

**Narrator:** Bill Hamilton

**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:** On September 15, 2002, Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions interviewed Bill Hamilton, a member of the Brookhaven Baymens' Association, in Patchogue, New York. Hamilton provided a detailed history of the Brookhaven Baymens' Association, founded in the 1970s, and its initial focus on clamming issues. Key figures in its early days included Grant and John Mensal, Doc Murray, and Mario Carrera. Hamilton discussed various challenges faced by the Association, such as price fixing, reciprocal agreements between townships, and attempts to limit licenses. Membership peaked at around 300 but has since dwindled due to declining involvement and interest. Hamilton highlighted ongoing efforts to influence town and state policies regarding clamming, fishing, and crabbing. He emphasized the significance of maintaining water quality for successful clamming and the detrimental impact of the Southwest Sewer District on the bay's salinity. He also described the implementation of spawning sanctuaries and legislative efforts to protect these areas from harvesting. The interview shed light on the challenges faced by baymen, including restrictive licensing and regulations, and Hamilton's personal advocacy for sustainable fishing practices and resource management. The discussion underscored the importance of community involvement and policy support to sustain the baymen's way of life.

Nancy Solomon: Today is September 15, 2002. This is tape one, side one. I am Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. I am interviewing Bill Hamilton of the Brookhaven Baymens' Association. We are here in Patchogue, New York. So, Bill, can you tell me a little bit about the history of Brookhaven Baymens' Association from what you recall?

Bill Hamilton: I believe they established it back in the '70s, was when they first – you see, originally, I'm from Islip Town. I was involved in Islip Town. I've been in Brookhaven Town now about seventeen years. Of course, when it first was founded, membership and everything was booming because the bay was booming. Essentially, in the beginning, it was mainly involved with clamming issues. It's never been too involved with fishing issues and that. It's mainly revolved around the use of our town lands, underwater lands, and that, which mainly involves clamming and oystering.

NS: Do you know who some of the original people were in the beginning?

BH: I know Grant and John (Mensal?). They were originally from Islip Town. They were involved in it. Doc Murray was involved in it. I'm trying to think of the one guy. He smoked a pipe. I can't think of his name, but he was big on it too. Flo [Florence Sharkey] would be more familiar with a lot of them. But I remember the (Mensal?). They were very involved in it. In fact, I got involved with Brookhaven Baymens' Association when I was an Islip Town digger because this was back when they were trying to start the union. They had the Baymens' Alliance that Mario Carrera had tried to start up. We basically tried to pool resources since both of our townships worked in Brookhaven waters, basically. Islip Town, most of us worked in Brookhaven Town waters, not too much in Islip. But those are the guys that I remember – Doc Murray – because I did go to a few meetings with them, like Senator [Kenneth] LaValle's office, Owen Johnson's. But there were so many initial people that were involved.

NS: What were some of the issues that you recall at that time?

BH: A lot of the big issues was on prices. There was price fixing going on. Another one was they wanted to try to stop Islip Town people from working in Brookhaven Town waters to do away with a reciprocal agreement. There was also talk about limiting licenses and that, back then, trying to put a cap on it. Because as it was, you could walk from boat to boat out there just about back in the '70s, middle to late '70s. Basically, it was all clam-related issues.

NS: Rough guess. Any idea how many people were part of the association?

BH: Well, at one time, we had probably upwards of three hundred members. Then, additional members that weren't actually directly involved in the bay. Some were part-timers, some family members, or just people that were concerned. Now, unfortunately, we're down to very few, a handful of people, due to the fact that quite a few people left the bay. They're not concerned. In fact, we probably have more input from some of the part-timers than you do, even the full-timers. Most of the full-timers that are out there haven't been that involved, or they've distanced themselves from the organization because they just don't want to be bothered. It takes time out of your busy schedule. People have families, and that. Like the (Mensal?) really aren't involved much in it anymore. Occasionally, if there's some big issue, they'll come out, but

usually, not. We had a town meeting back a few months ago where we set a few new town laws to establish a spawning sanctuary and to make it illegal to harvest clams. Of course, with our winter grounds, also, they could ticket you. Two part-timers showed up at the town meeting. So, that shows you, besides me and Flo, how much interest we have. It's pretty much waned. It's pretty sad.

