Narrator: Jack Combs

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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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: In this interview, Jack Combs recounts his experiences growing up in a family with a long history tied to bay life in Freeport, New York. Starting from a young age, Combs was deeply involved in the bay's activities, learning the intricacies of clamming, fishing, and eeling from his grandfather, who was a prominent figure in the community. He describes the traditional way of living off the bay, highlighting the importance of self-sufficiency and the skills needed to survive by harvesting various marine resources. Combs shares anecdotes about his family's involvement in rum-running during Prohibition, emphasizing his grandfather's reputation for honesty in dealing with dangerous individuals. He also discusses the changes in the bay's ecosystem and the fishing industry over the years, including the influx of new people and the subsequent impact on traditional practices. The interview provides insights into the community dynamics, with references to various local families and their roles in the bay's history. The narrative also touches on the environmental practices of baymen, who, despite being labeled as outlaws, were early conservationists, mindful of maintaining the bay's resources for future generations. Combs shares vivid memories of the camaraderie among the baymen, the practical jokes played by his grandfather, and the challenges faced during harsh weather conditions. Overall, this oral history captures the essence of a way of life that has largely disappeared, offering a personal perspective on the cultural and economic shifts in Freeport's bay community over several decades.

Jack Combs: – oh, until ‘76, ‘78. We moved out here in 1976. Then I started bay scalloping on my time off because I was good. But this bay is just as dead as a doornail.

Nancy Solomon: What kinds of things do you need to go scalloping? They do not do that out my way.

JC: Well, I'll tell you, at Freeport-Merrick, you had some scallops years ago. You had a lot of scallops. In fact, in the house that Mom and Dad lived in, in Gordon Place, I think that garage was built on scallop shells that were dumped there over the years.

NS: [laughter] I wouldn’t be surprised.

JC: I remember the amounts of scallops; they just settled down with dirt over them. But if anybody dug up, they must think, "How many Indians lived here?" [laughter] You see all the shells. But they had dredges. They towed dredges.

NS: Was that something that Bedell would have made?

JC: Yes. Bedell never made too many scallop dredges because down there, they would go at night with a jacklight and pick them up with a crab lift because the scallops would lay right on top of grass at night. Then daylight, they'd go down. So, they would [inaudible]. The same thing as conchs. They used to catch a lot of conchs, Grandfather and them, in the wintertime. In January and February, they would go out there on a calm night, and then they could pick up fifteen, twenty bushels of conchs a night. They'd lay on top of the bars.

Q: Do they call them anything else besides conchs?

JC: Well, periwinkles, but we always called them conchs. Now, another thing, the big, brown rock crabs – the first full moon in January, they would shed out, and they'd be soft. We would catch them in the mud [inaudible] clams. Nobody else knew about that – that the crab shed out. These rock crabs, big brown ones, would shed out in the first full moon in January. Then we'd have flounders come in the bay – tremendous-sized flounders.

NS: Almost the size of flukes, probably? Bigger?

JC: Oh, bigger. We've had flounders come in the bay; you lay them in a bushel basket, and their head would stick up, and the tail would stick up.

NS: Oh my God.

JC: Or they would come in a spawn. They were called snowshoe flounders. If they were fat, they would be eight, ten pounds. But they were so [inaudible] that they'd come in a spawn, and they eventually would die. But you held it up, you would count every bone just looking at it [inaudible] because it was so thin. But you would catch them early in January or February. They'd come in a spawn, and then they'd die or fall out.

NS: Would you sell this to the markets or [inaudible]?

JC: No. Anything like that, we kept ourselves. We ate. The flounders, we'd take and cut the roe out, take the roe out, and fry the roe.

Q: Did you use fykes to catch the flounder?

JC: No, we never did. That was a thing on the eastern part of the bay – fykes.

Q: Yeah, the Dutch baymen [inaudible].

JC: Yeah, Sayville stuff.

NS: What are fykes? I do not even know. [laughter]

JC: Fykes are a net. They are round hoops, and the hoops take them down, a long bag. They have two wings, and [inaudible] out according to the tide and [inaudible]

NS: Okay, I've seen drawings of it.

Q: The Dutch baymen used to use rectangular casing. The guys out here, I know used rounds ones [inaudible]. Do they even have that in the western part of the bay?

JC: I think they did, but I never remembered. My dad would know.

NS: What do you remember using?

JC: Well, Bedell rakes.

NS: [inaudible] dragging.

JC: You always had a [inaudible] rake because you could always scratch clam with that. But you treaded a lot. I used to – when I was a kid, we always used to tread. We'd tread ten bushels of [inaudible], and one bushel of cherrystone clams every day. We used to do that. That was fast treading, I'll tell you, boy. You always had one arm longer than the other because you're leaning on a boat all day, and you keep picking up. But we would make our treading shoes out of inner tube tires. Grandpa would take and cut them –

NS: You had shoes? Because most people would just –

JC: Yes, booties. We'd take inner tubes. He'd cut them off just a little bit longer than your feet, and he'd sew up the ends and cut a slot on top. You stuck them over your feet because the conch shells and the razor clam shells you would cut your feet.

NS: You could hurt your feet.

JC: But these rubber booties would protect your feet. But once in a while, if you're sliding along your feet, you'd get a small [inaudible] with a sharp tail [inaudible] very sharp. Oh my God, if you get one of them stuck in your foot. But I think with the mud and the saltwater, they seemed to heal awful fast. I never had any bad infections, I can remember.

Q: Would you feel them as you slide across the bottom?

JC: Yeah. Sure. You could feel a dime with those booties. You could actually feel a dime. Grandpop said he could tell which was heads and which was tails. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] That was one of his stories.

JC: Yes. I would say he was absolutely the bayman. Pop was a bayman. I would say bad is the last Bayman. Georgie is the last of the baymen, but it's a different era. When I'm saying baymen, Dad went down the bay – I went with him as a kid – icy weather, snowing, blowing, freezing. My God. I pay for it now. I have a lot of arthritis, and you pay for that. But I remember being out, and it would be freezing ice on you, spray, and – I'll tell you.

NS: I imagine duck hunting you were in some pretty bad weather.

JC: Yes, cold. Oh, boy, I'll tell you. We rescued a few people over a period of years. We had this one guy – we were going across the bay. In the wintertime, we never went out early in the morning because, number one, it was too cold. The ducks never flew. They would stay still [inaudible] the sanctuary [inaudible].

Q: You wanted to get up – the ducks flying around nine o'clock, right?

JC: Yeah.

Q: You'd be there at 6:30.

JC: So, we'd go out at nine o'clock. If you had high water at noontime, birds would fly from noon to two o'clock because of high water. After two o'clock, if it's high water, the birds won't fly until that night because it's their feeding time.

NS: Would you go duck hunting out on Swift Creek, or where would you go?

JC: Not so much there. More towards the greenhouse at Merrick Bay. That was a big stomping ground.

NS: Do you have a picture of the greenhouse?

JC: No. Georgie asked me for it.

NS: I am looking for one. [laughter]

JC: I remember it. I remember the (Connors?) house next to it. The greenhouse used to have a spring there. You would always find [inaudible] living there all winter. There would always be one or two living there. There would always be a mink living there on account of fresh water.

NS: So, the ducks would fly out that way?

JC: Yes. We'd come across the bay about nine o'clock. We see this guy sitting in this rowboat. Pop said, "This guy is in trouble." Because we went past this point of land, and we see a duck stool off the point, and we didn't see anybody there. About a mile down across the bay, rowing like hell northwest, we see this guy over there hunched over his boat. The old man said to me, "I think this guy is in trouble." We go alongside him. He couldn't get his motor started. The boat was half full of ice and slush, freezing weather, and his [inaudible] is laying in a boat all frozen. He had one oar, no anchor, and he was half-frozen to death. But we had a little Shipmate stove in the cabin of our Garvey going because we always started a fire onboard.

NS: You had that Garvey with the little cabin that came out?

JC: Yeah. What we did was I always started a fire in the morning when we went to work, or we went [inaudible] so you're warm all day. So, we got a hold of this guy, and the old man said to him, "Listen, we're going down [inaudible]. We're not going to [inaudible] on account of you. We'll take you, and we'll put you in our boat. You can get warm. You can sit here. When we're through in the afternoon [inaudible], we'll bring you back ashore." That guy was so happy to get on a warm boat; he didn't care. Pop said, "If we didn't come across the bay that day, he would have perished." Because he would have drifted right across the bay – no idea what to do, no knowledge of how to survive. Every year, there'd be one person or two people. I remember a number of years ago, a father and son in Merrick Bay. They were out on a small gunning boat. It was nice weather in the morning. The wind came up northwest, and they'd come north of the greenhouse, and they drowned. The bay is really bad.

NS: Did anything scary happen to you when you would be out in the bay?

JC: No. I'm not bragging, but I was taught the right way. I was taught you always had extra gear. You always had candles. You always had a thing of kerosene because, as Grandfather would say, "If you get stuck down at bay, you go with the wind. You're either going to hit Jones Beach Causeway, or you're going to hit some [inaudible]. Years ago, the [inaudible] was very high. You had a lot of drift, a lot of [inaudible] bushes. He said, "If you get broke down, if you have some matches and a candle and some kerosene, you can always set the [inaudible] fire." He said, "You can always do something." But we were always prepared. I was always taught when I was young to have two oars, have anchor lines, have extra clothing, and I tried [inaudible] my boys. But my boys aren't baymen, so they can't acknowledge it. They go out to have a six-pack of beer on the boat. That's being really set for the day. I try to tell them that they have no idea. But I can never remember have anything happen dangerously.

