

Narrator: Michael 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: The oral history interview with Michael Combs, conducted by Nancy Solomon on June 9, 2015, offers a rich narrative of his life centered around the bay house in Baldwin, Long Island. Combs recounts his earliest memories of visiting the bay house at two weeks old and growing up immersed in activities such as crabbing, clamming, fishing, and boating, all taught by his father and grandfather. The bay house served as a weekend retreat where he and his family experienced the joys of nature and learned essential skills. Combs details the evolution of his involvement in commercial fishing and crabbing, describing the various traps and methods used over the years. He also discusses the maintenance and carpentry skills necessary for the upkeep of the bay house, highlighting the harsh weather conditions that necessitate constant repairs. The interview touches on the community aspect of the bay house, where family and friends would gather for activities and celebrations. Combs shares stories of childhood adventures, such as the "bay-athlon," and the communal efforts during storms and natural disasters, particularly Hurricane Sandy, which devastated the bay house and required significant rebuilding efforts. Throughout the conversation, Combs emphasizes the importance of respecting the environment and maintaining the traditions of the bay houses.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. Today is June 9, 2015, and I'm talking with Michael Combs of Baldwin about his family's bay house. What are your first memories of your bay house?

Michael Combs: Well, before my first memories, my parents – my mother and father – had told me they took me out on the water to the bay house. I was two weeks old, according to them, and then I basically – probably when I was like three and four years old, remember playing in the marshlands, sinking in the mud in the creeks, and I basically grew up there my whole life with my other two siblings and family friends. I was taught to crab, clam, fish, waterski, tubing by my father, my grandfather, George Carmen, also [with the] nickname of Mush Carmen. It was a great life. There's nothing better than being out on a boat in the water and a house to go to, like a summer home, just something on the weekends to go to and wake up, have the seagulls drop clamshells on the roof. Then, eventually have children of your own and teach them the traditions and the ways that we grew up with. I remember my kids clamming at the bay house. We'd give them tubes, and they'd just go out and clam and they'd sit there crabbing, and they'd catch snappers and basically fiddler crabs. They'd run after the little fiddler crabs. As I grew older in the bay, I started doing things commercially. I started blue claw crabbing, and I also started commercial clamming, and I made it into a pretty good living. Through the years, while we were younger, me and my siblings were taught by my father and my grandfather, basically that we were the future of the bay houses and we had to uphold them. We also were taught some carpentry, how to do the dock work, how to replace moldings. When we were young, we helped them. Most of the time we'd bend the nails because we weren't able to get the nails in straight. So they were always pulling it out. And some dock work. They would show us how to replace the chains, things – old tricks like instead of the chains and the PVC rollers digging into the telephone poles that held the floats, they would put PVC runners on the poles so they wouldn't wear out as quick. Just basic upkeep of the bay houses, which, in that climate, you have a lot of heavy winds. How to replace shingles on the roof. The elements are pretty harsh out there. There's nothing to protect it, really. So you're going to have a lot of maintenance on these homes. You're always replacing something. It's not all fun and games, but you go out and you do it. There's always a plank or two that has to be replaced or a boat. It's getting weathered and cracked. Stuff like that. As the years go on, we basically – more on my shoulders. I took more of a charge than my other two siblings. They basically had jobs upland, and I stayed in the bay. Like I said, I always – right through the winter we clammed, and through the whole summer we crabbed. You have to be pretty much into it multi-faceted or it would be tough to make a living on the water.

NS: Can you tell me how you would clam, how you would harvest the crabs? What kinds of traps and tools that you used and how that's changed over the years?

MC: Well, we had traps made. They were basically coated wire traps. They were approximately like 24 by 24. They varied from two entrances to four entrances, big bay well down the center, and then almost like a dome in the top. Then we would set them with bunker or blue fish, whatever was available at the time from the gillnetters that we could buy. From there, every morning at 3:30 in the morning, seven days a week, wind blow, rain, whatever the conditions were, we would go out – me and my partner, Jeff (Korn?). We had at one time about two hundred and thirty crab pots. We were checking it daily. Then we would sell them down to

Two Cousins Fish Market, Captain Ben's, and Fiore Brothers. They would take what they needed and then the rest, if they didn't need the rest, we would ship into the Fulton Fish Market. Then, in the fall, in the spring, we also did some eeling, and the eel traps were a lot smaller, obviously. They're longer, but smaller. They're about a foot high by maybe eighteen inches wide, and length would be about two and a half, three feet long. Then, we would use horseshoe crabs. We'd quarter up the horseshoe crab. They love the eggs and the female horseshoe crab especially. We'd get eels – an eel run. They had to move them around. They love to go up the areas where there's freshwater tributaries because they like to spawn up there. So, a good place to set your traps. Then we also did a lot of commercial clamming right through the whole fall, into the winter. That was when it got tough. We would build little cabins on our boats. We had little propane heaters, and we would actually break ice to get out of the canals to go clamming. Then we'd have to run in the area just to break up the ice to actually clam because we had no room to move forward if we didn't break the ice. It was tough, but a good living. I still enjoy it to this day. But clamming was probably the hardest because – a lot of weight, a lot of lugging. You had to sort everything and in the cold weather, once you got out of the water – because you had wetsuits on, Neoprene, gloves – once you stopped working out there, those days that it's thirty-five, forty-five-mile-an-hour winds, and it's brutal in the winter. It's probably about minus-twenty on some days. That's why we needed the cabins because they had to bring the clams inside the cabin with a little heater on because they would flash-freeze otherwise. So we would also cover them in burlaps, but inside the cabin had somewhat heat. It would be above freezing with the heater on. The little propane bottles would last about two and a half, three hours on these little heaters, and they would do the trick.