NS: How often are you guys meeting?

BH: Well, basically, at this time we haven't had many meetings. Me and Flo will get together, and then I'll call up Greg LoVece now. Then, we get input from them. The last couple meetings because we were allowed to use – Post-Morrow's got a building down here we can use, me and Flo showed up. That was it. It's pretty much waned.

NS: Would you say that the focus of your efforts is on town policies, on state policies, or both?

BH: Well, basically, I've always been involved myself, even not as an official of Brookhaven Baymen's Association, and going to meetings about fishing, clamming, crabbing, those related issues with the state. I always want to be there and hear what they're trying to force down our throats.

NS: What are some of those bodies that you are going to and talking to?

BH: Usually, the fishery advisory meetings, shellfish advisory meetings, any of the special meetings, like the DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation] calls up on crabbing regulations, fishing regulations, I try to make it there. Horseshoe crabs, checking on that, you have to be there. Because the next thing you know, you got a new law that you didn't want.

NS: Are these meetings usually held on Long Island, or does it mean going up to Albany?

BH: No. They almost always have them up at DEC, at Belle Meade, up there –

NS: Okay, in Stony Brook.

BH: Stony Brook. That's where they have most of the meetings. Now and then – I haven't been up there myself, but we've sent people up to Albany for certain things. They have the seafood – I guess it's like promotion. They go up there. Then we've had them go up there on the Raritan Bay clamming issue. The one year when they didn't have the budget passed, and they were going to possibly shut down the program, the program did start late. We sent people up there to spur them on. Then we'll have private meetings. I'll go see some of the different assembly people from the state, like [Patricia] Eddington or [Debra] Mazzarelli. I was in touch with her back when we had a lot of trouble with licenses, where a few of us lost them. I lost my fishing license because I didn't renew them in time for one year. They never had. That passed some law up in Albany. Next thing you knew, there were like two hundred of us that lost lobster licenses and fishing licenses because they put a moratorium on it. It went from that date even though there was never an expiration date on licenses. Yeah. We got caught in the legal loophole. So, then I had to go to meetings.

NS: What were some of the more important things that you helped prevent or helped instill in terms of some of the legislation that has affected the baymen [inaudible]?

BH: Well, I kept on Mazzarelli and quite a few of the other state people, getting this rectified with the licenses, which we did have rectified. It took two years, but we did get that done. Another thing I've been working on at the town level would be on the spawner program, getting the spots set up out in the bay. Then basically, the town's got to appropriate money now, and we have to go. They screwed up in the bidding process on a few things. They missed the one bid. So, basically, that's stalled right now, but it's all set up. It will be a go once we have bids in on the shellfish, and then they can purchase them.

NS: Will this be for different kinds of shellfish?

BH: No. This is basically just for clams. We established two zones out there, one out in the middle of the grounds along Blue Point's property line and another one in the uncertified waters up here in Patchogue Cove, based upon the dye test that they did, where the spawn would end up. Yes. Those are the two areas. We might have some future ones.

NS: Now, when you are talking about these spawning projects, what will be the actual seeds? Where will those come from?

BH: From the clams themselves. We're going to purchase Cherry and Chowder clams.

NS: So, these are going to be wild clams, and you are using the seed from the wild clams?

BH: Yes, because we banned pretty much – that's where us and [Jeffrey] Kassner don't see eye to eye.

