock area?

CB: Yes, right.

NS: Was there ever a problem with stealing? Do people steal each other's –?

CB: Never. It's not like it is today. Well, people today, you couldn't leave an outboard on the back of your boat. A small one – they got it. Now, years ago, when I was a kid, you'd dock the boat, get out of the boat, and leave all your equipment in your boat, never bothered. Never. If it stayed there for a month, nobody bothered. It's a lot different today.

NS: So, you would go eeling what time of year?

CB: In the spring and in the fall. That's about April 15th to about June 15th. I believe that's the best time because once the water got warm, real warm, and the crabs used to shed on the bars. You'd get soft crabs. When they used to shed on the bars, eels go after them instead of the horseshoe crabs. Then, in the spring, eels would normally fatten up because they hibernate in the winter. So, they fatten up, and they go in the mud – stay there all winter.

NS: Would you go combing for them in the winter or spearing?

CB: They used to have what they call a guess jab spear.

NS: Right, a winter spear. They come down, and they have those little things.

CB: Combing today is modern.

NS: So, what is that called? Was it called jacking?

CB: No, no, guess jabbing.

NS: Guest?

CB: Jabbing.

NS: Jabbing, okay. When would you do that? That was in the wintertime?

CB: Well, it had to be cold weather. You get ice on the cracks and stuff like that. We used to cut a hole in the ice.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: So, you would go eeling – jabbing?

CB: Guess jabbing.

NS: How do you spell that? Guess?

CB: Yes.

NS: G-U-E –?

CB: When you guess.

NS: Guess?

CB: [inaudible]

NS: Guess jabbing. Why is it called that?

CB: Well, you don't know where the eels are. You can't see them.

NS: So, you'd have to guess.

CB: Right. Now, combing, you're doing the same thing.

NS: Now, when did combing replace the jabbing?

CB: I'd say twenty-five years ago.

NS: How come? It was easier?

CB: Well, yes. You'd catch more. They even do the summer. We used to go jacking with jacklights in the summer years ago. Now, they get up on the bar. After the eels started chasing the soft crabs, then they get on the bar, and they go around in circles to catch them.

NS: [laughter] That must have been fun to watch.

CB: What, watched them –?

NS: You watching them chasing each other.

CB: They'd turn around in circles. That's all they do.

NS: So, you went eeling. You went cod fishing. You went skimmering. You went gillnetting. What other things?

CB: Clamming.

NS: Clamming. Now, would you tread clams or go with the bay?

CB: Oh, I used to tread. I used to rake. I used to tong.

NS: Now, what exactly is tonging?

CB: Well, they got all lengths of poles, and there's pair of tong heads that acts like a fork.

NS: That is what I thought.

CB: They go like this, and you just had to do this. On the very end, there's a nut and a bolt with two pieces of wood. Well, it would be like a Y or an X. Well, the tongs come down like this. Two pieces of wood. There would be a nut and a bolt. Then there would be another extension, maybe two-foot. It would be eighteen-foot, a nut and a bolt, and then two foot more. Then you'd put your tong heads on. Then opened up –

NS: Right. Now, would you do this in a skiff or a Garvey? What kind of boat?

CB: Garvey.

NS: It would be in the calm water, and you would drift?

CB: Oh, rough waters. [inaudible] because you're anchored. You used your tong. Now, treading, we used to hop [inaudible] feel with your feet.

NS: [laughter] Did you ever step on anything?

CB: Oh, yes. I cut my foot right in half.

NS: What happened?

CB: Well, I just jumped overboard, and there was an old can in the bottom, and I stepped right in the middle of the can.

NS: Oh, God.

CB: I cut my foot, and I had to – I think it was four toes that was cut in half, and my foot was cut in half.

NS: Oh, lord. You were barefoot?

CB: Yes.

NS: The doctor could help you?

CB: Oh, yes, he sewed it all up [inaudible].

NS: How old were you when that happened?

CB: Oh, I guess I was eighteen then. Eighteen, nineteen, something like that.

NS: Now, how old were you when you had your own boat?

CB: I don't know.

NS: After the Army?

CB: Yes.

NS: How old were you then?

CB: Twenty-five, thirty. No, more than that.

NS: Yes, because you said you were in for fifteen years.

CB: Yes, I had to be thirty-five. Of course, I went in the Army when I was eighteen.

NS: So, you were in your thirties?

CB: Right.

NS: Had you known that you always wanted to be a bayman?

CB: No, I was going to be retired as an Army serviceman.

NS: What happened?

CB: That's [inaudible] prejudiced.

NS: Okay. So, you came back to Baldwin when you got out of the Army?

CB: Yes.

NS: Was your dad still working on the bay?

CB: No, he was dead then.

NS: So, you pretty much took over everything that he was doing.

CB: But he had nothing. He was in Florida then.

NS: Why a bayman? You could have done anything.

