Narrator: Bob Doxsee, Jr.

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.

Principal Investigator: Nancy Solomon

Affiliations: Long Island Traditions

Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting and Molly Graham

Abstract: In this interview, Bob Doxsee, Jr. discusses his family's multi-generational involvement in the fishing and clamming industries on Long Island. Starting with his childhood, he describes the transition from traditional fishing methods, such as pound net fishing, to clamming, influenced by his father's strong work ethic and the impact of a major hurricane in 1944. Doxsee recalls learning to steer boats at a young age and the labor-intensive nature of fishing, including the process of setting and retrieving nets, dealing with algae, and sorting fish. He also shares anecdotes about his father's innovative and forceful leadership style, both in business and as the mayor of the village. The interview highlights the evolution of the Doxsee family business, from fishing to canning clams, and their historical roots dating back to 1865. Bob also touches on the broader family history, including their origins in England and potential connections to French Huguenots. The discussion concludes with reflections on changes in the fishing industry and the enduring legacy of the Doxsee family's contributions to Long Island's maritime culture.

Bob Doxsee, Jr.: – you work harder and longer. Then, they could lay the guilt on. If they thought you were having a good time or something, you weren't supposed to have too much fun.

Nancy Solomon: sure. It sounds like you really enjoy working on the water.

BD: Well, I don't know if I enjoyed it that much, but that was my father's attitude. If you had a problem with anything, you just had to work hard. But somehow or other, work was the Puritan ethic. It was good for the soul or something like that.

NS: Now, when you were growing up, your family had already gotten into the clamming business as a full-time –

BD: No, we were fishermen.

NS: Really?

BD: We didn't go clamming until I was about thirteen years old – twelve or thirteen years old.

NS: Oh, really? So, you were still doing the pound nets since you were growing up.

BD: Yeah, and it was all labor-intensive.

NS: What were some of the things that your father had to teach you to do that?

BD: Oh, well, he taught me to steer a boat. God, that scow I showed you in that picture – here, you can see it. The only guy in my life that ever gave me anything was this guy. He was painting this picture of my father's scow. In fact, it was my grandfather's. My father had it lengthened, and he put a tunnel stern on it, and he put an engine in it. It was self-propelled.

NS: Did your grandfather do that physically himself?

BD: No, this man was here doing this [inaudible] whole thing. I said, "Well, what do you want for that?" This was back in the ’60s. He said, "Well, why do you want it?" I said, "Well, it's my father's scow. It has a lot of sentimental [inaudible]."

NS: When you talked about lengthening the boat, I meant physically, who lengthened the boat.

BD: Oh, they took us to a shipyard. There used to be a lot of shipyards around here in those days. So, the guy said, "Well, let me just take this home. I want to show it to my wife. Let me just take it home, and then you can have it. I don't want anything for it because you let me use the premises to sketch this." So, I figured I'd never see him again, but he brought it back. He came, and I had it framed. But it was sixty feet long and twenty feet wide. It wasn't straight. It had a hog in it. So, when you were going down the creek with it, it was going this way.

NS: So, that was quite a trial to learn how to steer that way.

BD: Yeah. I could hardly even see over the steering wheel. If you wanted to go this way, you had to turn that way. If you wanted to go that way, you had to turn that way. So, I could steer a boat or [inaudible] boat or anything when I was ten, eleven years old. See, we'd only take this out. This was flat bottom. So, to take this out in the ocean, it had to be a pretty smooth day. You didn't use this to lift the traps. You only used it to set the gear out and to change gear. Because in the summertime, even though we put the copper paint on the nets, the algae would form on there, and it would be like a blanket. So, whatever went overboard weighing hundreds of pounds, you'd take it back out of the water weighing thousands of pounds. Then we used high-pressure water hoses to blast all this blanket of this blanket, this algae off the nets. So, in the summertime –

NS: What boat would you use to take the nets and the traps?