NS: What kind of boat do you use?

MC: We had a variety of boats. We started out with – when we were young, we all had Garveys. They were all basically made of wood with fiberglass on the outer shell. I've made a few of them myself. I lived and learned through the years. My first one that I made, I put little relief cuts where the bow had actually been in the wood, and I remember hitting a big wave and actually breaking a section out of it. So not knowing – I'm not a boat builder. So now I have this monster hole in the boat, almost sinking. I pull up near the bridge, and I grab some rocks to put in the back of the boat so the nose of the boat would hold up like this because I had to beach it or else I'd sink. So I'm riding home all the way like this because I had a lot of weight in the back and the hole was up front. I mean the hole was pretty big. I should have never stress-cut that plywood. [inaudible] you're supposed to soak it and steam it. Found out I was no boat-builder. So that was my first Garvey that I had built and it didn't turn out well. I had to have it redone. But the Garveys is what we started out with, and then we turned over probably – I turned over to a – in the 1990s, I had turned over to a Carolina Skiff. They're basically a fiberglass Garvey with flotation in them, and they're really low-maintenance. They're great boats to have. You can get in such low water. They're great for clamming. You could scoot right through any of the marshes and the creeks, basically anywhere you want to get with them. Even on top of the bars, we used to just – full-speed and slide across like a sled, right across the mud until you stopped. Then we would wait for that tide to come in because we'd be clamming up there anyhow, (hacking?) clams. Another tide came in, you were right near your clams; you loaded your clams, you culled them out, and you went home. But then, same with the crab boat. We had a nineteen-foot Sundance, which is very similar to a Carolina Skiff. We had built a big –

we had a table, a stainless-steel table. I'd work the table. My partner, Jeff, would actually do the hauling of the pot, and I'd cull the crabs from the blue claws to the females, and then we had peelers, which is called shedders. Same thing. They would be paired up, usually. You'd take that peeler, and we would actually shed them into soft shell crabs. So what a peeler is, when you first get the peeler, it's a small crab. Maybe four to five inches in length, point to point. You can tell when they're going to shed according to color and their fins. The darker red and blue – it's a V on the immature female that's a shedder. The darker that is, the closer she is to actually molting her shell, which, when she molts her shell, she's actually growing in size, almost double in size between length and width. This is how they grow. They actually leave their old lungs in a hollow shell, they come out, and they're soft for about – anywhere from about six to eight hours – a soft shell crab, which are very vulnerable to eels. I've seen eels actually, when I'm out jacking, attack. You'll see them tearing up softshells. That's why they pair up with the male, not only to breed but he protects her while she's in that state. Then, what happens is, about six to eight hours into the process, she starts to get leathery. She starts to actually get a leathery shell. The longer she's in the water for – once you take her out of the water, that metamorphosis stops. We would take them out. So when it was time to peel crabs, we would basically be at the shedder tanks around three or four times a day because we had to haul them out so they weren't getting leathery. Then you put them in boxes, cover them either with newspaper or what they call poppy grass, which is rock wall grass, and it keeps them moist and keeps them fresh, and you're able to store them in the walk-in refrigerator or wherever you're going to sell them. There's another way of going about catching them. We call it jimmy-potting. That's an old male, and we put him in the bait well – no bait – and then we catch just peelers. They are all going in there to try to mate with him. So that's called jimmy potting. Sometimes, on a good run, you'll start catching thirty, forty, fifty actual peelers or shedders. And then when we get – sometimes you'll have eight, ten thousand peelers. That's a lot of work. Then, from there, we get about a month, month and a half, one of them. Then we go back to the bait in the pots and catch the blue claws and sell them by the bushel.

NS: Did you do these kinds of things at the bay house as well?

MC: Yeah. More so as a child. We would go in the marshes and try to catch the little fiddler crabs. I mean, what an amazing little crab. This crab has a claw as big as its whole body, you know? You had to grab it right or else the thing would bite you. Got a little pincher. And sometimes, at low tide, if you look and you sneak up on the edge of the creeks – we used to call them cow paths – but you would see hundreds of them, thousands of them, just in them. When you get out and they see you, they all scramble and go back in their little holes. So we used to tinker with them and, like I said, we would clam. Just fun – as kids. We'd throw seaweed at each other. The muddier we could get, the better it was. My cousins, my brothers, all the kids – even friends of the family that we had – young kids would come out, and it was just a great day on the water. We would come back; we would just be so full of mud. Our parents would – get in the water and go clean up. If you had socks on or anything, they would never come clean. There's no bleach that could take it out. That was it. It was just so muddy, but we tinkered there. We were just having fun. As kids, there's nothing better as far as I'm concerned than actually growing up out on the water.