CB: I don't know. I like the water. I live on the water.

NS: What do you like most about working on the water?

CB: Your own boss. How nobody's got to tell you something. The money you make is how hard you work.

NS: So, you knew that whatever happened was up to you.

CB: Right.

NS: What was the hardest part about being a bayman?

CB: Being a bayman?

NS: Yes.

CB: Learning.

NS: Nobody taught you?

CB: No. You got to learn all by yourself.

NS: Your dad never showed you?

CB: No, not really. Know where you're going – that's the main thing. Know where you're going. Of course, you can get lost very, very easily. Years ago, you never had all the lights you got in the bay like the lights we have today. Well, there comes your ranging again. When you're someplace out there jacking at night, you got to know where you're going to go back because you're going around in circles and everything else. You got to know how to get back home. I heard guys on the radio today; they'd be right here in the bay and lost. I mean, guys got thirty-five, forty-foot boats. That don't make no sense. If you don't know where you're going –

NS: Then you shouldn't be out there.

CB: Right.

NS: Did you ever get lost?

CB: In a fog.

NS: Do you remember what happened?

CB: No, I just went around until I got home.

NS: Were you ever scared?

CB: Not really.

NS: Did you ever work with anybody?

CB: Oh, yes. I worked for William Granau. He's on the big –

NS: Billy Granau, yes.

CB: William, right. You know him?

NS: Yes, up in Freeport on South Main. My office is just down the street from there.

CB: He's quite a man. He's a self-made millionaire. He never had all that much because his – well, I don't know what his father was. I think he was a printer – worked in a printing office. He comes from Sheepshead Bay, and he moved down here. He owned a little boat, and then he ended up buying a big boat, trying to get a partner. Well, both of them get the money together to finance the big boat. They did end up buying the *Enterprise*.

NS: What did you do for him? You ran one of the skimmer boats?

CB: Yes, after. I used to work on deck.

NS: Who was the captain then?

CB: Well, we had (Willis Pickmin?). That was one boat. And Harry (Peterman?). I don't remember anymore.

NS: How long did you work for him?

CB: Eight years.

NS: How old were you when you worked for him?

CB: Let's see. One second. I started when I was about forty-five years old.

NS: So, you worked for him. After that, did you go back to working in the bay?

CB: No, I couldn't. I had a stroke. That's why I talk like to do.

NS: I had not noticed. Around here, everyone has an accent.

CB: [inaudible]

NS: [laughter] So, you had to stop working.

CB: Yes.

NS: Must have been very hard.

CB: Well, like I say, eight years later, that's [inaudible]. That's my pleasure.

NS: Did your father ever talk about the rum-running?

CB: Oh, yes.

NS: Was he part of that?

CB: Yes. In fact, this was about eight to ten people along here that went rum running.

NS: Really? Well, I know Dick Abbott was kind of the big –

CB: Well, he got in the last part of it.

NS: I thought he was in it from the beginning.

CB: No.

NS: Who were some of the other people who were –?

CB: Well, Fred Stenzel, Abe Stenzel, Dick Verity – he's the guy that owned the boat. He used to have men here [inaudible]. There was Austin Verity. I don't think –

NS: [inaudible] never talks about that. [laughter]

CB: No. Well, with his van, his boom van – he was the one [inaudible] the rum into the city.

NS: Now, did any of it stay around here where they –?

CB: The rum?

NS: Yes.

CB: Oh, sure.

NS: What were some of the speakeasies or hotels?

CB: Well, they had Rod and Gun Club in Freeport. There was (Skinny Frank's?) right there. [inaudible]

NS: Were there hotels on the marshlands?

CB: No. In East Rockaway, there was.

NS: Yes, there was Charlie Johnson's in Point Lookout, and in Meadow Island, they are a whole bunch.

CB: When I was a kid, there was only about two houses in Point Lookout.

NS: You were born here in Baldwin?

CB: Oh, yes.

NS: Where did you grow up?

CB: Right here in Baldwin Harbor.

NS: Is the house still there?

CB: Yes.

NS: What street?

CB: Pacific Street. Do you know where that is?

NS: I've seen it.

CB: Pacific. It used to be –

NS: That's up near where Lenny Koch lives somewhere.

CB: Now he lives in McKinley, don't he?

NS: Right, but Pacific is a couple of blocks –

CB: No, Pacific is down this way. [inaudible]

NS: I know that I have seen it.

CB: In fact, it's two blocks from Atlantic Avenue.

NS: Right. I know where it is.

CB: Now, that used to be Webster Street.

NS: How come it changed?

CB: Well, I have no idea. When I lived on that road, Pacific, it was a dirt road, and it was called Webster. I think a man had lived around here who was named Webster. They named that street after him. Why they would change that, I have no idea.

NS: So, was your grandfather also living in Baldwin?

CB: Yes.

NS: How far back does your family go in Baldwin?