NS: What about working on the tugs? Because I have heard about [inaudible] the tugs.

JC: Well, that's a rough job. I would say that's like commercial fishing because tugboats are

round bottom, and they roll your brains out.

NS: Some of those slips are real narrow.

JC: Yeah. Well, we had a couple of collisions where something would happen with the steering, and the barge would come up behind you and almost run you over. That's been cold. I remember up in Portland, Maine, it was twenty degrees below zero, and one of the hawsers had frozen. The towing line, which was called a hawser, froze. We had to take it, bring it into the shower, thaw it, and splice it. This was a ten-inch hawser. We had to use [inaudible] to support the tox screw in order to get a good splice. I remember the cold, cold days and nights being a deckhand. Then, I got hurt six years ago in Bridgeport with a coal barge. A guy was up on the ladder in a barge ship, and he fell on me and hurt my back. Then I went cooking. But I remember the Carmens [inaudible] waiting on it.

NS: Waiting to get to the Grand River Bridge there. [laughter] I talked [inaudible].

JC: Old Wink Carmen was my dad's partner for years. He was a fine person. Then, Young Wink used to work for us.

NS: I was thinking about Young Wink. [inaudible]

JC: Those were some of the old Carmens. Old Wink was good. He was a good person.

NS: How old were you when you first started making decoys? Because I know that your whole family makes them.

JC: Probably thirteen or fourteen.

NS: Was that a difficult process?

JC: Well, you learned from your dad. He would show me. So you weren't young enough to get hurt with a knife, right? I still had a couple of cuts [inaudible] over the years. You didn't think right, you started carving, and the knife would slip. I think we all have had cuts. But I learned it from Dad. Grandpop didn't carve much. Dad carved for Grandpa. Grandpa, his thing was he would take two [inaudible] and go out at night. He would shoot a [inaudible] birds at night over [inaudible]

Q: That’s kind of like those guys who just pick up – did you know any of them?

JC: [laughter] No.

Q: I know a couple of them.

JC: But I tell you, I said to myself – I said, "Good God." I said, "If they got more birds than they were supposed to have gotten, they're going to put six months in jail." But I think the way it sounds is less and less birds, but their thought was – they talked too much.

Q: They took somebody they did not know.

JC: You never take an outsider.

Q: Even if you are not breaking the law, it's not safe.

JC: No. But I know a number of years ago – we know three brothers in [inaudible], and they're good guns – they're part baymen and [inaudible] and had good gunner – one of the best gunners around they are, the three of them.

NS: Who are they? These three?

JC: I won't tell you because they're still alive.

NS: This doesn't go to anybody.

JC: What happened, they had a federal man come down. He heard about these guys gunning and stuff, and he went down, and he made friends with them. Went to the bar one day and talked to them. He wanted to go out duck hunting with them. So, they took him out; they killed a few birds. He said, "Can you shoot a couple more for me?" They said, "Sure. No problem." I don't know what the limit was then. Six or eight birds. I think maybe they shot ten or twelve. So, that was okay. Then he comes back a week later and goes out gunning with them again. Brings out a couple bottles of whiskey [inaudible] dinner – a real good friend. But he's a federal man. So, about a month later, he said to them, "I have some guys in Washington – congressmen and senators – they want to have a game dinner. They want to buy some birds." Now, these brothers never sold birds. So, this guy got them into that, and they went there, and – I don't know – over a period of time, I think they had five or six hundred birds going with them. They would shoot thirty or forty in one day and forty or fifty the next day. Meanwhile, they're collecting this evidence. All of a sudden, in April – six o'clock in the morning, there was a knock on one of the brother's doors. He opens the door and *clink*, the cuffs are on him. They got all three brothers. They did time. They did six months in jail. They took away their gunning license for two years. Then, my dad went down to the conservation. He seen one of the game wardens down there, and my old man raised hell. He said, "You goddamn people are supposed to be conservationists." He said, "Why did you have to wait until you had a thousand birds?" He said, "If you bought three birds off him," it was illegal. He said, "What happened to those thousand birds? You still had a dinner, right?" He said that was the evidence. Well, Pop said, "But you still killed a thousand birds." He said, "If you got them with four birds or even a dozen birds, they were guilty." But he said, "You had to have [inaudible] a thousand birds." So, Pop said, "Well, what'd you do with those birds?" "It was evidence."

NS: They ate them.

JC: Pop said, "Don't tell me that." He said, "That guy come down, and he pushed these boys into doing it illegally." He did. He did. I tell you. That's the way of life that I remember gunning. Let's see now. We sold ducks until 1960. We had this one restaurant, and he dealt

with game. He always used to get a lot of mallards. He couldn't get any more, so he'd come to us. He wanted to buy some birds. So, we wouldn't shoot the birds; we'd trap the birds.

NS: How would he trap them?

JC: What happened is a special trap. So, we'd give them a whole mass of birds. I don't know. I think we got two dollars apiece if they were picked. We got, I think, fifteen to twenty birds one day.

NS: What was this trap?

JC: It's a special trap, so big. [laughter] That's all I'm going to tell you.

NS: What is it made of?

JC: You would catch them alive. You would catch them alive, and you'd catch as high as thirty or forty of them.

NS: Was it a box? A wooden –?

JC: Yes. It's kind of a cage. Right. So, you would catch them. So, anyhow, we would wring the necks, and then we'd pick them and clean them, and we'd give it to this restaurant owner. So, what would happen was he'd come back to my old man a week later. He said, "George, I don't understand it." He said, "I'm used to game birds with a shot in them." He said, "None of these birds have shots." The old man would say, "Well, hell." He said, "We shoot them all on the head." So, he didn't quite believe that. So, on the next order for birds, the old man says, "Okay, I'll fix them." Next order of birds we had – I think we had an order for forty or fifty. The old man cleans them first, and he takes an ice pick and puts a few holes in the breast and stuff, and it looks like shot marks.

NS: [laughter] Oh, gosh.

JC: The owner comes back a month later, and he says, "I don't understand it." He said, "We've seen a shot in the birds, but we don't find any shot." [laughter] They could never figure it out. But he was a character. That same restaurant owner used to come out East to Eastport. He used to buy deer off the farmers. He would buy four or five deer twice a week. It's funny because he dealt with the (Whitneys?), the (Phipps?) – all the old Westbury crowd, and they wanted game. I shot some crows down at the bay. I'd never shoot crows, but I always felt they were an endangered species. But he wanted four or five crows. I shot five crows for him. He plucked them, had a chef cook them up, and put a sauce on them. He told his people they were partridge. When they got through eating them, he said, "You know what you had?" [laughter]

Q: That's terrible. [laughter]

JC: But I would never shoot crows. I always felt you had two types of crows. You had your mainland big crows, and you had your fish crows, which were smaller. I'll tell you, being on the

water and seeing those poor crows trying to survive, I'd never shoot one. I always [inaudible] – and each year, they were less and less. The last couple of years on our house, we'd always have four or five of them down there. Every time I'd stay on the bay for the weekend, I would take [inaudible] the old bread, scraps of food, and they'd come down during the week, and they'd feed on that because I knew life was harsh for them.

NS: What kind of ducks would you go after?

JC: Black ducks mostly. Very few mallards. If you shot a mallard years ago, that was like, "Wow, my gosh." That was unbelievable because there wasn't any mallards. Always black ducks or wigeon, broadbill. Never shot many geese years ago. If you shot one goose the whole season, you were [inaudible]. You were really great.

Q: How about [inaudible]? Did you get any of those?

JC: No. They never come from the bay. They always laid offshore off Jones Beach. They weren't inside. You had so many mussel beds offshore. They would follow from Orient Point all the way down. They would never come in the bay. Once in a while, a heavy [inaudible] would come in. Oh God, we used to live on ducks a lot.

Q: What about seagulls outside?

NS: What kinds of things would you do with them besides selling them? What kinds of different foods would you have? How would you prepare them?

JC: Oh, we had them roasted, or you'd breast them out. The main thing down the bay was stews. That was a big thing because you'd have a fish stew, an eel stew, a duck stew, or a clam stew.

NS: How was a duck stew made?

JC: Well, you'd take the birds and you'd cut them in quarters. Clean them, and you'd cut them in quarters. You'd just go, and you'd brown them in a pot with salt pork, and you'd have an onion cut up. You took your ducks out after they've breaded. You'd brown up your onions and put the potatoes in with a little water and pepper. Pepper was a big thing. Salt and pepper, that was it. They never heard of anything else but that. The reason for the stews is because you put them on, let them simmer on the back of the stove, and you went to work. Usually, because that was something, you'd come back at four o'clock in the afternoon; you're ice cold, you're freezing. You knew you'd come into the warm bay house. You open that door, had that hot heat from a stove, and you smell that pot. If you got down [inaudible] house, you knew what you'd have for supper [inaudible]. You could almost tell. The stew was great because you didn't feel like cooking when you got in. Only when you started to go sport hunting on the weekends, then the guys would bring down meat and say, "Meat, my God." We used to tell them, "Don't bring meat down here. If you want to bring beer down or wine or whatever, but don't bring any meat," because we didn't [inaudible].

NS: You would catch your food.