NS: What kinds of things did you have for lunch and dinner?

MC: Well, it depends. That would depend on the season. A lot of times, we would bring coolers and we would go to Charvin's, which was a little place on Woodcleft on the corner. We would buy the big block ice. If we were staying the weekend, you needed the big block ice for your cooler stuff, your sodas and stuff. We had anything from cold cuts to – well, if my dad was cooking, we had fish. We'd eat fish. My dad would make these awesome clam fritters. Clam fritter with applesauce over them. They were unbelievable. It was like a batter mixture of clam and Bisquick or flour. I don't know what he actually put in them, but they were unbelievable and we would steam clams on the barbecue and then dip them in butter. We actually had, at the house at one time, a propane refrigerator. You would turn that off when you weren't there, so you're not running the propane. And a propane stove – a gas stove. Now we have all the barbecues, but back then, it wasn't as common. You'd have just basically an oven that ran off of propane. It had the big hundred-pound cylinders. I don't even think they're legal anymore. But now you would have to bring the little twenty-pound cylinders out there. But that's it. We would have fish fries. We would have eels. I can remember a time I had went out jacking with my grandfather, and I had been on the bay, like I said, my whole life. I was in front of – we were in Scow Creek in front of Walt Stenzel's Bay House, and we were out jacking. What jacking is, is you put Coleman lanterns on the front of your boat and you push with a twelve-foot – almost like a closet pole with a spear on the end of it. You used to go and try to get fluke or flounder, depending on the season, and eels. So one night, I was with my grandfather. I was young, so I had never seen anything like this, and I still have it to this day. We hit this eel ball. There was thousands of eels intertwined into each other. We continued to follow this thing up and down the sand bar in front of Walt Stenzel's Bay House. We must have filled up about three old tin ice tubs of eels and, like I say, it was incredible. We were cleaning eels. We had like six people cleaning eels for hours. I think my dad actually went out and bought a freezer just for all these eels, and we would cook eels a lot. They were delicious. After you skin them and clean them, you chop them in chunks probably about four inches long; you would just basically egg them, flour them and fry them until they're golden. You would put a little salt or whatever you like on it and just eat it off the bone, and it would peel right off the bone. A lot of people, I don't think they ever experience that. But it's something to try if you haven't, really. Basically, a lot of sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly. As kids, it was a treat when you cooked fish. If we were out fishing and we had fish, then we would go and filet it and you know fish was going to be part of the meal. It might not have been lunch. It might have been dinner, depending on when we cooked that. But that's basically all the food. Like I said, clams and fish would be the main staple of the diet besides the regular cold cuts or basically peanut butter and jelly. In the morning when we woke up, we would cook eggs and sausage or bacon. That's it with the food.

NS: Did your family do any duck hunting?

MC: Yes. We did a lot of duck hunting. I started hunting probably when I was about maybe thirteen, fourteen, with my family. I'd go out and we did – we had what we call a marsh blind where we would set up basically burlap around some posts in the marsh, usually off of a point somewhere, where several bay intersections meet where they – a fly-away. We would sit there and freeze [laughter], and it was – a lot of times, it was very cold. Late in the fall, winter it's cold. The more you sit around – if you're not moving or working, it's chilly. But you needed the right gear. And we would get geese and we would get mallards, sheldrake. Oldsquaw would

come in on really rough days or you can go out near the inlet and get them – sea ducks. You just needed to know the species. You had black duck. I mean, there was green wing teal, blue wing teal. Through the years, growing up out there, you really learn a lot about what you're looking at – the species from seagulls to heron, the great blue heron and stuff like that. You learn a lot about the habitat out there. I mean, you're there, you pick up these things. It's everything from scungillis to birds. You pretty much know everything that flies in the bay. There's North American oystercatchers. There is endless birds and beauty out there that – it's just like anything else. If you do enough of it, you learn it. I pretty much can probably name every bird out there that flies. But, like I said, it's great to be out on the water. That's all I can say.

NS: Did anybody in your family make decoys?