NS: I know that there has been a lot of disappointment over some of the –

BH: Well, to us, it's just a waste of money. Blue Point's out of business. They spent more money than the town could ever hope to spend on seed clams, growing these things. This is like their own little pet project up there, Tom and Jeff. They had some little pet project they wanted to do up in Mount Sinai. They wanted to close off one of the most productive areas in there for harvesting oysters and clams and make that into a little area to let the clams grow out just to see how they did. But to us, it was like Tom wasn't really happy because this was a project I guess he worked on for a while. But, oh well, we wouldn't let them close off the area. But to me, it's like their own little experiments. They have their own, I guess, things where they want to further their credentials and stuff. We've done this, we've done that. You get to go give talks on things, lectures, and stuff. So, that's their own little project. We're not fond of it because to us, we call it crab bait. They're just growing stuff to feed the crabs. Because first off, they're [inaudible]. Flo will tell you. I could go out here and dig all day and not catch one [inaudible] clam. The only place where we really only catch any is on Blue Point's property, if you go on their property or along the line. You might catch half a dozen if you're lucky.

NS: So, you are really trying to make sure that the wild clams can rejuvenate and have a place where they can actually grow.

BH: Well, if you get the right water conditions, the clams spawn, and the set will take. It's all about water conditions. If you don't have the water conditions, even these seed clams they spend thousands of dollars to grow and dump out there don't grow.

NS: What will be some of the mechanisms to get the kind of water quality that you are looking for?

BH: Another inlet. [laughter] Unfortunately, we could use another inlet. We don't get a big enough flush here. In fact, the water here in Patchogue area – I believe they say it takes thirty days before it gets out of the bay. So, what type of flush is that? That and runoff. That's another thing. The runoff issues. That's when you'll see the blooms. If we get a lot of rain over this next day or so, you'll have some type of bloom out in the bay. Some type of algae, be it brown or be it green. We had one year, the best clamming – we had a green algae bloom. But the thing was, it bloomed so much, and the water was clear that year that it actually went to the bottom and then started suffocating the clams. So, the clams came up. We caught some clams, but it probably killed a lot of clams, too. That year, we seen somewhat of a set out there. You seen pinky nail-sized clams and that. They had nice growth rings on them, too. But most of the time, it's the water quality. We don't get the water quality, we don't have the clams. What killed the clamming industry, as far as I'm concerned, is the Southwest Sewer District. We had all big meetings back then, trying to stop it and that.

NS: When you say, "Try to stop it," what were some of the factors that were affecting –?

BH: Affecting salinity of the bay. If they start this, you wouldn't have the natural – like the cesspools and everything, where the water naturally seeps back. What they were having is they were pumping it directly out into the ocean, and then that pipe leaked. They had leaks on that. You have chlorinated water.

NS: So, it's the sewer pipe?

BH: Yes. You have chlorinated water. Chlorine kills off any green algae. One of the other big issues back then was probably when the DEC opened up all the uncertified areas.

NS: When did that happen?

BH: That happened in the late '70s. Late '70s, they opened it up. '78, they opened up Admont Cove, and that was absolutely cleaned out. Then, they did the same with Bay Shore Cove. Those were spawner areas. That's where clams spawned. They were like sanctuaries.

NS: So, by unrestricted them, they were inviting everybody.

BH: Yes. Everybody went in there. Everybody and his brother was a clam digger when they first opened up Babylon Cove. There were people jumping off the dock down there with baskets

and stuff. Oh, there was a lot of money to be made. From the day they opened –

NS: Did they know it was a spawning area when they did that?

BH: I'm sure they did know, but they didn't – this was all on the premise of stopping people from going in there to [inaudible] to work at night to catch these clams. Because it wouldn't [inaudible].

NS: Yes. Instead of making it illegal, they wanted to legalize and then get some money.

BH: Yes. So, they opened up these areas, and they were basically cleaned out in a matter of a couple weeks. The day it opened, it went from fifty dollars down to eighteen dollars in one day. Yeah. I didn't work. I took off two weeks. I went fishing because it didn't pay. You couldn't make no money. They didn't even want to buy clams after a while. "Don't even bring them here. We don't want them." So, that was another thing that affected out here. But I blame a lot on the sewer district. You don't have that freshwater getting back into the system in the bay now.