JC: We didn't care for steak. It was at the bay, the eels especially, fried clams. But I used to – when I was a kid, I made [inaudible], night herons – we used to them – and snipe and shy pokes. We even had this old farmer one time work for us, old Harry. He even conned me into cooking a whole bunch of killies one time for him. They were strong. But spearing, you'd eat. Spearing was like [inaudible]; they're delicious. They're very good. We'd get the big ones. I used to pick them out. Years ago, when we caught spearing in a net, we would keep them alive. Spearing, you take out of the water, three minutes, and they're dead. What we would do, we'd catch a spearing, and we had these [inaudible] with [inaudible] front. We'd dump the net into there, and then we put the cover on it. We'd have four or five cars full, or maybe you had a couple [inaudible]. We'd tow them in tandem very, very slow. You always grabbed [inaudible]. We used to work off the horserace east of the Meadowbrook Bridge. We always timed it so when you got through netting, you had fair tide going through the bridge because you couldn't tow against the tide. You'd never make any time. If you tow too hard, the spearing in the cars would all bunch up in the back, and they'd smother. So, you had a fair tide so you could make time and progress.

NS: Yeah, so that they would always –

JC: And we timed it so that you'd go over the bridge, and just about the time you got to Swift Creek and went around a bar, she was flood-tied. You went by tides. We used to keep them alive because no refrigeration down the bay, no freezer, no electricity. So, you couldn't store them.

NS: You didn't have a propane refrigerator or anything?

JC: No. Towards the summertime, when there was a lot of fluke, and we had a lot of party boats come to our dock, we had these big barrels we would ice down, put a lot of salt – kosher salt and ice. It would make a very stiff brine, a good brine. You would dump your spearing in that because you knew that day you'd sell two or three hundred quarts. So, you'd figure, "It's going to be a nice day today." You know how many boats are coming out day in [and] day out. So, you'd take that, and you would have them in the barrels of ice and salt. At the end of the day, you'd just dump it overboard because you couldn't keep it. It didn't matter because you dumped over what you didn't use, and then the next day, you have fresh again. That was usually on a weekend when you had a lot of fishermen come out. During the week, we'd keep them alive. They'd live four, five, six days, and they'd get sores on them. Shrimp you could keep alive for – we used to keep the shrimp alive in the cars for about four or five days.

NS: Wow. That is pretty good.

JC: We had a little bit of shrimp. It's funny. As my dad was talking to me the other day, you couldn't go out on this bay now and catch a hundred quarts of shrimp anywhere. The last three or four years, they have died off. They're not in the flats. We don't know why, but they're not there. Nobody goes for them, so they should be knee-deep, but they're not. You couldn't catch enough shrimp now to put in the bucket. I swear to God. It's same as everything. When you

shrimp, you'd always catch a lot of blue claw crabs. But we had a mesh in front of the dredge where you'd catch all the crabs and stuff. They wouldn't go through. After you'd towed them for half an hour, you'd pull up a dredge, you shook up the cleaning mesh, and you shook all the crabs [inaudible]. You could tell what kind of a set of crabs you had. There'd be little ones. One year, there'd be very few crabs. You'd say to yourself, "Well, there's not that many crabs this year." Because you could tell by the amount of small stuff you were pulling. But I remember back even in the '50s, even though we were baymen and outlaws, the old man and grandpa, they were kind of conservationists. When we caught green crabs, we had a [inaudible] box with one-inch square mesh. Every pot we'd have, we'd dump into this [inaudible box and all the little crabs the size of your thumb would go through. You'd have four or five bushels a day. We'd let them go. The fishermen wanted them. They were willing to pay a higher price for them because they were perfect-size bait. But the old man said, "If I sell them that stuff, I'm cutting my throat for the next year." So, the baymen never abused the bay. They would never catch every clam. They would never shoot every duck. They would shoot a fair amount of ducks. They would shoot this and that, but they would never clean the whole bay out because they knew it's their own livelihood. Now, we know our crabs would migrate out to Virginia. But if you had the cold floor – say November [inaudible] crabs would bed in this bay. They wouldn't travel. But if it's a warm floor, every crab goes to Sandy Hook or goes as far as Cape Henry, Virginia. They would travel that far down. But you knew. So according to the weather conditions –

NS: About how many baymen were working on the bay when you were growing up in Freeport?

JC: Probably a total of ten.

NS: [inaudible]

Q: Ten families or ten people?

JC: Well, the Mullers, Herbie and Joe Muller. They were in Freeport. Gardiners. Well, Freddie Gardiner had worked for the railroad.

NS: He was just [inaudible].

JC: Yes, but he worked the bay. He got chased by the wardens. That boat got shot up one night and stuff. Oh God, let's see now. The [inaudible] were Seaford. Well, the Veritys. Veritys are Baldwin.

NS: Yes. There was Fred Verity and "Hike" Verity. The (Kochs?).

JC: As my grandfather says, "Instead of sending the missionaries to Africa, they should have sent a missionary to Baldwin." He said, "I'll tell you, you went back four hundred years when you went into Baldwin." That was some outfit. Those guys were crazy. Hardest workers. I don't think that anybody worked as hard as Veritys. They were good baymen, the best baymen, worked like hell, and drink and fight. I've seen a time when one of them bought a brand-new car, got drunk, chopped the fenders off with an ax, and drove it overboard – the Woodcleft Canal. I'll tell you, they go nuts.

NS: Which one was this?

JC: Oh, I don't know.

NS: I know them well.

JC: But full moon, I'll tell you, they were different. [laughter] But they were good baymen. The Veritys worked the ocean more. They were cod fishermen, set liners.

Q: Really?

JC: Yes.

Q: Was there a lot of that around here?

JC: Used to be.

NS: Well, they also worked on the bay.

JC: The Veritys made a good skiff. The Verity skiff is one of the best. In fact, Grover makes a fiberglass one. I see one down here on the main road.

NS: Sam Verity and his [inaudible].

JC: Yes, but they were good baymen.

Q: Were there any ocean [inaudible] back then?

NS: Yes. The Doxsees.

JC: Doxsees had them. The reason the Doxsees left Swift Creek – the old man told me when they put the causeway in 1929, it was easy to go to the Point Lookout. So, they drove that way.

NS: That is not why. I talked to Bob Doxsee, Jr. Apparently, what happened – he and his brother Joseph and Henry had a falling out. They decided to dissolve the partnership. One of the things that they put in the agreement – and I don't know why they agreed to it – is then he had to leave Islip, and he could only fish out of Point Lookout. That is why they went there.

JC: Oh, yeah?

NS: Yes. It was during World War II. They had this big fight. World War I, I mean.

JC: Because Pop said to me [inaudible] – yeah. Because I remember the net house was full of nets, [inaudible] nets and lobster pots. I'm trying to think about the Carmens. The Bidells. They worked the bay. Gee, they were a very old family. But Pop said the Bidells were really great

people, very honest people.

NS: They're all gone now.

JC: I think my plaster is falling off the ceiling – bouncing around.

Q: [inaudible].

JC: Yeah, I pray they were going to do something.

NS: So, there are about a dozen of them?

JC: Yes, I would say so. It wasn't like you had [inaudible] the clam [inaudible] off Patchogue or off Northport. I clammed in Northport in 1960, and you had three thousand clam diggers there. That's just what they were. They were clam diggers. I always said they were society's misfits that couldn't make it because any dope could catch a clam. Anybody could dig clams and catch clams and [inaudible]. But to follow the bay, to follow eeling and baiting and do a little trapping and shoot ducks – everything [inaudible].

NS: [inaudible]

JC: But the Verity could work the bay. They could survive. Morses. (Al?) Morse and them – the Morse family from Freeport. They used to tong mussels for years by Meadowbrook Bridge. They were good baymen.

NS: Are they still around?

JC: No. They died off. The one Morse, he moved out to Islip quite a while ago, early '60s. The other Morse – (Howie?) Morse – wanted to be a teacher, and he married a woman – her name was (Jean Trebor?). They had a house to the south of Doxsee's house on [inaudible] for the summer. He was a retired judge from New Jersey. But (Al?) Morse – they were good baymen. [inaudible] would work mussels more or less.

NS: Getting back to you, do you still make traps and decoys? Is that something you still know how to do?

JC: Well, I don't [inaudible] as much. Carving, somehow, you get into ruts. You carve like hell, and all of a sudden – you have to carve when the weather is right. If it's warm and hot and sticky, you don't feel like carving a duck. What you want to do is get out fishing or get overboard and [inaudible] a few clams or do something. Or just sit on the front porch with a chair or a Tom Collins. The last thing you want to is there here – "I got to carve this damn bird." Well, when I was a kid, I carved a lot. But like I say, after I got – [Recording paused.] After we got married and stuff, you didn't have time to carve. Years ago, we always said we will –

NS: Is that something, if you had the time, that you would [inaudible]?

JC: Yes. When I was down at the bay, I would always carve because, number one, you didn't have television. I had a radio, and I liked classical music. How I got into classical music was, when I was about sixteen, I was a fishing guide for the vice president of RCA. His name was (Clifford Fink?) from Bellmore. He'd come out on weekends. He loved fishing. He loved to take off his suit and tie, put on an old shirt, and go down and see the Bidells. I can't remember the man's name down in Bellmore there. He had a boat. So, I would take him out fishing. He'd have all these records, these albums upon albums. He gave me a stereo. Well, we called it a stereo – the record player. It was one of the first stereos in the '60s. No, it was '56. That's when Elvis Presley – I had an Elvis Presley record. But anyhow, I used to pick out certain records. Like I said, he had all types from country right through to classical. So, he'd say to me, "Don't pick out one type." He said, "Listen to everything." He said, "If you listen to the (Jive Five?), to classic classical, to this and that, you'll know what you're talking about." So, that's how I got involved with music. So, I got to like classical. So, I'd be down at the bay. At the bay house, I'd have a radio. I'd have classical music on – WQXR was one of the early ones. I'd be carving away or culling clams, and I'd have Beethoven on. [laughter] But that was me. My brother is not into classical. But I could work with that kind of music. It was funny.