MC: My grandfather made a lot of decoys. Mostly cork decoys. I actually did decoys with him. We would cut a base out of wood and then we would layer cork, glue the cork together and shave it in the basement, and then we'd make the heads on the bandsaw. We had a basic – almost like a stencil. We'd cut out a block and we would make our own decoys like that, mostly cork. I have made a few cedar decoys, all carved. It takes time. In my day and age, a lot of kids that – now everything's very easy to order. You know, you go and get the plastic decoys or the rubber decoys, but it's not the same. So if you grew up with hand-made decoys, I think that – I mean we used to put the – you had to put the lead weights for ballast so it would float right. We used to make all our own sinkers, all our own ballasts, all our own weights to hold the decoys. We had molds. My grandfather worked for Columbian Bronze. He was an engineer. He could build anything from propellers for the warships to propellers for planes. He made a lot of neat things through the years. I mean, he made alligator nutcrackers. He would make anything. He made molds. Like I said, he used to – still, to this day – just the other day, we actually made sinkers for the ocean fishing. We melted the lead in the old cast iron pot. I have a ladle and I have molds we pour it into, and we make our own lead sinkers. I have a friend; he's a plumber, and we get the lead bends and we melt all that and make our own supplies, basically. But basically, even back in the day, you didn't go out and buy a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff was made. Like you said, the decoys. My grandfather – to go back to my grandfather's day – used to actually market-hunt. What market-hunting was, was back then they used to sell the ducks mostly for their down. They would shoot into flocks, but they used a two-gauge – almost like a mini-cannon mounted to the bow of the boat, with straps. They used to pack that thing with glass, nails – you name it – anything they'd be able to shoot into the flock and get big numbers down – fifteen, twenty birds. That's what they would do. Then,, when the bay froze over, they would stay out weeks on end back then. I mean, really. The earlier 1900s. My grandfather had a boat almost like a mini-sailboat, and it had almost like big ice skates on the bottom of it. They would just wind-sail out there on top of the ice, and they would go out. I asked him, "How did you stop it?" They had these big lead weights that they would throw out and it would just drag on the ice to slow them down. That's how they slowed down and stopped. He said them things flew. I mean, they would do thirty, forty miles an hour across the ice, and that's how they got around in the winter. Then they would go to the houses and they would stay. They had the old potbelly stoves, or – and they made a lot of potbellies. Even we made potbelly stoves in the past out of thirty-gallon, fifty-five-gallon drums. You can cut them. They don't last long. You get a few seasons out of them because they're very thin; they're not thick like a potbelly stove, but you can make your own stove, and we've done that in the past. Just through the years, they taught us

a lot of little tricks from, like I said, jacking. Not just eeling. We would do crabbing. When I was twelve years old, I had gotten my first boat. It was an MFG, and I used to keep it over at Buckley's. There's an empty lot over on West End and Johnson where Buckley's boatyard was. There used to be an old oyster house across the street from that, and that eventually went by the wayside and they knocked it down. Then my grandfather – I didn't have an engine, so when I would get home from school, I would basically pull myself or oar along all the canals just to go crabbing. I was happy if I caught five, ten crabs. It was the best thing in the world. I would come home and I would actually sell them to my neighbors, and that's really where I got started loving it. On the weekends, when my grandfather was off from the job, if it was calm – you needed a calm night to jack, usually – he would tow me out behind his boat. He had a John Dory and a lapstrake boat, about sixteen-foot. I had a little thirteen-foot MFG. And he would pull me out and we would go jacking. So I had my own set-up and he had his. Basically, he taught me the ways of – when that tide was going out, you didn't get many crabs at all. You would get them, spotty, here and there, but then he would whistle to you, "Hey, come on over," and then we would have basically our snack before the tide changed. So we would be tied up next to each other. We would have Graham crackers, butter, some soda and then he says, "Oh, the tide's going to change soon." Then, when that tide changed, them crabs came out from under the seaweed. It's almost like seaweed flipped over, and they came out to sit up there and that's when you caught a lot of pair. The pair was key because that's what you wanted to shed soft shell crabs. In fact, my dad would tell me stories that he used to go to school. He would go to school with soft shell crab sandwiches, and all the kids would love to trade him. After a while, if you go enough with that, you got tired of that and you want what they got, so they want what you got and you trade. He would tell me that. I says, "Yeah, I can see that." There's nothing like a soft shell crab sandwich, but I guess you get tired of – after a while, too. But he would tell me about the kid who loved to trade him lunch when he went to school. So there's a lot to know out there. It's just like anything else. The more you do it, the more you learn. It's hand's-on.

NS: Tell me more about the bay house, how it was built, and the changes it went through after Sandy.

MC: Well, the bay house was – the story that I got was originally it was floated out on barrels – big fifty-five-gallon drums – and it was originally a garage and it was actually floated out on barrels and it was pieced together and put – when they had built it, everything was on sills, like mudsills. That would be flat boards with your beams on the flat boards so it didn't sink into the mud. That basically is how they did it. I mean, everything had to be carted out there or floated. There was no – you just couldn't drive or bring it there, so everything came by boat and basically they towed this garage out there on barrels, and that's how it started. The stories I get from a lot of the old bay men and old timers, basically, way back, the houses were used by rumrunners that would come in – they were going to be going into Freeport, but they would use these houses overnight to stay at and then they would go on into Freeport to unload their cargo because there was no taxes and that's why Freeport's Freeport. That's where it got its name from. A lot of commodities and stuff came in through that port, but they would basically be places to stay a short time while they were waiting to unload their cargo.

NS: Was anybody in your family involved with rum running?