BD: The pound boat we used to raise the net. But this one, we used to change gear. Set it out in the spring, bring it in in the fall, and change gear during the summer. After so many months of being in the water, you had to change net because of all this algae. Then, we set the poles in with this with the water pump. So, he and I would go out together on that. God, I'll never forget the first time that he ever took me out on that alone. Of course, he was behind a wheel – and even as a kid – I mean, I don't know how old I was. I might have been ten. I might even have been nine. I don't know. But I was a little kid. I mean, if you explain something to a kid – if you take enough time and explain something to a kid, especially if he's been around a boat and lines and everything – say, "That's the bow line. That's the forward spring line. That's the steering line. That's the after-spring line," a little bit of terminology. But he always thought that what he knew, I was supposed to know through osmosis.

NS: My father was the same way. [laughter]

BD: I remember we went out; he said, "Get the spring line."

NS: "Which line?" [laughter]

BD: I'm standing there looking at him with this stupid blank look on my face. So, if I didn't understand it with that [inaudible], obviously, if he raised his voice louder, then I would understand. His face would get red. "The spring line." Oh, man. He used to get me so nervous and so upset. But you learn, right? It would have been a lot –

NS: Yes. Well, it sounds like everyone goes through that.

BD: Yes, but it would be a lot simpler if he just would explain some of these terms before we started. That's the kind of thing that we were doing. Then, on the pound boat – I'll get a couple of pictures I can show you. [Recording paused.] – perpendicular – vertical, I mean, in the water. These quarter-inch ropes would be maybe eight inches apart or ten inches apart. I mean, I always thought fish could swim right through them, but they wouldn't because they would follow the migratory pattern of swimming parallel to the beach. Then they'd see this shadow. The leader casts a shadow. They would see this shadow, or they would sense that there was an obstacle there, and they would make a turn and swim offshore. Fish's instinct is to swim into

deeper water. So, then gradually, you see – these were the wings or the forebays, they called them. Then, gradually, they start to get within these wings, and then it tapers to a narrow point here. This is the trap. This is what we call the pocket. This was all webbing, all the way around. The floor, everything, was webbing. Then there was a funnel. The funnel was only six feet that way and six feet this way. So, as the fish is gradually being confined, he doesn't notice it.

NS: The funnel probably obscured the fact that he was going into something.

BD: Yes. So, the thing is, it started out wide, and he's gradually, gradually being confined. The gradual confinement – he's not aware of you, see? The funnel wound up almost in the center of the pocket. So, then, after he swam through that opening, he would go around the outside perimeter, and they'd stay in the net a long time before they found the way back out through that pocket again. Sort of the same principle as an eel trap, I guess, but on a much larger scale.

NS: Right, that is what I was thinking. Now, what is the shutter?

BD: Well, sifter?

NS: The sifter.

BD: We didn't have that kind of gear. We would put our pound boat right up against the –

NS: Okay, I was going to say –

BD: – we would put our pound boat right up against the pocket, like that. There would be poles that we could lay against, you see.

NS: Now, I see this in 1943. How long were you still doing pound fishing?

BD: I think that was our last year. '43 was our last year. In fact, that's me right there. I was pretty big for a kid. That's one of my uncles there.

NS: Now, was your father still with the company at that point?

BD: Oh, yes, sure. He was the company.

NS: When did he die?

BD: He died in 1967.

NS: When did he retire?

BD: He never retired. He drove off the Meadowbrook Parkway. He drowned.

NS: Oh, no.

BD: You might know Pat Collins. She's a judge now. She was a friend of my dad's.

NS: Oh, he was mayor?

BD: He was mayor of the village, yes.

NS: I didn't know that.

BD: They used to call him the fiery mayor because he was one of those guys – he'd pound his fist on a table, and he always had a loud voice, and he'd wave his arms. But he had a knack because he never had other than a high school education. But he had a knack that he could deal with people who were a lot more intelligent than him but couldn't get things done the way he could. So, whatever the problem would be – this guy, this guy, this guy – we were all involved in this problem, and just say it's a great big mud puddle, right? So, he'd get all of them in the mud puddle, right up to the neck, including himself. Then, he'd say, "All right, you guys. Here we are. Now, you're the ones with the brains. Now, how do we do this?" Then, of course, he'd have them so deeply immersed in whatever the problem was that they were forced to find a way out of it. He really did. He could do that with people. He didn't have the vocabulary or the education or the smooth exterior, but he'd go, "All right, you guys. [inaudible]." [laughter]

NS: Sounds like you really admired him.