NS: I am curious. It sounds like you spent a lot of time at the bay house.

JC: Yes, before I was married. In fact, I'll tell you, when I got married – when I first met my wife, we had a problem. I was twenty-two, and I didn't own a car, and I didn't drive a car. I always went back and forth by boat. I went down the bay. I stayed all week. I'd come ashore. There was a store in Seaford. You went up the canal. You tie it to the dock. You walked across Merrick Road, and you did your shopping. I had no use for a car. All of a sudden, one fine day, I met this big, good-looking woman. I said, "Wow, this is better than [inaudible]." So, I started to go out with her and stuff. I took her around by boat. She said to me, "How do you travel?" I said, "By boat." She said, "How do you travel on land?" I said, "I either walk or my mom and dad drive me to the store." She said, "You don't have a car?" I said, "No." She said, "How old are you?" I said, "I'm twenty-two. I have no need for a car." Well, it got to the point where if the relationship was going to last, Jack had to learn how to drive. [laughter] So, I had to go to driving school, and I failed twice. I finally passed. But I always spent time down the bay. Even when we got married, I would go down the bay for three days, clam and so forth, and I'd come home on the fourth day with a load of clams.

NS: Did she ever go out with you?

JC: Yeah. We spent our honeymoon down the bay.

NS: Did she go out with you when you were working, though?

JC: Yeah. She used to come down the bay with me there. She used to shoot once in a while. In fact, she shot too good; I wouldn't take her anymore. I said, "This is not right. This is not the way it's supposed to be." [laughter] But no, she loved the bay.

NS: She must have been upset with you when you told her [inaudible].

JC: Yes. Then we had our little children about the size of these little critters running around. But it was nice. She would take the bay just for about four days [inaudible] if it was hot and the mosquitoes and gnats are out, she said, "Take me back to the mainland."

NS: Did any of your brothers take their wives there?

JC: I think George took Maria, but not as much. Like I say, I would be away for three days. Johnny [inaudible] was a clam buyer from Oceanside. He was the best clam buyer, the most honest. We would sell to him, and then we would sell to Campbell Soup.

NS: Where is Campbell's?

JC: Campbell's Soup Company.

NS: Yes. Where were they?

JC: They were in Jersey.

NS: You would go all the way down in Jersey?

JC: They'd come up to our house. Yeah.

NS: Really?

JC: Well, it's funny. I'll give you a for instance. They're talking about red tides and brown tides.

NS: The brown algae.

JC: Right. Well, years ago, every spring after the ice went out, say, March, chowder clams – the skirt and the clam – would turn an aqua-green color. Most beautiful green you ever seen. There was something in the water. It wasn't harmful because we had the state come down and test them. But all of a sudden, you couldn't sell any clams into the fish market. So, then what we would do when the clams turned green for three weeks, they would strictly go for chowder clams, and we'd catch a couple of hundred bushels a week. Then, the Campbell's Soup Company truck would come down and buy the clams. Of course, when they [inaudible] –

NS: How did they find out? Was it just through the grapevine?

JC: Well, this is before they used skimmer clams. So, we knew certain times of the year. But we had one guy [inaudible] talk about him. This guy used to buy small clams, the little necks stuff. He had a clam bar. When the clams were green, he would put green lights on in the bar room so that you couldn't tell the color green of clams. [laughter] There's always some gimmick. It wasn't harmful, but this was before they had red tides and anything else. But it was something they were doing in the water, and the state was puzzled by it. It wasn't toxic or anything else. It's funny. I do remember the time my dad caught a pilot whale. It was just born. It was about twelve, thirteen feet long, snow white, and it was alive. He was downhill at Jones Inlet setting

crab pots.

NS: How did he catch a whale? [laughter]

JC: Well, it was about this big around. He'd seen this thing breaking out in the channel. He'd see this tail go up. "What the hell is this?" So, he goes out there, and he goes alongside. The whale comes up, and it's laying there. So, as he's going along, the whale goes away. So, the old man goes around the outside, and he keeps going that way, and he forces this whale into shoal water. He got into shoal water, knee-deep water, and Pop seen another guy – [inaudible] from Merrick. Waved him over, and then together, they both rolled this baby whale into the Garvey. It was about 350 pounds. So, he got in the Garvey, and he brings it home to Massapequa.

NS: That is some Garvey, I will tell you. [laughter]

JC: It was a sixteen-foot Garvey, a little Garvey. They roll it because they're very low sides. We had them built low for clamming.

NS: Yeah, I'm surprised it didn't sink.

JC: So, he had him in there, and he gets to the town of Massapequa, the creek. He puts a rope around his tail, keeps it alive, and calls up the Coney Island Aquarium and tells them what he had. Well, I come in. I'm going to be bay. I don't know anything else was going on. I come down the bay, and I slow the boat down and go to the dock. I get up on the bow and the bowline of the boat – I'm just going to the [inaudible], and I look down, and I see this big, long, grayish thing. "What the hell is this?" I didn't know about this whale being there. "Holy cow. What the hell we got here?" I didn't see the rope on his tail. So, I said to myself, "Good, God." I said, "[inaudible] it's a whale. What's it doing here?" So, meanwhile, Dad was out somewhere. So, I looked around, and then I finally see the rope on a tail to the post. "Pop must have caught this down the bay." Thought it had died. It was born young, but it had a disease. That's why it came into the day. It never would have come in. They called it a pilot whale [inaudible] what happened to it? But Pop said he laughed because he said, "For two hours, it was alive." This was in the summer, and whenever a boat would come by, [inaudible] people would almost – "What's his story now?" They'd stop, and they'd look. It was funny, though. Pop's the only one I know who caught a whale with his hands. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] That is incredible.

JC: The thing years ago was wild dogs down the beach – down the causeway, all down towards the rock pile and Meadowbrook Bridge. People would have dogs out for the summer, especially when they had their summer houses, and let the dogs go. The dogs would turn wild. Well, they would kill so many [inaudible] ducks. They were the (mangiest?) things. I've shot them, and I'll tell you, they did a lot of destruction. In fact, one warden (Bill Gunderson?) went down to the dumps. I told him, "There's four or five living down there at the dumps in Jones Beach [inaudible] sand dunes." He went down there, and Jesus, he sees three of them. They don't [inaudible] they're going to try to attack him. He shot all three. He said, "I'll tell you, I was scared. If they bit me, I don't know what the hell they had." [inaudible] He couldn't get over that.

He was quite shaken.

Q: There are a lot of them out here on Rocky Point. I remember forty years ago, they had a hunt because there were so many packs of dogs. So, periodically in communities, they would organize a hunt to wipe out these dogs that the summer people would let go.

JC: Out here, you have a lot of foxes, but they get mangy. But the old game warden (Charlie Weinberger) – he was a person I remembered. (Charles Weinberger?) was warden until about 1953. Then he died of a heart attack in Seaford [inaudible]. He was a good old warden. Then one of the [inaudible] Ralph [inaudible] was a bay warden for Hampstead. The old man and him never got along at all. Wouldn't talk to each other. Then, of course, (Gunderson?) came along in the '50s. Bill was a nice guy. We know him. He had heard about us, and he was awfully leery of us. He heard bad stories. He didn't want to get too close to us. Then, he finally met us one day.

NS: What kinds of stories? Did you ever hear of any of them?

JC: What's that?

NS: What stories he might have heard about you?

JC: Oh, how pirates – dredging clams out at night and ramming other boats. You'd hear all this nonsense. [laughter]

NS: Oh, God. [laughter]

JC: Of course, we wouldn't do any of that, [laughter] but we got to know him.

NS: Did you ever build your own boat?

JC: Yes.

NS: What kinds of boats did you build?

JC: Dad's Garvey. It was a thirty-two-foot Garvey they'd built at [inaudible] –

NS: I've got a picture of that.

JC: – 1947.

NS: Right. [inaudible] in the exhibit, we got a picture of that. In fact, it's you and your father in the Garvey.

JC: We build sixteen-foot, eighteen-foot Garveys – the outboards and stuff.

NS: How would you build them? I know it has changed a lot.

JC: Well, the only place you would get wood, we used to go to Charlie Harned in Commack. He has the only sawmill left in Long Island. He still has it. We even buy white oak. He would get some local wood.

NS: So, you would buy the wood.

JC: He would take us there to his big sawmill. He's a real Long Island Yankee. He may talk to you, and he may not talk to you. But you knew him. You just walked in with a mass of clams or eels. He just sat there and just didn't say anything. After about twenty minutes, he'd get out and see you. He'd talk to you, "Well, what do you need?" "We need some white oak."

NS: They would trade?

JC: No. But we'd always bring a mass of clams. Then he'd say, "Well, all right, you got out to the woodpile. You pick out what you want for twenty-five dollars." You'd pick out enough wood to build two boats. [inaudible] and stuff out of oak. [inaudible] heavy oak. Of course, the plywood you bought probably for [inaudible] that time, I guess.