NS: Now, explain that to me because I am not sure that I understand.

BH: Well, you have the cesspools. You'd have your natural water flow. All your wastewater goes into your cesspool here. Now, over time, it leads it through the sand and makes it out into the bay. Now, what they're doing there – you have sewer pipes now. So, everything that you flush down your toilet, you drain; it all goes to the sewage treatment plant. From the sewage treatment plant, it's pumped out into the ocean.

NS: So, that fresh water, that combination, the [inaudible] –

BH: Yes. A lot of the streams have dried up down in Babylon, in Bay Shore, all those areas where they have sewers. In fact, they wanted eventually to put sewers all the way out, all through Islip Town, save them and all. But the people fought it, and they did stop it. They knocked it down. Otherwise, it probably would be even worse. Because basically, Babylon and Bay Shore area, there was no clams down there for a long time. They're just starting to make a comeback.

NS: Well, why did they create the sewer?

BH: They figured it was going to clean up the water. Well, it solved a lot of problems along the water. If you have cesspool problems, you get a high tide. Next thing you know, your cesspool overflows. I know. I deal with it myself.

NS: So, you got raw sewage.

BH: This year, it's been great because we haven't had a lot of rain. So, my sump in the basement is dry this year. No water in that. But you get years – like the typical year, I'll have to have my cesspool pumped twice usually, in the spring when you have the high tides and in the fall. So, down Bay Shore, a lot of the people had to deal with it. With the development down there – they

were putting in townhouses – they needed it. To them, it was to clean up the water. Yes, it probably cleaned up the water, but it didn't because you don't have the salinity that you need. Now, for some reason, we get the brown tides. Now, when you get brown tide, you don't have any good algae. The clams don't like the brown tide. They go down. We never seen that until after that.

NS: Is there something that the association feels could help remedy, obviously, the creation of another inlet?

BH: Well, we talked about even having pipes put through Fire Island, like over here, so that we would get a flush right through the Island.

NS: So, different mechanisms to increase the flush.

BH: Yes. But then we are up against the homeowners over there right away. "Oh, they're going to put pipes through. Oh, it could be a potential." They all freak out right away. "My million-dollar home's going to float away." Unfortunately, the baymen have little money, and the homeowners on Fire Island have a lot more money and win or lose when it comes to that. That's why they closed the Pikes Inlet, the Little Pikes.

NS: Yeah, I know. I remember that. Now, do you remember exactly – because Pikes Inlet, I remember it reopened when we had that nor'easter in December. I guess it was '92 or '93.

BH: Yeah.

NS: When did they close those inlets? Do you remember?

BH: Oh, I believe that was like '90.

NS: The early '90s?

BH: Yes. '91 or so. I'll have to get my scrapbook. I got it put away right now. I keep all articles on that stuff.

NS: Was that the town or the Army Corps that did that?

BH: Army Corps engineers did that. Excuse me a sec.

[Recording paused.]

NS: Sure. So, we have got all these different agencies that you can go up against.

BH: Yes. That was Army Corps engineers that basically – they closed it up. The homeowners sued them. They had to close it up.

NS: Now, the restrictions on the striped bass fishing, has that affected the baymen around here?

BH: Well, like me, I never really was into the striped bass fishery. So, I never got a permit. So, now, at this stage of the game – I go pin-hooking. You only get like a hundred tags or so. I can go pin hooking, which, to me, is a more conservationist type of method for catching them if you are restricted to the amount of fish you can catch. But I can't get a license to do it now because of the moratorium on it. So, that's something that I'm locked out on. Same with fluke. I could pin hook fluke, keep them alive, and get a lot of money for the fish. I don't have to catch a lot, but I can't get a fluke permit.

NS: Is this because of the town moratorium or the state?

BH: No. This is the state. The state, yes. DEC. It doesn't look like they're going to – there's a waiting list. I'm on a waiting list.