MC: I would think, yes. I can't say for sure. I mean, I heard that there was family members that used to work on them boats, but I don't know really of any stories with that. I know the story of *the Lizzie D*. That was a famous rumrunner. The *Lizzie D* was – the captain of the *Lizzie D* was William McCoy. He was known for his liquor not being cut as much as these other guys would cut their liquor. So the saying, “the real McCoy,” comes from that actual rum-running ship. That's William McCoy and that's where they got the real McCoy from. True saying. And his boat actually sunk off the Rockaways inlet, that ship, back in the day. I know someone who dove that ship and actually got a bottle of rum off of it, near the boiler room. Yeah. Still to this day he has it. But that's where that saying came from, and that's all I really know about the rumrunners. It's just so far back. I wish I would have heard more stories through the years, but – and if you were told, you don't remember everything either, as a child. .

NS: And when was the first bay house built, when that was made out of the garage? Roughly.

MC: That's where you have me. I'm not too good with dates. I forget names, too. But I would think, at least in my grandfather's day, it wasn't the same bay house. There were several bay houses through the years that he actually might have been partners in. I would have to say the 1930s and somewheres back then, some of their – in those early ones. Because years ago, there used to be so many. There was a lot of homes. Now, I mean, I think, if I'm correct, we're down to twenty-seven, twenty-six. I mean, we're down to almost non-existent numbers.

NS: Where did you get the water from at the bay house?

MC: Well, some of the houses through the years, we used to bring out water in containers, and we also had an [Artesian] well.

NS: Artesian.

MC: Artesian. Yeah. Artesian well. Then that would basically – that was about – I think it was sixty-seven feet down into the marsh until you hit hardpan, and then you got to the gravel. I think that's about the range. Between sixty-seven and sixty-nine feet, they would tell me. They'd pipe that, and then it would go up to an old hand pump, and it was a primer in there that you would hand-pump into the sink. But that water was good for washing, cleaning, stuff like that, but it was very – had a lot of high Sulphur content to it. It had that rotten egg smell to it. But it was good – I mean, you could drink it if you boiled it. That's fine, too. But most of the drinking water and stuff like that would be – and back in the day, I'm sure they – that's all they did. They drank it. They boiled it, made sure it was sanitary then. But we had a well that you would pump the water up, and that was amazing. As a kid, you saw the pump, and you're pumping it into the pots. You'd cook with it and everything, but – you'd bathe with it, but I don't remember actually drinking it. It would have a bitter, sulphury taste. I tried it, and it's not for me. I would have to boil it.

NS: Was there an outhouse, or how did that work?

MC: Well, yeah, there was an outhouse. You had a small building, usually off the house that you would go out to. You'd do your thing, and basically, it was – that worked on – you just had a

hole cut in a platform with a seat, and it would go into – what we would do was we had a five-gallon bucket and a double garbage bag in there, and for the weekend, you'd tie that up, and you'd bring that back up-shore, and you'd get rid of the waste. You'd basically go into a bucket, which they called a honey bucket. You don't want that job, tying it up and cleaning it. [laughter]

NS: Were there specific chores that you had over the years at the bay house?

MC: Yeah. Usually, when we got there, everyone pitched in and set up the place. You would set up the coolers, and they opened the windows. We had screens. The screens – some windows had them. Some, you had to use the adjustable ones. And we all walked the docks, and then we had to clean the clamshells off. That was a big thing because the seagulls like to drop clams. They know. They're a very smart animal, and anything that they can drop a clam on and break, they do it. I mean, sometimes you come out to piles of clams. So you would sit there and sweep the docks off. After that, it was playtime, pretty much.

NS: Were children expected to help get the clams or the crabs for dinner?

MC: Yeah, pretty much. That was something we would just do for fun. Even if we were – even if they were going to be cooking them or not, we were taking them home if we weren't cooking them and then, you know, like I said, I used to sell crabs and clams to the neighbors and I mean, even if you made a few dollars it was a big thing as a kid. They loved it, and they looked forward to it. Then, after a while, they were asking you, “Oh, are you going to have any clams or crabs this weekend?” “Yeah, I'll get you some.” Then we'd look forward to doing it. And from there, it just grew. I mean, you wanted to sell them commercially to Fulton Fish Market, to local fish markets.

NS: There are a lot of things that people don't know about bay houses. What are some of the things that you think are important for people to understand about having a bay house?

MC: Well, the thing is, it's just the history behind it, and that's the way of life. That's all I knew as a child, growing up out there. It's just like as a family, maybe they go camping all the time. That's their way of life. They love that. It's just a tradition, basically. And to me, it's just beautiful. You go out there, you see the sunrise, the sunset, the wildlife. I don't know what to tell you as far as that, but, like I said, it's just something I grew up with. There's not many left and I hope that the traditions of the houses can stay and people will uphold them.

NS: What do you think are the most important things you need to know to have a bay house?