NS: You were using marine plywood?

JC: Yes, marine plywood.

NS: Would you fiberglass your boats, or no?

JC: Only on the edges because, at that time, fiberglass never went on too good. Fiberglass was only in its early stages. They didn't have the right resin and stuff. After, no matter how good you put it on, it would somehow start to loosen up. If you went through ice, which we [inaudible] on the boats for, it would start peeling it off. Not like they are now. They're really fantastic as far as knowledge on fiberglass and so forth. In 1960, Dad started to get the boats from Herb Jester in Chincoteague.

NS: Down in Virginia.

JC: The Chincoteague Garveys. I had a twenty-two-footer. My brother had a twenty-two-footer. They all looked good. You can hold fifteen, twenty bushels of clams and crabs in it, which we would have. Then we'd go soft-clamming with them, and we'd catch twenty, twenty-five bushels of clams with that. They were good boats.

NS: Did you ever build your own gunning boats?

JC: Dad did. I didn't. I had a gunning scooter. It was called a Pumpkinseed. It was built in 1905. I bought it from George [inaudible. I had until – well, let's see. The last bay house burned down about 1973.

NS: Yeah, '72.

JC: I had the boat down there. I used to gunner all winter. I used a gunner boat down there. This boat had runners on it for ice.

NS: Yeah. So, you would put the sail up?

JC: Yes. So, what I would do is during the winter, it would be painted brown. Then, when the ice come, I'd give it a coat of white, and we'd gun on the ice. It had runners on it you could shove across with ice hook. I loved ice gunning. It would be quiet.

NS: Did you put a sail up? Is that how you did that?

JC: No. I didn't have to. Just we would tow it down as far as you would go. Make sure your boat was anchored properly, figuring on the wind and the tide because ice would jam you in. Then what we'd do is I'd put a gunner boat across the ice to an air hole, and you'd lay there. There'd be these big hair seals laying there with you. Oh, beautiful seals. They'd come up all gray with black spots. They'd lay in the sun with their flippers crossed like this. So, you shot one, and geez, they'd all go up like that, and they dive because they didn't know you were there; you'd be all camouflaged. But I liked ice gunning because it was quiet. It was like you thought you was in Antarctica. You were only three miles –

NS: So quiet out.

JC: – across the bay from the mainland. But nobody was down. You didn't hear anything.

NS: No cars anywhere.

JC: No cars. I tell you, it was like a different world. So, I had that gunning boat. This one year, 1972 or ‘73, I left it down there. I said to myself, "I should bring her home this weekend." I said, "No. I'm going out to sea. I'll come back next week. I'll bring it home." Well, I come back from sea, and my wife picks me up at the train station. She said, "Let's go for lunch." “Okay.” She said, "How about a drink?" I said, "What's going on here?" "I've got some bad news for you." I said, "Well, what the hell happened?" She said, "The bay house burned down." In the house, we had all of Dad's carvings in there over the years. We had food and we had an outboard motor and gasoline. I said, "I can take that as long as I get down and get my gunning boat." She said, "I got more bad news: your gunning boat burned up." I said, "Oh, Christ." So, I went down, and the only thing I could find was just the bottom part of the boat. It was 1905. I was very proud of it because they're one of the last scooters left. So, I had this one guy, Barry Canady Kanavy, in Seaford; he was going to rebuild it for me. I was looking at five or six hundred dollars to redo it. By that time, that was a lot of money.

NS: It still is.

JC: I said, "To hell with it." But I never forgot that. I think that the only tragedy that really hurt me more than anything else is losing that boat.

Q: How did they burn up? What set them off?

NS: Vandals?

JC: Vandals, yes. It was vandals. I think what they did – they went down. They stripped the house. Because we used to leave the house unlocked. We had six bunks. We had plenty of food, all blankets, everything there. We had shotgun shells. It was always left unlocked. We had a sign in there: "You're welcome to use the house. If you're broke down, or if you're stuck, you can use the house. Please don't destroy anything." What happens in the wintertime when the bay would freeze up, you'd have kids walk across from the mainland across the bay. They'd go into the house, they'd smash windows, throw eggs around and crap in the bed, and just do destructive things. You'd get so goddamn mad because you never had this. All of a sudden, in the early '70s, you start to have these kids that were bored to death. I caught two of them one day. It was summer. I go across the bay, and I see these couple of kids around the house, and I see them leave. I go down by the house. [inaudible] dark. I can see the windows are all shot out. Well, I got the boat, and I went like hell. I chased them through every goddamn creek. When I got up to them, boy, they were scared. I said to them, "If you ever come down this bay to this house, they'll never find you or your boat." I said, "I'll put you [inaudible]. Don't ever bother my house." I said, "We don't bother you. Don't you bother us." They stayed away.

Q: I guess so. [laughter]

JC: I tell you, it was very close to somebody getting hurt bad because I just went – the trouble with my brother and I and my father – we've always had tempers. We just – bingo. The last time I was chased by the police, I was soft-clamming in another part of the town, which I shouldn't have been – North Amityville. They started to chase me. I had a load of clams, about twenty bushels. Of course, I was loaded down. They come up with a Boston Whaler. Oh, man. They tried to tell me to slow down, and I ran into a sandbar, and they ran aground, and I kept going. I knew the bay. Their motor kicked up, and I thought, "I got rid of them now. They're high and dry." But they pushed the boat off, and they kept after me. They tried to get in front of me. They tried to make me go in a circle. I just seen red. So, I went at them, and I hit them broadside. Knocked one guy ass over head, broke the railings. I said, "Oh, Jesus, I just made the *Daily News*." They had a helicopter come down from Nassau County. They chased me eight miles. It was on the third page of the *Daily News* about chasing me through the bay. So, he finally got me, and they handcuffed me. Oh, man, what a mess.

Q: What did you tell them? You did not know they were Coast Guards? [laughter]

JC: So, anyhow, the one cop said to me – the old guy was evil. He wanted to get me, and I knew him. But if I got him alone, I'd have pounded his head in. So, the young cop was all right. He said to me, "Jack, I thought I knew this bay." He said, "You showed me more sandbars than I ever knew existed." Because I ran them aground, and I was throwing bags overboard trying to get in their wheel. I just got to a point – I said, "Well, if I don't stop them, they're going to get me." So, I hit them. So, I [inaudible] my report to the Coast Guard. So, being on a tug, you learn some formalities. So, I put it on there, "I was the burden vessel, being overtaken by a light vessel. They failed to signal properly, and a collision occurred." [laughter]

Q: Did they accept that?

JC: [inaudible] I [inaudible] since. That was – oh God – ’76, ’75.

Q: Did they fine you for that?

JC: Well, that was a tricky thing. Because I had a lawyer who is now a Supreme Court justice, so I won't mention his name, but he was pretty good. He said, "Don't worry about this." So, we postponed it about ten times. I was out to sea. I was down the coast of Africa [inaudible]. They had all kinds of things going back and forth. So, by the tenth time, the cops didn't show, and I showed up. So, it was a fifty fine.

NS: Great.

JC: So, the judge says, “How does fifty dollars sound? " I said, "That sounds pretty decent, Your Honor." [laughter] But oh my god, you couldn't believe the helicopters that came. I said, "My God." Pop said, "I can't believe this." He was down at the bay, and he said, "Hey, they're not taking you in." He said, "I'll call the Nassau County cops." He says, "I don't want this other guy to take you in. He's likely to drown you because you've got him all buzzed up." Oh, man, I tell you. But they left me alone. [laughter] Good thing I didn't drive a car. Once in a while, things just do get out of hand. But you have respect for the wardens. I remember years ago, in the ‘50s (Art Chris?), he was a head warden, and he was from Quogue. Pop said he was the best warden in this country. He was an outlaw the state could never catch. He shot more deer. He could do anything outlaw. The state could never catch him, so they made him a warden. Dad said to Art, he said, "Art, if you come in our part of the bay, just give me a call." He said, "I'll come down and plead guilty to anything because I know damn well you're going to catch me." A couple of times, we got caught. They grabbed [inaudible]. They wouldn't confiscate the clams. They talked to my grandfather. Grandfather would say to them, "Now, listen, Bill, if you want a mess of clams to eat, fine. I'll give you a bushel of clams to eat. But God damn it, those clams have to pay for our fine." The fine was fifty-two dollars for dredging clams. Bill says, "Okay." He'd take a mess of clamps to eat [and] give the old man a ticket. We went down. They’d go to court in Freeport, then. They go up to the Conservation Department of Freeport [inaudible], pay the fifty-two dollars, and go to work the next day. But nothing was ever done evilly. Now, the last part of the years down the bay, these wardens come up to you; they got a shotgun on you.

Q: Well, they are not local, right?

NS: They’re state people.

JC: Well, they are local, but they have an attitude. I guess, the way the bay is – they put cuffs on you. Oh my God, almighty, it's a different way. Before the gentlemen's agreement – you got caught? Okay, fine. "We caught you." "All right." But now, it's like, God, they confiscate your boat, they put handcuffs on you, you have to have a wire, and [laughter] it's no more fun – changed. [Recording paused.] They looked like shiny black stones. That's how much they were handled, these lima beans. Well, I remember grandfather says, "Where's the potatoes?"