BD: Well, he was so different. Anyway, so, then this other boat –

NS: How long did you go out pound fishing?

BD: Myself?

NS: Yeah, personally.

BD: Must have been four or five seasons, I guess. It seems like it, anyway. Maybe it wasn't that long.

NS: How long is a season?

BD: Well, summer is when – I mean, I did go to school. But this other boat, you see, we would drop the net, and we'd get inside the pocket. The boat would actually be inside the – later on, it was self-propelled.

NS: This is the trap right there.

BD: Yes, we called this the seine boat. In later years, I must have gone quite a few seasons because I remember when I just had the donkey engine. Later on, they put a self-propelled engine in it, and it could go by itself. But we used to tow it. This was a big boat. It was thirty-five feet long. We used to tow it out there.

NS: So, there were about five of you that would –?

BD: Yes, we used to tow it out there.

NS: How many thousands of pounds of fish would be in the trap at the time?

BD: Well, it would depend how they ran. In the spring and the fall is when the big migrations ran. But with this donkey engine, see, we would pull up – a rope would go to the bottom of the pocket. So, with a donkey engine, you would pull that up with the engine. But then all this webbing – you see how they're pulling that webbing in by hand? All that excess webbing, they had to pull that by hand. As you can see, they dry up the net, like here. See, the fish are all now bunched up. This is Big Andy here. That's Joe (Isher?). That's a guy named Bill Dean. Then, they'd come across a plank onto the larger boat. Then we'd use this big bull net and scoop the fish out. Then up in the front here –

NS: Would you have to sort in those days the way you do now, which ones you had to –?

BD: Yeah, there were pens. There were pens in the deck of the boat. If it was a big run, you got mostly all porgies or, mostly, all squid or mostly all butterfish. Then they'd go in the pens, and they'd be able to sort them out. There's other pictures I can show you –

NS: It is like on the dragger boat [inaudible] –

BD: – where we sorted them. Yeah, there's all these [inaudible] boards here.

NS: Now, these are all different kinds of – I guess that is what you would put them in after you were done sorting?

BD: Well, we had to ice them. If you just had a few hundred pounds of each species, they might put them in a basket like that. But see this guy up here? You can just see the head. There was a little winch up there. He would run the winch, and that operated this single whip here. Then another guy had to hold this handle, and he actually dipped [inaudible]. Then, a winchman would pick it up and swing it over. Then this would open, you see, and the fish would – so, I used to run that winch there.

NS: That wasn't motorized, I bet.

BD: Oh, yes.

NS: It was?

BD: It ran with the boat's engine. But I was just a little kid, and there would be a lot of slime and fish scales and stuff that would get into the bilge, and then it would run forward and get up in the engine room. Then the heat from the engine – and then all this putrid stuff down there in the bilge, man, that would stink. Of course, when you're not underway, when you're just laying

in a swell [inaudible] up and down in a swell like that, boy, I used to get nauseous as can be. But it was a man's work, so we're free as men to do something else.

NS: How often would you set the nets and gather the fish?

BD: As soon as the fish were taken out, the net would be reset, and then you'd raise again the next day.

NS: Oh, my God. So, you did this every day?

BD: Well, I don't think they raised Saturdays or Sundays. Maybe if there was a big run-on, they might have raised Saturdays. But if it was just normal fishing – we had about four traps.

NS: How long would that take to gather all the fish and then –

BD: We had four traps.

NS: So, that was a whole day?

BD: No, we'd be in by 12:00 or so. It was just outside the inlet. Then we'd have to unload and ice and everything, get the stuff ready. Then, at night, Roger Smith Trucking used to come and pick up the fish and take them to market.

NS: Were there other things that you had to do besides set the nets?

BD: Oh, the gear and the boxes. Get gear ready to change. Oh, my God. Pound fishing – you were never done working. That was so damn labor-intensive. I had this movie that he made – eight-millimeter movie that he made. In fact, he made a print and gave it to the Nassau County Museum. It has a voice thing –

NS: A narrator.