MC: Well, one, you have to respect the environment and the conservation around you because if you don't, you'll ruin the habitat. You need some craftsmanship. You need to know some basic carpentry and – or someone around you in your family to help you. I've gone out and had windows broken at the bay house and it wasn't because it was vandalized, it was because a seagull dropped a clam and it started coming in on an angle and hit the window. I mean, you see it. It'll be actually in the sill, sometimes, the clam. You have to replace things and you have to be somewhat handy. That's about it, really.

NS: What about getting to the bay house?

MC: Well, you can actually – there are several ways. Mostly by boat. When we were children, we used to actually go out there on Styrofoam. We'd build our own little boats, and we would swim. We used to call it a bay-athlon. So my cousin, brothers – we all decide we're going to go from the end of Freeport, Sterling Place, or one of these blocks on the end, and we actually had gotten – we each had a slab of Styrofoam that we had gotten in the marsh. So we decided we're going to tie all of them up, and we made this thing. We're going to do this bay-athlon. We go all the way out. We're [inaudible] with pieces of two-by-fours, and we row all the way out to the bay house. Now we're exhausted. We don't know how – we're like, "Oh, this is too hard." We figure we're going to swim back because the tide got low. So we left that day at the bay house, and then we decided, "Well, let's see who can get home first." So we made this into – we actually wrote a story about this. We call it the bay-athlon – to see who could get back to the mainland first. So we would swim across the channels, run across the marsh, and then we'd run the bars – what we could – but it was still about waist-deep. So we're diving, trying to be like porpoises, and pretty much – it was a good time. We went all the way from Scow Creek all the way up into the end of Baldwin Bay. I can't remember who won, to tell you the truth. We were all pretty close. We were all right near each other. But my cousin actually wrote a little story about it, and he called it the bay-athlon, and that's how I remember it. He actually got an A on that term paper when he was in college. I'll have to get him to send me a copy of it so you can have a copy of that.

NS: Wow. How many people go out to the bay house at a time?

MC: Well, it varied. I mean, usually, there was probably six to eight people, sometimes 10. But then it varied – a lot of locals. We had a lot of local firemen that used the bay house for their annual party, and they would stay overnight, and they would have their cookout with their steaks. It would be something they'd do every year. Their corn and – then there was a lot of people. There would be thirty, forty people at the house if that was the case. Then we would have picnics, and again, you would have a great deal of people. The biggest problem with all that would be mooring all the boats because you had to watch all the boats, tie switches, whose boat's going to bang into whose.

NS: Did you have hunting parties?

MC: Yes, we did. We would have sleepovers in the winter. But the group of guys usually – the biggest group would probably be about six, eight guys that would come out hunting. We also had a gun club, which was the Scow Creek Gun Club. It's still in existence. We haven't done much of it because of the damage to the house and the shooting range. Yeah, we would go out. It was a good time. You usually did a couple of days out there. You'd stay overnight, do a little hunting, and basically, our fathers taught us how to hunt and like I said, fish, crab, eel. I mean, you learn everything about the water, pretty much.

NS: Let's talk about some of the storms that hit the bay house before Sandy. What were some of your memories?

MC: Well, I remember – again, dates I’m not good with – but I remember the No-Name Storm. I believe it was in the ‘90s, early ‘90s. That storm actually knocked our house down off its mudsills and cradle. It was down for about a year. We tried a lot of different techniques to try to raise it. It didn't seem – just wasn't working. Initially, the fire department, some of the Baldwin Fire Department, came out, and they tried to lift it with airbags. Didn't work. Didn't lift it. I had gotten three and four-ton jacks, and we actually jacked the house up slowly, over months of working two or three hours here, two or three hours there, and then I'd have to – just as if they do the houses upland, almost like Lincoln logs – you criss cross them, and you stack them up on cylinders of Lincoln logs. Did it the same way. Rebuilt the mudsills and the telephone poles. We stood them up behind the house, tied ropes to it, and pulled it with boats along with people walking up under the house. We got all our mudsills in place, crisscrossed them, then lowered the house back onto these sills and mud plates and poles. That's where it stayed until Sandy. Then Sandy basically took everything. Just took everything away. I mean, it was a nasty storm. No one ever seen anything like that. I mean, just with all the – even upland houses that got the damage. It is devastating, and I can't wait to actually put it back.

NS: What are some of the things that you're doing differently for this house?

MC: Well, instead of on mudsills, we're going to be sinking poles, which will be a big difference because it just doesn't wash away. It will be a fixture on poles. It should be higher. It will probably go higher because of the last storm – the tidal surge. I'm hoping to go up somewhere around six foot in height for the base of the house. I just got all my permits to redo the house and go from there. You know, it's going to be a two or three-year process, at least, to rebuild everything because, like I said, everything goes outboard by board on a boat. It's not like you just pull up to a site on land. But [with] a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, it will be back up. I know there's no way it's not going to be back up.

NS: Besides putting it on poles, are there other changes you're making?