"Somebody forgot the damn potatoes." "Okay. Well, we got to eat." They get all these lima beans that have been used over the years for [inaudible] were shiny black-looking stones. They boiled it twice, skimmed it off, and put a piece of salt pork. They couldn't play cards that night. [laughter] [inaudible] Oh, I tell you. Years ago, my grandfather used to make what they called lickdob. Lickob was an old Freeport name for it. It was salt pork in a cast iron frying pan. You [inaudible] your salt pork. [inaudible] to dry it out, your salt pork. You dry it out, and then you take it and mix it with flour. After it made like a rue, you'd pour it into it. It's like a heavy, gassy gravy. You'd put it on bread. That was called lickdob. He's always said that. That was a bayman's food.

NS: I've heard the phrase before.

JC: Yes. That's an old phrase.

NS: Sounds like your family has a lot of interesting recipes.

JC: Yeah.

Q: Has anybody ever collected them or written them down?

JC: No.

NS: Has anybody written them down in your family?

JC: No. George is the only one that has followed through. We had one uncle that has started to trace the family tree from 1635. George has told you all about the family tree?

NS: Yes.

JC: From the *Mayflower* right on through. It's been well documented, but he was a dentist. As Pop says, "Three hundred years, only one Combs made out pretty good." [laughter] He [inaudible]. That was him because he had time and he had money. He went over to England and followed all the way back, I think, to 1066 through the graveyards. But Georgie has all this stuff. He had files of cards on each person and what they did for a living. Whether they were a shoemaker, a bayman, or whatever. But Georgie has a lot of information. I just hear stuff from [inaudible]

NS: What are the interesting things? Because I have been doing this for about a year now. Your family is the only one that really has documented all the history. Why is that? Why do you think?

JC: I don't know.

NS: Is there something everyone is looking for? [laughter]

JC: No. I think it's a matter of pride. Well, it's hard to say. You go back just maybe to great-

grandfather. Then, after that, there wasn't anymore. One of the things was we were loyal to the crown, and we had a lot of property in Freeport. We were loyal to the crown because you have to remember the early Long Islanders were doing very good. Now, the Combs had grist mills in Setauket in 1850. [Benjamin Franklin] Thompson's *History on Long Island* is 1845. I have one of the copies, and it lists – Combs is there as a gristmill – grain mill in Setauket on one of the creeks. The Combs have always had boatyards. They seem to be – they got along good. But I just don't know. Grandpop, we never had many of his decoys. We heard his stories and stuff, and he had pictures. Of course, he used to tell us a lot of stories. But before that, it was just, well, you did your thing, and you made your living and so forth. Not that they were ignorant or they couldn't learn to write, but I don't think any bayman, really – it was just passed down hand-to-mouth. Like I was saying, in the '60s, is when George and Dad rather realized, especially with the Verity, the way the Seaford Veritys, the Carmens – the way things were going when they'd go, that's it. It spurred them on. But I think a lot has been lost. We had people here – we run a bed and breakfast here also.

Q: Over here?

JC: Yeah. We had people here from the city, and they were asking me about the family. So, I told them, "Yeah, we've been here since 1640 or whatever." They said, "Do you have any documentation? Any paper?" I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "Maybe years ago, they kept stuff, and maybe there was a file."

NS: Tell them papers aren't that important. [laughter]

JC: Yes. But we just don't know. It's like antiques. All I remember was my grandfather having everything from China. They had priceless things that nowadays you say, "My God," because the stuff came over the 1860s when nobody knew what antiques were. God knows what there was. Those three [inaudible] they're over a hundred and fifteen years old. 1950, Dad's aunt – her name was Aunt (Frieda?); she was ninety-some-odd years old, and she gave it to me. She said it was her father's. That's how far back it goes. There's two English snipe. There's a Woodcock [inaudible]. It's hard to try [inaudible] the stories. [Recording paused.] First, we went to St. Michaels and stayed overnight. Went to the Maritime Museum of St. Michael's. They have a lot of decoys there. We lived out here in '42 or '43 when Dad was in the Coast Guard. [inaudible]

NS: So, you left Freeport in '42?

JC: Right. Well, for a period of time during the war. George was born out here in Freeport. Dad was in the Coast Guard, submarine detection on sailboats [inaudible]. They were here '42, '43. We moved back to Freeport because he was transferred to Rockaway. Then they phased him out during the war, towards the end. Then we stayed in Freeport until '49. Then, Dad had a house built on a canal in Massapequa in 1949. 1950 is when the bay houses down in Swift Creek [inaudible]. Because we had that, and we had a houseboat in Goose Creek, east of the Wantagh State Parkway Bridge. In 1950, Harry came [inaudible] a houseboat and a [inaudible] down in Freeport.

NS: So, Freddie (Gardiner?) gave the house.

JC: Yes. Freddie (Gardiner's?). That was built in 1930. That was built mainly for rum-running. That was a stopover place. They'd come in there. Gee, I got to think. I just got a picture from George.

[Recording paused.]

NS: Oh, yeah. In fact, this is one of the pictures we're going to use in the exhibit. It is on Meadow Island.

JC: Right. This one is [inaudible] Point off the Merrick Bay.

NS: Right. That is the other one he lent me.

JC: Well, when I went down to George, my dad's – I showed him it. I picked his brain. In the back, this was the first load of rum to come into Long Island [inaudible] place.

NS: Was it Charlie Johnson's hotel?

JC: Yes.

NS: I didn't know that. [laughter] Do you know who was carrying it?

JC: Yes. His name was (Rowan Symon?). He was from Nassau Islands. Pop says – he remembered when he was a kid how they worked this thing. They had a sailboat – (Rowan Symon?) – and he's coming up the coast. He got off Jones Inlet and called the Coast Guard, or he wrote to him – however, they did. He notified the Coast Guard that his boat was leaking, he's out of supplies, and so forth. So, what they did was they allowed him to come to Charlie Johnson's hotel. They put two Coast Guard men on there on a boat to watch it. Pop says he remembered that (Rowan?) got the two Coast Guard men drunk. They unloaded a load of whiskey, put it into the hotel, and they'd put enough ballast into the sailboat so the same depth. They'd cover the hatches up and canvass everything else. So, there was no difference in the depth of the boat.

NS: [inaudible] the Coast Guard was guarding this. [laughter]

JC: [laughter] Yes. Well, what it was, all the Coast Guard men were from down south, the Outer Banks, Virginia. They were all baymen years ago that used to [inaudible] –

Q: Old pirates. [laughter]

JC: They were all pirates and [inaudible]. So, it didn't take him long to make friends. But Dad said that was the first load of rum. It was about 1927 or '29. I said, "Gee, that's really great." Because he was quite happy.

NS: So, you grew up out here in Greenport?

JC: Yes. I went to school out here for two years. I went to school in Freeport. Archer Street. I went to school there.

NS: How old were you when you moved down here?

JC: I was seven or eight.

NS: How old are you now?

JC: Fifty-two, going on fifty-three. I'm eight years older than George. We love it out here. The reason we moved out – we moved out here in 1976. It never changed in all those years. Post office changed, and the farms had kind of changed. Everything's the same, but in the last five years, it has escalated. They found the lost (North Fork?).

NS: Mostly city people coming out here?

JC: Yeah. Well, we have a lot of people – one that we know – I can't think of her name – she writes for *All My Children* or one of those soap operas. She comes out and stays here for four days. Takes the bus in for three days. In fact, one time, she had forgotten a script. She called up with my son and my young daughter. She offered them a hundred dollars. They had to go to her house, get the script, drive them all the way in in time for the TV show. [laughter]

NS: She should have paid them more. [laughter]

JC: Well, what was funny, though, [was] the kids all knew six weeks ahead what was going on. So, everybody [inaudible] … [Recording paused.] We lived there – oh, gosh. Well, let's see now. Grandpop and my father used to come out here in the ’30s and sell shrimp.

NS: Your grandfather's [inaudible] was?

JC: *Jack Combs*. He had a house on, I think, South Side Avenue just below Archer Street. He had that house built. They'd come out in the summer. Well, the week [inaudible] come out here May the 5th. All the party boats from Freeport and New Jersey would come out here. They would come out and bring shrimp out, catch shrimp here, and also catch shrimp in Freeport and truck it out in the morning – wee hours of the morning. Then they stayed here until probably about middle of June. In the middle of June, they'd go back to Freeport, and they'd catch killies and bait for fluke fish [inaudible]. The same party boatmen would come out to Freeport, stay here for the spring fishing, then go back there to Freeport. They did a lot of traveling years ago.

NS: So, did they have a house here where they would stay?

JC: A bay house. It was a shack down in New Suffolk. All they were just a little bit of shingle houses. They were all scallop-shucking houses, and the rest were all big houses. They had a couple of bunks in it, a table, chair, and kerosene light. That's what they used.

NS: Is it still there?

JC: No, they're all gone. Majority of stuff has gone. I remember when I was a kid, that house that we had stayed at – what they called shacks. It was so close to the water. I know with all the hurricanes we've had over the years, it had to disappear. I've gone down there to look. When Dad would come out, we would go for rides from New Suffolk, and he'd show me this creek and what used to be – what rum boat was there and so forth. He had a lot of information.

NS: How old were you when you first started going out with your dad?

JC: Oh, five, six.

NS: Wow.