CB: Oh, I have no idea.

NS: Do you know when the first Browers came here?

CB: No, I have no idea. But according to my brother, we are part Blackfoot Indian.

NS: So, you have been here a long, long time.

CB: Yes.

NS: Were the Browers always baymen and fishermen?

CB: Yes.

NS: Were there ever any –?

CB: My father ended up being a painter. He worked for Fred Stenzel. Fred got started in the paint business by rum-running [inaudible] he got the money. [inaudible]

NS: Did you ever make your own boats?

CB: Not really.

NS: You used to get them from Sam Verity?

CB: Right.

NS: Were you into duck hunting, or was anybody in your family?

CB: No, never. I don't need it. I don't like them to eat. I never went into it. Rabbit [inaudible] rabbit hunting. I used to go rabbit hunting.

NS: Where did you go?

CB: Well, this whole [inaudible was all –

NS: Was all rabbits?

CB: All meadows.

NS: You used to have hens, I know.

CB: Oh, yes. We used to have pheasant around here.

NS: Do you have any pictures of what it used to look like around here?

CB: No. They were all gone. If you know Albert Smith.

NS: Can't say I do.

CB: He used to live off [inaudible]. He donated all of his pictures to the library. His father used to be a camera nut.

NS: I was just wondering if you had pictures of the old fishermen and the baymen in the creek. Your mom, how did she handle first your father working on the bay and then you?

CB: Oh, I don't know. My mother originally comes from New Suffolk, out by the Riverhead. How he met her out there, I have no idea.

NS: [laughter] Did she help in the work?

CB: No, but my wife did.

NS: Yeah? What did she do?

CB: Well, she used to mend all the hooks for me.

NS: Oh, really?

CB: Yes. I had a friend that made me a machine, and it could cork – with the line through the cork. The guy made me a machine for that.

NS: Who was it?

CB: I forget what the guy's name is. He used to work for my wife on the job. So, he asked me to send him one of them things [inaudible], a cork on the line. So, he went and made a gadget that put things together. In fact, I still have it in the attic.

NS: [laughter] Next time I come, I would like to see that. What were some of the harder things that you had to learn how to do?

CB: Well, tell you the truth, [inaudible] learn.

NS: Like just learning how to shuck a clam. Now, you saw me that day, and it was very hard for me. Was it easy for you?

CB: It comes natural. It comes natural. You have to live, or you had to be brought up around it.

NS: Do you remember having to learn it, or was it just something you already knew?

CB: No, you automatically did it. More or less, the old fishermen used to take and shuck all the skimmers, right?

NS: Yes.

CB: Maybe they wouldn't shuck enough. So, you'd have to go in and open some yourself. So, you gradually learned doing it like them.

NS: Were there some things that you had trouble learning, and you remember getting frustrated?

CB: No, not really. Everything is luck. If you set your line, it's luck. You catch a fish, it's luck. Like I was telling you, guess [inaudible] – you guess for everything you're doing. You're clamming, you guess. You're fishing, you're guessing.

NS: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in the bay?

CB: Closing the bay, that's the biggest change.

NS: When did they start to close off?

CB: The bay?

NS: Yes.

CB: Twenty-five years ago. They started in East Rockaway, and they kept on running east. Now, I was too young when they closed Jamaica Bay. But then they went from Jamaica Bay and East Rockaway, from East Rockaway and Baldwin Bay, and then they even closed up Merrick after a while. Then [inaudible] had it opened.

NS: Do you think that the pollution has gotten a lot worse?

CB: Oh, yes, a lot worse. I mean, years ago, we used to be able to clam right here, right here in the creek – or just about right in the creek. Then, after they closed the bay, they gradually went out south. Then they closed up there with the sandbar down there in Baldwin Harbor. They closed that, and then, all of a sudden, they closed the whole bay. I mean, they took a lot away from the old-timers.

NS: What do you think it would take to clean the bay up?

CB: What would what?

NS: What do you think should be done to make the bay cleaner?

CB: I don't know. If they had different sewage. Years ago, they used to have gutters in the road. They used to have gravel inside the gutters. It was natural with the stones and stuff like

that. But now, what you're doing, you're ruining your water pollution, your drinking water. The gutters used to filter the water before it went in the bay through the stones and the sand and stuff like that. Now, they got sewage that run all the way from Garden City and Hempstead and all over there that went right in our bay, hazardous chemicals. Do you ever smoke?

NS: No.

CB: What do you do? Just write?

NS: No, I talk to people.

CB: Oh.

NS: What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you when you were working on the bay or on the ocean?

CB: I don't know. The bay is never scary.

NS: You have always felt comfortable.

CB: Yes, I feel more at ease in the bay than I do at home. I'm thinking, at night, I feel very uptight, I might go and lay in the bay. Well, you can't do that today because they'll run over you. Too many boats could run over you.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/29/2024