MC: Well, back in the day, basically, we really didn't use bolts. I mean, everything was nailed. So a nail – you get enough tidal flow, it just pulls things out. Where bolts on poles and heavy-duty – at least under the house, heavy-duty lumber, like three by tens or three by twelves, it shouldn't go anywhere. But then, again, you see piers lift up and go. But the difference with a pier is it's out in the water, and a lot of times, the piers get it from the ice grabbing it. And on top of the marsh, ice will go up there in icebergs and stuff, but it's not grabbing it constantly. It's not underwater all the time, so that's not going to lift, as if it would in the – out of water where the ice is – I've seen the ice crush boats against poles. Ice lifts poles right out, one tide to the next. It just basically adheres to the pole, and when that iceberg goes up, it just rips the whole pole out. So it's the best way to anchor the house other than, you know, mudsills and that stuff. But between heavy-duty lumber, nice bolts, telephone poles – that should do the trick.

NS: Are you sitting it in the same place –

MC: Yes.

NS: – or is it further back?

MC: Yeah. I have some pictures and old sketches of the actual house, the diagram, and the dimensions.

NS: I guess what I'm asking is, is it in the exact same location, or is it further back?

MC: Well, I'm not quite sure because they approved it. I think it's a little back, little further back. But I have all kinds of diagrams – the longitude and latitude – and height and graphs and all this stuff. But I think that it will get – soon enough, it will be back to where it was, and I'm looking forward to it. We're hoping to start some poles in July, maybe, get about sixteen poles pounded and go from there. It's costly, you know? But once you got the foundation, it's a lot easier. As far as framing walls and the house, that's not a problem. I'll put that up, one, two, three.

NS: Have you ever had any close calls on the water yourself?

MC: Actually, I have. I was jet-skiing one afternoon with my brother-in-law, and we were riding in all the creeks, high tide, and my ski slid out from under me, and I fell. But he was right behind me, and he tried to turn, but it just didn't react quick enough, and he hit me. So he hit my head, and this is why I got this little scar here, scar here. I was bleeding. Obviously, it looks a lot worse than it was because you're in the water, and it's just spreading. But it was pretty bad because you're going fairly quick. I got hit. Basically, the only thing sticking out of the water was my head because I was in the water. So the machine – the jet-ski hit me, and I was basically unconscious, face-down. He grabbed me, and he was obviously panicking. They waved down a passerby boat. It was right here in Baldwin Bay. The ambulance came, a helicopter came. They were almost ready to airlift me, and I landed up in Nassau County Medical Center. I remember the doctor coming in and telling me that I needed surgery because a bone on the side of my eye was pressed in, and they had to – I could tell you, Rocky had nothing on me because you saw how Rocky was in the movie? That's how swollen my face and eyes were over the next week. They actually did surgery. I remember the doctor telling me – I was really out of it. I mean, I don't know if they – they must have had me sedated and concussion and all that stuff. He just explained to me – I remember he says, "We're going to cut under your lip, go up through your cheek, and pop this bone back in place." That was a hard week. It was a very close call. After that, I never rode my jet ski without a helmet on. I had a waterproof helmet, and I wore it with that.

NS: What about working while you were fishing? Did anything ever happen?

MC: Besides the occasional hook in your finger, things like that, not too much fishing. I had other things happen to me. I had a nail go through my foot. In lumber, we were bringing out, and I had – as a kid, I jumped down, and I had a nail go right through my foot. That was painful. But really, my closest call was that jet-ski accident.

NS: Let me ask you. Were there certain things that helped you in knowing when a really bad storm was coming? I know fishermen have another set of warning signs.

MC: The things we would do to prepare?

NS: Well, what were the warning signs for you if a storm was going to be really bad?

MC: Oh, there's a lot of sayings, too. You have red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in morning, sailor take warning. You couldn't go by what the weather people said because they were never right back in the day. It's like, "Well, it's supposed to be a sunny day. It's monsooning out here." Well, you pretty much knew. Sometimes you look at the moon. It would get hazy, and you say, "Oh, it's not going to be a nice day. It's coming in." You felt the weather. You'd get very damp. You'd see fog roll in. You knew it's just going to be bad weather. But it didn't matter, really, the weather. You worked in it, whether it was rain or shine or snow or ice. You did what you had to do. You had to have the right equipment. If you didn't have the right equipment, you can get seriously hurt. You had to be prepared for everything. I've been out there – we used to put hot water in thermoses, so when we got out in the water, we used to pour the hot water down our Neoprene gloves just to get our hands warm after working in the winter before we have the propane heaters. The water pump from the engine, it has a – the water pump, when you're pissing out the water, we used to take our gloves and let that warm water from the engine pump into our gloves and warm up our hands until we got home because it was always the ride home that was very brutal until we got smart when we got a little older and started building little mini-cabins. But we were tough guys when we were young.

NS: Did you ever work offshore?