JC: Freeport's Swift Creek, though – I was a kid. Well, let's see. I was probably about ten or eleven when we started. I remember the one time – and we'd go out. We had one boat. Well, Grandpop and I would stay on the bay all the time because, being married, he went home the first part of the summer. But then later on, everybody moved out to Swift Creek, say, from June on. We'd stay there, and you'd only go ashore for a haircut once a month. Once a week, you'd want to get ice and groceries. But you lived off the bay. You had flour. You had salt pork and potatoes. Never forgot potatoes. You can live off the bay, clams, eels, fish. Pretty well survived down there. I hated to come back to school. I'd come back about three days before school, get a haircut, and try to find a pair of shoes that would fit my feet, which were about as wide as a flounder from being barefoot all summer. I had a hell of a time getting a pair of shoes. [laughter] Then I'd be ready for school. But yes, Swift Creek was nice.

NS: Did you get along with your grandfather?

JC: Oh, yes. He was king, though, I tell you. I would say our family had control of the bay for three hundred years. Grandfather, then – before him, I can't remember him too clearly, but they ruled the bay. If they liked you, you were all right. But if you were an outsider, they'd talk to you nice but you knew [laughter] you're going to get a job somewhere else. But Grandpa was very fair. He was well-liked. Years ago, I know in Freeport, when a lot of the fisherman came over from the other side, off Italy, a couple of different places in the Mediterranean –

NS: Yeah, the [inaudible]. Yeah, the [inaudible].

JC: – they'd first come out –

[Telephone rings. Recording paused.]

NS: What were some of the more important things that your grandfather taught you?

JC: Well, the only thing I know is what my grandfather has told me. I don't know if you've ever heard any of his stuff.

NS: No.

JC: When grandfather was a rumrunner, he was one of the most honest men around. He was. Because he said, "You never went against those men." He said they were dangerous. They used to kid about him years ago in Freeport. He was down one day digging for clams, and he had six one-thousand-dollar bills in his shirt pocket. They said, "Here he is." That kind of money back in the '20s, and he's going down and digging a mess of clams. But as I was saying before, when a fisherman from Mediterranean come over, Jack [inaudible]. He knew them, and they didn't know anything. He loaned them money to get started years ago. He was that kind of a person. If you're a fisherman, you were part of the trade, your livelihood. Of course, years ago, it wasn't as crowded. So, you accepted people within reason. But Grandfather had a sense of humor. The one thing I never forgot, when we had the bait station, once a year, the summertime, the nuns from the Holy Redeemer Church used to go out on one of the boats fishing for free. [inaudible[had a boat called the *Gladys V II*, a party boat out of the Freeport Boatmen's Association. He was our uncle. He used to take the nuns out fishing. So, they'd come down to our house down the bay, and Grandpop would give them the bait for nothing, killies and spearing, and he wouldn't charge them. So, I remember this one time distinctly because I was standing there. The Mother Superior said to Grandpop, "Captain Jack, is this a safe boat?" He took off his hat, he held it over his chest, [and] he said, "Ladies, this is the safest boat in the world. The captain is too old; the mate's too young." They couldn't get over that. They wrote him a letter. But he would always have these little things going on, always. Summertime, we would have two or three college boys come down and work all summer. He used to say to them, "Boys, working with me for three months is equal to four years in college." Because he would show them this and that and kid around with them. One of his favorite things was – well, you'd get up about three o'clock in the morning or early in the morning and go shrimping or catch bait. He'd make coffee. He never changed the coffee grounds all week. He'd keep adding more to the pot until the end of the week. When the pot was full, you dumped it out. At three in the morning, it was hairy. Well, his thing was he'd take one of the new boys that'd come down from upstate or whatever, wanting to work a summer job. He'd take them out, and they'd go off to a sandbar, and he [inaudible] along with the oar. When he'd got past a sandbar, you'd still make the same depth with the oar. Meanwhile, you're off in twenty feet of water. Suddenly, he'd say to the guys, "Okay, Bub, go ahead over." The guy would jump over at three in the morning and think they're going to be knee-deep in water. Only thing you'd see would be the hat come out. [laughter] He'd say to them, "Can't find the bottom, huh, Bub?" [laughter] But that's what he always would pull all the time.

NS: Did he ever pull any tricks like that on you?

JC: Yes. He used to do that.

NS: Do you remember it?

JC: Oh, God, no. He was a well-liked person. He was a character. He was a guide, and he's been all over the Eastern Seaboard and out Middle West – [inaudible] as a guide and so forth.

NS: How long was the bait station there for?

JC: I would say probably 1940 to 1951. A hurricane took it away. I remember the last three or four years because I was older and I was into it. Before, I used to roam the meadows, and I remember during war, you see at night the submarines would torpedo the ships. You'd see a flash and a glow in the sky way offshore. Most of the time, you wouldn't hear anything. You may hear a low rumble. About two days later, all along the banks would be all this heavy tar from the oil, and you'd see a light gray Navy lifejacket. You'd see parts of this and that. I remember, as a kid, seeing all that stuff come into the bay. Let's see now. [inaudible] houses were standing. They went down, I think, in the middle of '50s. They were beautiful, tall, big, white houses. They were set back behind the bluffs, and that was nice. It was beautiful. It was very pristine.

NS: What did you do when the station was destroyed?

JC: Well, after we lost the bay houses, it was getting near the end of an era. Fishing was changing then. What happened was the business was starting to slow down [and] the fish weren't biting as good in Freeport bays. They were biting more towards the East Bay. So, when our houseboat went, we built a house down there.

NS: This is the house in Amityville?

JC: No. This was in Massapequa, off Seaford [inaudible].

NS: The one on the canal.

JC: Right. Yeah, but the bay house, we had built another bay house down at the bay.

[Recording paused.]

NS: You built the house on the canal. So, you were working off of that area in South Bay?

JC: Yeah.

NS: You were how old when that happened?

JC: About fifteen, sixteen, I guess. When we built the bay house, where my grandfather built it, right on the town line of the town of Hempstead and town of Oyster Bay.

NS: Town of Oyster Bay, and neither one acknowledges it. [laughter]

JC: Whenever they'd come down for the rent, we'd say we're in Oyster Bay. Then, when the Oyster Bay men would come down for the rent, we'd tell them we were in the town of Hempstead.

NS: It is still that way – (Freddie Gardiner's?) house.

JC: But now that is the town of Hempstead because when they put the new sewer pipe in, they re-surveyed it, and it gained a hundred yards to the east. But they've been very lax about us having our place there because they're very tight on housing. But since that's been an old house – and we leave it unlocked all the time.

NS: So, when you were growing up, you would go out killi-ing. What other kinds of things would you do?

JC: Well, let's see now. Well, the first full moon in June, you'd go and pick up all your horseshoe crabs. We called them horse feet. We would store 3,500, four thousand. We had (gloves?) for that.

NS: You would get them at the full moon?

JC: The first full moon in June, usually around the 20th, 21st, that was the thing. I used to pick them up in Freeport. But then, as more of the guys at Freeport started looking, we used to go East because there were less baymen than in the East. Then, well, weakfish came in about May. Then, the fluke season started.

NS: Did you go jacking for them?

JC: Yes. I used to go jacking and stuff. In the summertime, once in a while, being so close to the inlet, we'd have a tremendous school of bonito come in the bay.

NS: Oh, really.

JC: They would be like rockets. They'd go past our dock, and you see the water crash. I always said if I ever hooked one, I'd probably pull me over because they were going so fast past you – we would just try to snag one. But they'd only go in the bay and they turned around, and they go out. But they would follow the bait in [inaudible].

NS: You would just drop a string off of the hook, and you would fish that way?

JC: Yeah.

NS: Was that hard to learn? I have never done that.

JC: No. That was easy. I remember 1948 – either '48 or '49; I think it was the first television crew camera. They come down to bay. They used our dock because that was the year Guy Lombardo was testing out his new racing boat, one of the Tempos. They wanted him to go from Fundy Bridge down to Meadowbrook Bridge and around. I remember we were on a dock then. These couple of boats come up with all these people on. We didn't know what television was. We see the cameras and stuff. It couldn't have been live; it had to be like movies for the TV. It wasn't a live thing. But 1940, I think it was. [inaudible] Guy Lombardo. He's zipping down there and zipping up. I'd never seen one of those boats go like that. I knew Joe Van Blerck from Freeport had racing boats. Him and Guy Lombardo used to race together. I wasn't experienced

to hear those things going. I said, "Oh my god." That was something new. [laughter]

NS: When you would go killi-ing and eeling, did you make your own traps?

JC: Yeah. We made everything. We made our own traps.

NS: Who taught you primarily?

JC: Well, it was handed down through the family. Well, I remember Grandpop, mostly.

NS: Really working with you?

JC: Yes. Because, like I say, that was at the age where I lived with him all the time down at the bay. Of course, when we went back to school, I'd live with Mom and Dad. But in the summertime, Grandpop loved the bay. He lived about a year round. In fact, a lot of times early in the spring, we'd go down when it's really cold because he just loved to get down to the bay. We would shoot a few snipes. Even though it was illegal, he just liked to have a few snipes to eat. It was a thing that he did, and it was a tradition, and I followed through with it. Years ago, he used to trap a few ducks and stuff. Dad and him used to sell a few birds and so forth. But Grandpop just knew the bay. Even though I was young, I knew when he goes, there's nothing that's going to be like it. When I was a kid, when I lived on the bay, after 1950, I would stay down on the bay myself for a week or two at a time and clam and store up the clams. Come in the dock about once a week.

NS: You would tread for clams?

JC: Tread for them. We used to dredge for them.

NS: In the bay?