BD: – that he narrated himself. Well, I guess it was just eight millimeter. I mean, probably, it was eight millimeter.

NS: I'll see if I will get them to show it to me.

BD: I wouldn't mind having it [inaudible] because it has his voice on it. But I have the original that he made. It's about a forty-minute film.

NS: God, that is wonderful.

BD: It shows him going out and raising the net and changing gear with the scow and all that kind of stuff.

NS: How many men would be on the boat at one time?

BD: Well, there would be, I guess, ten or so. Ten or twelve, I'm not sure. Depending on how the fish [inaudible].

NS: I mean, that is quite a –

BD: Then we would bring the net in with all that blanket algae on it, and we'd spray it with a pressure hose, knock most of that off, and it would go in the water. Of course, now, they'd say you're polluting the bay, I guess.

NS: The algae?

BD: Yes, because it was [inaudible] –

NS: No, algae is good for the water.

BD: It was like hair almost. It was all this heavy stuff. Then we'd take it, and we'd spread it all out on a dock and let it dry in the sun. Then we'd go out there with carpet [inaudible] that stuff – and then beat it off.

NS: Can you imagine what it would be like today with all the junk floating around in the ocean? I mean, you see the nets when the draggers come in, and there is all kinds of –

BD: You just wouldn't be able to get anybody to do it today anymore.

NS: When did your family buy the clam boats? Was that 1913, something like that?

BD: See, there was a big hurricane in – was it ’43 or ’44?

NS: In ’38? Is that the one you’re thinking of?

BD: No, another big one came in ‘44 and demolished all those nets. But before that is when he started going into doing his clam thing.

NS: The ocean clam.

BD: I guess he thought maybe he could do both things for a while. I don't know. But then, when the hurricane came, and it wiped out the pound traps, he gave up with the fishing. We just stayed with the clam stuff [inaudible].

NS: Did you go out on the clam boat?

BD: Oh, sure. Yes.

NS: What is involved with that? I have never been on one.

BD: Oh, that's not too interesting. [inaudible]

NS: You just drop it in and bring it right up?

BD: Bring it up.

NS: It is interesting because I was talking with George Streit – you probably know him.

BD: Oh, yes, known him all my life. He had a boat here. Brought clams in here.

NS: He had never done anything on the water before.

BD: George?

NS: Yeah. I mean, he was in the Navy, but his family had not been involved with the water.

BD: Oh, he did charter boat fishing. He did a lot on the water.

NS: Right, George did, but not his father or his grandfather.

BD: Oh, no. Yeah, right.

NS: He was the first one.

BD: He started out charter boat fishing. Then, after World War II, he went clamming.

NS: I mean, your family has been involved with the water for over 150 years now.

BD: Yes. Well, they started in 1865 out on Long Island. In fact, here's a picture of the factory. That's the old factory.

NS: That is the one in Islip?

BD: Yes.

NS: What did they do here at the factory?

BD: They canned clams.

NS: Oh, really?

BD: Yeah.

NS: So, these were bay clams. They would go out –

BD: Yes, it's in that sketch I showed you about my great-grandfather. "These products, known

as Doxsee Pure Little Neck Clams, pure clam juice, and clam chowder, found market in all parts of the United States and were largely exported."

NS: Is the factory still there?

BD: Oh, no. This is a little bit about the Flower place.

NS: Now, this is your grandfather's brother we are talking about, Jim Doxsee?

BD: His half-brother.

NS: His half-brother.

BD: No, that's my great-grandfather, Jim Doxsee. I've got a family tree here somewhere if you want to see it.

NS: So, your great-grandfather was Jim Doxsee. Your grandfather –

BD: John.

NS: – was John Doxsee, and your father was Bob Doxsee.

BD: Right.

NS: You are Bob Doxsee, Jr.

BD: Junior, yeah.

NS: Do you have any sons working in the business?

BD: No. This is my family tree. We go back to Thomas Doxsee, who was born in England in 1722. He immigrated to America before 1743 and settled on Long Island. He married Elizabeth Raynor. Do you know Bob Raynor?

NS: Sure.