MC: I did work offshore. I worked on the *ET* dragger. That was Eleanor and Tony [Sougstad], and I worked with Tony several times, probably over a year and a half. That was interesting, to say the least. Learned a lot about dragging and a lot of different species. That is tough living, very tough, because a lot of regulations, a lot of stuff you had to shovel back. You were only allowed a certain amount of pounds of certain species, depending on the year, what quotas were what. I wasn't so much up on that. He knew the quotas. I just worked the deck, but I learned a lot. You had a big stainless-steel rod that you would guide the cable back onto the spool. Tons and tons of tension. It's a dangerous job. And the decks got icy. It was very, very slippery, but I enjoyed it. It was something that you looked forward to because you really didn't know what was going to come up in that net next. I mean, it could be a piece of ship. We've had big timbers come up to old bottles, to you-name-it. Pretty much any type of fish would come up onto the deck. I remember I was out there and saw my first monkfish. We used to shovel them over. Now they're like a delicacy. People love them. I mean, how things change. I mean, sea robins. We would never keep them, and now people are eating them.

NS: Sandy had an effect also on the bay. So how did things change for you after Sandy?

MC: Well, basically, I pretty much it was tough. You couldn't make a living because, one, not only did you have your own houses to contend with upland and the damage that you had to do, you basically had to shift your focus there, but you still tried to work. But it was devastated. I mean, you couldn't go out to work. The bays were just littered with timber and things from up on the mainland. A lot of people lost everything from their backyard to parts of their homes actually washed away on the mainland, too, the low-lying houses. So, in the beginning, it was

pretty much unnavigable. You couldn't navigate the bays. You didn't know what's going to hit your boat.

NS: Did your boat suffer any damage?

MC: No. My boat didn't because I hauled it out, and there was things that you knew that you should move. My boat didn't, but other people's shops and stuff – I tied it actually to the fence, and it stayed good. But other people lost their boats. They lost a lot of stuff. Everything that they –

NS: What about all of your traps and your equipment? What happened?

MC: Well, most of that was upland. We lost some gear and green crab traps and blue claw traps and stuff. Not a lot, but the problem was, the bay wasn't the same. It was like things moved out. The species, these things know when the storm is coming; they move out into the ocean, offshore, different places. The next few seasons were not the same as – it changed everything – the fishing, the crabbing. It was a tough, tough (sled?) to make a living out there. So I actually got into real estate and started doing some real estate on the side, and I actually enjoyed it for a while, but I missed the bay. I don't do it full-time. I just do some horseshoe crabbing and some crabbing and eeling a little bit. I tinker more or less now. It's not my regular, everyday salary. I got to subsidize with other things. You got to multi-facet, or else you can't survive. There are a lot of regulations. It's hard to make a living out there and getting older. Not young like when we could do anything. We were invincible, working from 3:30 to 9:00 at night. We were out there pulling crab pots; it was still dark. 3:30 in the morning, we'd be out there and, like I said, sometimes 9:00 at night between clamming and crabbing. You can make a living, but you have to be multifaceted in the bay. There's no "I just do this" unless you're retired, and you got a pension, and you want to just subsidize a little income. It's a tough, tough living.

NS: Were you involved in real estate before Sandy, or did that come as a result of Sandy?

MC: I think it came as a result of Sandy. I started working. There was a company called Sound Real Estate, and I did good. I sold a bunch of homes. I sold actually a boatyard on Hudson, and I did pretty good with it. I still practice it today. Like I said, the clamming – we haven't had a lot of conditional and stuff like that, which is a wintertime opening. We haven't had a lot of clamming seasons opened. It's been getting more difficult, but still, a handful of the guys go. So you need to offset your income somehow.

NS: When were you born?

MC: I was born in 1968. July 3, 1968.

NS: I think we've covered quite a bit of information. Are there other things that you'd like to share before we finish?

MC: Well, not really. I think it's a great thing that you're doing, upholding the traditions of Long Islanders and their family traditions, whether it's the water or camping or conservation or beaches or whatever it is that you're doing. I know that you go to bat for us, and I appreciate it.

NS: I guess what I was trying to ask you, is there something more that you would like people to learn about you, your life, and your history? What's some of your basic family history? When did the Combs first come to Baldwin and Freeport? Any idea?

MC: Well, I grew up in Freeport about half my life.

NS: What about the generations before you? Do you know when the first Combs came?

MC: Well, I don't know, really. I know we came – I know we trace back to the *Mayflower*. That, I know. But a lot of baymen that were in this area were the Combs, the (Verritys?), the Carmens – a lot of names. This was a pocket where we would run from, basically – we would do our business from. These are a lot of bay names, and basically, it's been a very good life. The beauty out there of the nature and the environment, you can't ask for a better life than that. Just growing up out there. I just like to go for a boat ride sometimes. Even though you work out there, you would think that's the last place you want to go back to, but it isn't. There's something about the fresh air, the salt air. You smell it. You could just go for a boat ride; you come home, [and] it just puts you to sleep. It knocks you out, that salt air. Pretty much, I covered everything, growing up in the bay, from childhood to now.

NS: Great. Well, thank you very, very much.

MC: Thank you, Nancy, for all that you do for all the families on Long Island.

NS: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/18/2022