JC: Oh, yes. It was illegal, but we [inaudible] dredge for them. I used to keep all the records of the bay. When the first [inaudible] come through, when the first yellowlegs, the first osprey. I used to write on the wall the date, how many, what time, what was the weather. I had the walls all written with this stuff. It was a whole diary of it.

NS: Is this at the bay house that you had all those things?

JC: Yes. When the house went, all that stuff went. I remember Dad, and I used to trap mink down the bay. We'd go down to the summer houses, and you had a lot of mink years ago. They lived in these summer houses. When people would roll up the mattress, the mink would come up through the rain drains into the house. They would go through a hole two inches in diameter. They would go in and live between the mattresses or in the drawers of things. You'd only catch mink the two weeks of Christmas. That was a prime time. Before, their pelts weren't prime, and after, they started to shed. You had a very short season on Long Island. But the slower mink, their hair was always coarse. It wasn't fine-textured, like fresh water, because of the salty air and the sun, and so forth. The environment on a mink – the hair was quite [inaudible]. The most we

ever got was twenty-four dollars for a large mink, where the same-sized mink being upstate probably double or triple. But that was a thing. I know my dad and them used to do that every Christmas. They would catch enough mink, and that would pay for the coal – one load of coal for the house. Everything was seasonal. You'd dredge for crabs and clams in the winter. By March or so –

NS: Were these blue claws that you were getting [inaudible]

JC: Yeah. They bury in the mud.

NS: Would you go for green crabs?

JC: Green crabs, we did start that around '48, '49. We had a lot of green crabs, but it wasn't much call for it in the Freeport area. But Sheepshead Bay party boats wanted crabs. They couldn't get any amount. So, we started selling to them. Then we built [inaudible] pots, a couple hundred pots, and then we started selling to them out in Greenpoint and Southold – Port of Egypt fishing station. Well, they started in 1950. They came to us, and we sold them shrimp. They used to come in; they used to buy four or five hundred quarts of shrimp in trays.

NS: Where would you get shrimp?

JC: Down there. Grass shrimp down the bay.

NS: Oh, really?

JC: Oh, yeah. So, then you'd shrimp in the spring and the summer.

NS: How would you catch the shrimp?

JC: We towed the net. There was a net on a galvanized pipe frame. The frame was about six feet long, one foot high with runners, and it had a long bag. But then, in the mouth of the net, you had heavier netting.

NS: Is it something you would make?

JC: Yes, everything was made. [Recording paused.] – the nets. Grass shrimp was in the creeks. You went in the creeks underneath the banks with a push net. It was a net that had two wooden bars and it had a net with webbing in between. You'd go along and you'd hit beneath the bank with one handle, and it kicked the shrimp out. As you're going along, it would go into this bag. I have one inside the shop. I have to show you.

NS: Is this something that your grandfather did and he taught you?

JC: Yes. From what I can gather, I would say that Grandfather started the shrimping business. I would say he did because I never heard of it before.

NS: How come he started?

JC: Well, I guess he was always looking for ways to make a living. You couldn't clam all year because the price of clams went down. So, you always had to work the bay according to seasons.

NS: Yes, and what you could get the best money for.

JC: Right. Years ago, they went to Beach Haven in the '30s. They went down to New Jersey. They learned shrimping down there. I think they went down there, and they seen what could have been done. I think they started shrimping there, then they bought the equipment up here to Freeport, and they started that.

Q: Did the people eat these shrimps, or were they bait?

JC: No. They were small bait shrimp. Maybe a half inch to an inch and a half.

NS: What would they use it for?

JC: It was the chumming for weakfish.

NS: For weakfish.

JC: That was the main thing. They would catch a lot of flukes with it. It was a good, all-around bait because you had a quart can for seventy-five cents, and you had four hundred shrimp in a can. So, it was perfect bait.

NS: Do you still go shrimping?

JC: No. People don't use shrimp. The last time I caught shrimp, I caught three-fifty quarts in about four hours with one net and an outboard. That was going to New Jersey. That was about ten years ago. New Jersey had a blight, and they couldn't get any more shrimp. Somehow, they had some kind of a red tide. One of the baymen called up my brother. Georgie was busy catching killies and so forth. I come home from the boats, and he says to me, "Jack, can you go down the bay and catch some shrimp for this one order?" I said, "Sure." I went down, and that was the most shrimp that was ever caught in four hours.

NS: That is a lot of shrimp. [laughter]

JC: It was. It was right off the [inaudible] station in Jones Beach there, this little channel. The tide was low, so all this shrimp drew off the bars and laid on the edge. What it was was very shallow water.

NS: I have seen eels do that. They finally get real close to it.

JC: Yeah. If you went too deep, there was fluke down below and snappers.

NS: Wonderful. [laughter]

JC: So, the shrimp had to stay at this one little path. It was just like raindrops when they'd come up to the top of the water. That's the last time I ever caught shrimp. I think Dad had caught a few shrimps for a few people. We used to catch thousands of quarts a week. Oh, in 1955, it died out to nothing. Just you have an order. Somebody would say, "I want a hundred quarts of shrimp." Well, you would do it. But the bay changed as far as catching the bait. Like green crabs, we had hundreds and hundreds of green crabs. About the middle of the 1950s, my dad and I could see with the DDT the difference it made in the bay. All your peeler crabs would start to disappear. The green crabs disappeared. Your mink disappeared because one thing lived on another: it's a chain reaction. You could see the difference in the bay, very much so. It's never come back. Because all of a sudden, by the time they want to come back, well, then the bay got some other damn thing in it, who knows what. But we always said one of the biggest destructions of the bay was the Mosquito Control Commission. Because you took a flat island, a piece of marshland, and you'd have a hurricane, it would cover the island; the water would drain off. So, some bright idiot decided, well, if we dig a ditch every two hundred feet, we're going to have drainage. Well, that was fine and dandy. So, he'd dig a ditch. Then you'd have a hurricane come, and there'd be all this marsh grass, foxtail, [inaudible] floating. When the tide receded, the stuff would lay in the ditches. Then they would dam up these ditches. There'd be all these pockets of water. Well, then the mosquito larvae – when it started to rain a lot, the water turned from saltiness – turned brackish to almost fresh. Then, the mosquitoes thrived there. So, then the next idea was, well, let's go down and spray oil and DDT on top. So, they'd go down with these Indian fire pump strapped on their back, and they'd go down [and] they spray all these things. Then what happens is – you started to get some tide coming through these ditches. After a while, you had erosion. Now, some of these ditches are as wide as you can drive a car through. So, they actually cut the islands in half. It washed away a lot of the bay. Stupidity. But that spraying was very bad, and we [inaudible] very long-lasting effect.

Q: [inaudible] the ospreys. [inaudible]

NS: Yes. I saw some yesterday.

Q: The blue-claw crabs [inaudible] last couple of years.

JC: Crabs are a cycle. Now, we always caught them in the mud. That's when they were the fattest. In the wintertime, we would go, and you'd take a lot of newspaper, line a basket with newspaper, stack the crabs in. You'd have maybe a hundred and ten to a hundred and twenty crabs per bushel. You'd round it up, and you'd put the paper on top of that, and you put the cover on it. That was to keep a crab from freezing. If it was a real cold, rough day, Grandpop would say, "Put a couple of telephone books in the bottom of this basket to keep them warm." [laughter] So, instead of a bushel of crabs, you may have about half a bushel. Grandpop would say, "Well, they're getting cold, boys. Better put more paper in the bottom." [inaudible] paper. [laughter]

NS: Do you still do that?

JC: No. Well, I got out of – well, I got off the bay in 1968. I went to work for Moran Tugs.

NS: That is right, you mentioned. They're in the city.

JC: Right. Well, the headquarters was in the city, but we were coastal. We went from Maine all the way down to Louisiana and Sabine Pass, towing ships, coal barges, everything. Because I knew by 1960, I could see the bay is dimming. I had said to the guys working the bay – well, I was married, and I had six children them, and I said to them, "You can have all the clams you want in this bay." I said, "If the Board of Health condemns this bay, you're not going to make a living." Because by the '60s, you had hundreds of people on the bay. You had part-timers; everybody was out. The old-working [inaudible] – they'd come down after work. They had eel pots and clam. Years ago, when I was a kid, you had the [inaudible] from Seaford, you had the Veritys from Freeport and the Carmens. Everybody had their more or less the area they clammed. You never want in that man's part of the bay. You never set eel pots on that part of the bay. It was like an unwritten agreement, and everybody respected it. If you lost an eel pot or you found an eel pot, you'd put it up on the bank. Sooner or later, a guy will come down and say, "Oh, gee, there's my eel pot there." You'd tell him, "Hey, did you get your eel pot that I found?"

NS: Now, people steal them.

JC: Now, you can have it locked up, and they'll steal them out of your boat. So, I could see in the 1960s –

NS: Was there anything particularly that happened to you?

JC: No. We've had pots stolen and so forth. I remember one night, we just put out twenty-one brand new eel pots, brand spanking new, and the next morning we come up in the flats. The old man looks and says, "Jesus, I don't see any [inaudible]." I think we had five pots; the rest of them were stolen. They weren't even one night old. What happens is, when the guys go jacking at night, they come across a pot. Nobody's out at night. When you're jacking, you can hear a long ways off. If you don't hear any boats running or anything else, you look around – "Oh, hell, I'll grab that eel pot." So, somebody had a whole string of them. But it happens. It's just one of those things you say, okay, well, you lost money, but you just can't stand still. You have to build more pots and go at it a little bit stronger.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/6/2024