NS: Oh, boy.

BH: That's a whole scam in itself with these striped bass tags because half the guys that get them don't even fill them themselves. It'll be like ten guys give the tags to one guy, and he fills them and splits the money with them.

NS: How long has this moratorium been in effect? Two years?

BH: Oh, since the early '90s.

NS: That long?

BH: Yes, Well, originally, we started off, you didn't have a food fish license. Then they come up with that. Then, from the food fish license, they come up with a striped bass permit, a fluke permit. Next thing you know, we'll have a bluefish permit. It's just, to me, more ways to raise more money and just to put boxes in, corral us a little bit more. Okay. That's what you are. You're just a striped bass fisherman. But it's funny. When the state has pressure by the right people, they'll come up with something like they came up with a bait fishing permit. Now, basically, they wanted to stop – there's a lot of us that fish.

NS: What is the rationale by restricting the permits? I mean, there must be some benefits.

BH: Conservation. They're going to conserve the resource.

NS: Is that not something, though, that would ultimately be good for you and the next generation?

BH: Not so. To me, the industry restricts itself. If I can't go out and catch fish, or if I can go out and catch fish but I can't make any money on them, you don't go fishing. Now, there is a lot of people – they hold licenses. Yes. You don't use them all the time. So, basically, you need all the different licenses so that you can go and catch what you can to make the money on that thing at the time. But to me, it's self-limiting. With the moratorium on licenses, crabbing, lobster, and



fishing licenses that they had in effect, which it's still in effect. Basically, there weren't anybody going to run out and buy another lobster permit because you're not going to make the money on it. Why pay for that permit? We're all forced to pay for the permits now. Because if you don't, you lose them if you don't renew them. You can't go down and get one. To me, it's a resource of the state of New York. Constitutionally, I believe that everybody that's a resident of New York has a right to pursue their livelihood. There shouldn't be restriction on it. If that's the case, why don't we restrict carpenters? Say we can only have ten thousand licensed carpenters in New York State. There's a lot of stuff we could do. Fish stores. Okay. We'll restrict fish stores. You could do all that with licenses. But they do it to us. I don't think it's fair. If you wanted to get one, you should be able to go down there and get one. I thought this was the land of the free and opportunity and stuff. But that's the opportunity. If I was an eighteen-year-old kid, the only thing I could get myself is a clamming license.

NS: Are there other restrictions as well in the amounts, the quotas, and what you can catch and where you can catch them?

BH: Yes. I get paperwork every week. I don't know if this is probably just on a meeting. Every week, I get paperwork. This is a new thing on striped bass. We're going to have a meeting coming up. That's going to be on September 18th.

NS: But are commercial fishermen allowed to catch striped bass? I thought they were [inaudible] –

BH: Well, if you have your permit, you get your hundred and something tags. You don't really make no money on it. But that's something that – I'll go to that because of the fact that maybe there's something they're working on to try to loosen up the permits. It's something that I could go and probably make money on for two weeks fishing. It's something. It would be a paycheck.

NS: Two weeks. So, that is two weeks' worth of work.

BH: By catching them on hook and line, you can let the shorts go. It's not like you're using a gillnet where you're going to kill a lot of fish. That's why even with the pound trap fishery – that was a good conservation type method because you don't kill anything.

NS: Now, what is the status? Pound trap fishing is prohibited in the town, is it not?

BH: No. No. We overturned that. They have no regulation and all that.

NS: When you say you overturned it, tell me the exact sequence of events because I remember when they had the proposal to eliminate it, and that passed.

BH: Well, we had Tom Henry.

NS: Yes, who almost got killed.