BD: Well, he and I are related through Elizabeth Raynor. She was born October 10th and was a great-granddaughter of Thurston and Martha Raynor. Bob comes from Thurston. Thurston was the progenitor of all the Raynors on Long Island. Bob Raynor is a great historian. He was president of the Freeport Historical Society. I guess you probably know that, right?

NS: Yeah.

BD: Then Thomas and Elizabeth had Hannah, Archelaus, Amos, Samuel, and Thomas.

NS: Tell me, is there a recipe that has been passed down through your family?

BD: No. Archelaus was my great-grandfather's father. He moved to Islip when he was but a young boy and became an extensive landowner. He handed down a very productive farm to his son, James Harvey Doxsee. He's the guy that started the clams.

NS: Now, your family, before they were here, they came from England?

BD: That's what it says here, yes. Although, my brother thinks that – my brother does a lot of that genealogical research, and he's been to Europe a lot. He believes that our descendants were French Huguenots. They were persecuted in France. They went to –

NS: England to escape.

BD: No, they went to Holland first because someone told them that Doxsee –

NS: It sounds like a French name.

BD: D-O-X is sort of a Dutch-sounding prefix, I guess you would say. They have a lot of Z-E-E's and all that kind of stuff. So, he thinks that we were in Holland before we were in England.

NS: It wouldn't surprise me.

BD: But the farthest they can trace it back is this Thomas in 1722. So, then, Archelaus would have been my great-great-grandfather. Now, this Phoebe married into the Smiths over in Smithtown. So, we're related to the Bull Smith family as well as the Raynor family.

NS: I am sure if you really wanted to, you are probably related to a lot of the old families on Long Island.

BD: Do you know Bull Smith, the bull rider?

NS: Sure. Well, there is also Raynor Rock Smith, who apparently had one go up towards Smithtown. So, there is some relation there.

BD: Well, you know how he rode the bull around Smithtown, right? There's a bull up there at the triangle between 25 and 25A.

NS: Let me ask you, this came up – I was talking to somebody else about some of the things that fishermen have made – that they would catch and then they would decorate. They said, oh, you should go to Bob Doxsee's place. He has got a whole bunch of stuff like that.

BD: Yeah, I showed you.

NS: Well, you showed me all the things that were caught in the clam and tools and all the things that were used, but I am talking about stuff that – let us say somebody caught a starfish and they would glaze it. Do you have anything like that?

BD: No, just like artifacts.

NS: Those are things that are used rather than decorated by the fishermen. I was curious. Did you ever do anything like that?

BD: No, no. I wrote poetry, though.

NS: About the sea?

BD: Yes.

NS: Could I hear one of those sea poems?

BD: I don't know what to tell you. I just happen to have a few thousand – 1930s and the 1940s. There was a guy that used to cut fish for my father that was – I guess he was kind of a con man. He would go to Florida and sell swamp land to the suckers and stuff like that. He would cut fish in a pinstripe suit. But you had to remember this was the Depression, and people would take jobs that they could get. I guess he was a very intelligent guy, but today, he would be on TV selling things. So, he used to print up a little tabloid, and then he would have these homey sayings, Bill (Snyder?) says.

NS: Bill (Snyder?). This was some of the things that he wrote. Of course, it would be about fish.

NS: You wrote this?

BD: No, I didn't write it. I just had a copy.

NS: Oh, he wrote it.

BD: Bill (Snyder?), Bill (Snyder?) said. I just had a copy of some of these things that he had written. Here's one here, "Old King Tut, that golden king, who lived so long ago, thought he had all the knowledge of all there was to know. But now, a grammar schoolboy would think he was a numpty. Teacher was telling me who was dumber than King Tut. In King Tut's day, they knew that fish lived in the open sea but seldom graced a table as fresh as fish should be. They did not know that bright eyes" – because we had the Bright Eye Fish Company – "meant that fish that did not smell for fish that [inaudible] bright eyes is a fish that's not so well." Here's another one that says, "You think you're just whole damn thing because you have bright eyes." He was a character. Then, this is about my new vessel that I had built in 1977. This is about the trip that we made when we sailed the vessel up from the Gulf of Mexico to Long Island. This is about my father and pound trap fishing.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/13/2024