BH: Yes. (Stein Melvin?) nearly killed himself. Right away, the town – because we had a big

meeting –

NS: I was actually at that meeting. [laughter]

BH: Yes. Well, you saw, we had all the firemen and stuff. The people who listened to the firemen before they would ever listen to us they're up there pleading their case because Stein's a volunteer fireman. So, the town right away – "Okay. We're restricting it." In fact, the year after, I started fishing with Tom Henry. We went out [and] set up pound traps. The town came out and ticketed him – gave him a ticket. Meanwhile, through research on a lot of these old patent grants and stuff like that, we found that the town can't regulate fishing. Only the state. The state has jurisdiction over it. So, their law was null and voided. Tom Henry beat it in court.

NS: Although, there were some baymen that said that nobody has [laughter] the right. (Milton Miller?) out in [inaudible] –

BH: Yes. Yes. Not even the state. Realistically, when you read these old grants, kings' grants, and stuff, they have no right over-regulating any of it.

NS: But anyway, so you took it to court?

BH: Well, he got a ticket, and then he went to court, and he beat it in court. So, then, we went out. We fished, basically. The last year that I fished was with Tom Henry. That was basically the last year that he was alive.

NS: That was like in '97, '98.

BH: Well, he's been dead now, it'll be two years.

NS: Oh, it is two years.

BH: Yes, two years. So, two thousand. Then Paul –

NS: So, now, it is permitted. But nobody is doing it –

BH: Nobody's really doing it. What am I doing?

NS: Because he died with the knowledge, I assume.

BH: Well, no.

NS: You have some of it.

BH: That's why I went with him because he wanted to have it –

NS: Passed down.

BH: He knows I have a memory that I don't forget anything. So, that was one of the reasons why he took me. He wanted somebody to know how to do it or at least know about it. Now, his nephew (Paulie?) inherited the traps, but Paulie's not got too much gumption. It's a lot of work. A lot of work, pound trap fishing. Lowell will tell you that. I'm sure that's one of the reasons why he's bent over the way he is. He's had the back and knee problems and stuff. So, I went to learn about it. In fact, if Paulie wanted to set traps up, I would go with him just to at least further the knowledge. Let him know, get something going.

NS: There is nobody else that has this interest or that you could teach?

BH: Not really, and it's the equipment. I fished as basically a mate with him. He owned all the gear and that, and it went to Paulie. For me to go out and replace this – just the one year, now, (Dougie Jane?), I don't know if you know him. He's from out East Hampton Bays. He lobsters out of Mattituck. In fact, there's a whole him and his sons and that to do it. Dougie gave us some of the bodies for these fish traps we put up out in Flanders on some state sites. The year before, we caught fish out there with a haul –

[Recording paused.]

NS: This is tape one, side two. So, you were talking about your work with Doug.

BH: With Tom Henry Dalton.

NS: With Tom, yes.

BH: We had gone, and we caught fish out there with a haul net. So, then we ended up going, and all went along. We made new leaders. We made these leaders. I believe Tom Henry spent like fifteen thousand on leader lead lines. We spent five months getting stuff ready, making leaders, and cutting poles. We go out there, set these things, and there's no fish that year because it got real warm, and the fish –

NS: Did not come to the bay.

BH: They came in, but they left right away. So, that's what happens. But the money, the cost for these things – and we didn't even have to make the pounds, the actual bodies. Dougie Jane gave them to us. All we had to do was extend a few of them because we were in deeper water. But to make them, you could – probably, a trap would cost you between five and ten thousand dollars for a trap, depending on where you're putting it. You have to have the place to store it. You've got to be able to dip them in deep every year. You've got to have a tractor or something to pick these things up. Basically, there are a few guys, and they're out east that do it. You'll see a few in the Peconic Gardiners Bay, and you'll see a few out around Shinnecock Bay. Most of them, it's been in their family for generations out there.

NS: So, there is none in the town of Brookhaven anymore.

BH: Not at this present time. I just was speaking to Paul. He was asking me about it. I said,

"You're late. You should have been" – because it is maintenance. Tom Henry used to start – over the summer, he would start getting his gear ready – sewing because [inaudible]. You have to sew your lead line back on, or your leaders go over everything, especially if you're going for eels because they find one broken mash, and they're out of the traps. So, you have to look the whole thing over, sew them, dip them, spread them out in the field to dry. Then you've got to pull them up just right.

NS: You got to do this all before it gets cold.

BH: Yes. Then you've got to go out there. As soon as Labor Day's over, you go out, and you put your poles. Poles have to set out two weeks to a month. So, they take hold in the bottom because if you put webbing on them right away, they start moving. Next thing, you come out there, and everything's popped up and floating around on you. So, you have to let them set in. Then, about now, you'd start putting some webbing on some of the traps. You spend weeks, and you don't make no money. We were laughing when we did – what else can you do? After we did the three traps out and planned this bay there, we didn't make – it was a bust. That's all you could do. Laugh. We said, "If we were getting five bucks an hour, we'd be rich men today." But we sat over there and sewed. I'd be over there at 6:00 in the morning. I'd leave there like 10:00, 11:00 at night, and Tom Henry sometimes would sow even longer than that on these leaders. It's a lot of work involved.

NS: If you had to take a guess, how many people are part of the association right now?

BH: Right now, we have –

NS: You can pick a number. [laughter]

BH: Right now, how many people?

NS: Yeah.

BH: Essentially, there's the four of us: Bundy, Ken, Greg LoVece, me, and Flo. The only time we've had a big meeting lately was a year and a half ago when there was some stuff going on with the crabbing. A lot of the crabbers were having their traps run by people out there, and they wanted something done. We had six people show up.

NS: That is really hard.

BH: It's like anything. People are busy.

NS: Are there dues?

BH: We have dues, but –

NS: Nobody pays them. [laughter]

BH: Nobody to pay them lately. We gave up on meetings. We'll get together to wait – because what I'll do is if there's some issue, I'll get my boat, and I'll go out and speak to the guys that I can find out there. Try to get around and get a general consensus on what their take is on things. But it's like, really, you don't want to disband the organization because we're one of the few groups to give the town input on it.

NS: And the state.

BH: It's pretty sad considering how many – really, the East End boys have the strongest membership. Huntington has a fairly strong one. There's quite a few involved there. But around here, there's not a whole lot to do, even with the fishing. Fishing was lousy out here this year. We haven't had oysters in the last couple of years, or else that's normally what I'd be doing up on the North Shore: picking oysters. The clamming is like, when you get my age, to go out there and try to scratch up a bag eight, ten hours, I'll be hurting for the next ten days. My body doesn't take that anymore. Then, as far as going [inaudible] fishing, the price hasn't been there. You have imports. They've been bringing them down from up in Canada. So, you can't make no money. Most of us that do go fishing end up out of our own township. I'll be out East End in Riverhead or something out in the Peconics looking for shiners. Or you got guys like (Carl Frolic?) and his son. They fish out in the ocean for bellies and stuff. They'll go crab-dredging over the winter. Carl would go clamming or oystering. But lately, it hasn't been that great up in Port Jeff and Mount Sinai. So, there's very few of us. Most of it is like Flo is working at the schools. Bundy works for Post-Morrow. Greg does carpentry work and stuff at the beach. When he's not doing that, he goes clamming. Jim Rose, he's been a [inaudible] –

NS: [inaudible]

BH: – bay, and they're basically –

NS: Yes. Lenny Nilson.

BH: Yes. Well, Lenny's fortunate.

NS: Lenny actually is lucky. Yes.

BH: He's got the bait business. If he didn't have that bait business, he couldn't fish as much. He'd have to look for a job. He'd probably be a janitor in the Sayville school system or something. Look at Lowell. Lowell went to work at the airport. You had a lot of them from – we have a bunch of Van Essendelfts working with Flo up at the high school. They're janitors, maintenance people. It's a bunch of them from around here that I know – clambers. They're all working at the school. In fact, another guy that I just know was just telling me he's getting a part-time job there as a groundskeeper. So, people have gone to work for the town. Come winter, when we have ice out here, you better have something else to do. You better not have any bills that you can sit home and sit tight because there's no money to be made out there. We'll become extinct. That's what I said when we had the South Shore Estuary, the meeting up here at the firehouse. They're trying to further promote the clams spawning and all of that, but they might not have any baymen left by then. We'll be the guys in the museums. There'll be a way of

life – I can see it eventually within my lifetime; I don't think you're going to see many baymen.

NS: Is there any current legislation that the public can help to support the baymen in Brookhaven and elsewhere?

BH: Yes. Get rid of the DEC. [laughter]

NS: Well, let's try and be a little [inaudible] –

BH: Yes. That would be about it because then we could realistically – the waste. The waste. I know people with draggers and long liners and everything. They give us these limits where you can – a hundred pounds of pogies. If they go out, you know how many other fish they kill?

NS: Well, is there an alternative plan that you are supporting?

BH: I think some of the things should be – they should allow you to go out. You're better off allowing somebody to fish for a number of days rather than put quotas on stuff. Like say, "Okay. We'll allow you to fish two days a week. Whatever you catch in two days, you can sell; you can do whatever you want with." Rather than telling you, "Okay. You can catch a hundred pounds of pogies a day, fifty pounds of fluke, no spiny dogfish, no sea bass." So, here you are. Draggers kill fish. I hate to say it. It's just a fact of life. Even with catching striped bass, if you happen to be one of the guys with a striped bass permit and you can go out there and net them, how many do you kill?

NS: So, opening up licenses to the more environmentally, less intrusive methods?

BH: Yes. Makes sense. Something that makes sense. The stuff they have is totally unrealistic. Unfortunately, it never gets in front of the public enough that the public wants to do anything anyway. I'm a guy that when I was eighteen, I went down and registered to vote. I vote. I'm involved. Some people say, "Oh, what's your one vote mean?" Well, it means something to me. But most of the public's pretty apathetic when it comes to political involvement with stuff. The public doesn't even know what's going on with fishing and that. To them, they don't care. The only people that get involved are the sport fishermen, and they want to get rid of us. So, anything that they can do to get rid of us, they're for. It's because of them that brought about the striped bass moratorium. It's because of them a lot of stuff's been brought about. I don't know if you ever read the book, *In the Slick of the Cricket*, about Frank Mundus.

NS: No.

BH: In fact, I'll look for it. I'll loan it to you. It is one guy. He is a writer that went out fishing with him. He talks about the different stories and stuff. Mundus talks about it in there, about how with the striped bass, when you figured out the amount of striped bass that are caught by recreational fishermen basically in one weekend far exceed the amount of striped bass that any of these haul seine crews ever caught in the whole season. There's days the guys go on – I've seen them sit out there and not make a set all day. Then make a set and catch nothing. You might make ten sets and catch nothing. There's more fish caught on hook and line than was ever caught

in any of them haul seine nets. That was a money fish for guys. You could get money for them. The restaurants want them, especially the size. You could catch a sixteen-inch fish. Restaurant doesn't want a thirty-inch fish. They want the sixteen-inch fish. So, you go in there. They cook that whole thing up, and it comes out on your plate like that. A whole striped bass. Not a hunk or something. So, to me, politicians go by the way of the majority. Unfortunately, we're the minority at this point.

NS: So, you do not work at all on any of the dragger fishermen issues, [inaudible] like apples and oranges.

BH: No. It's like anything. I'm pro-fishing. If the drag is up against something, I'll have my say too because – hey, now, I couldn't go out and get the federal permits and stuff that I could have a dragger anymore, which is stupid. When we were all clam diggers, you'd go, "Oh, yeah. Well, when I get older, maybe I'll have a dragger. Maybe I'll be a lobsterman." A lot of the guys. But now, you can't be a lot of that stuff because if you weren't in a fishery, you're locked out now. So, a lot of us are limited as to where we can go. In fact, Flo gave up her crabbing license so little Paulie could get a crabbing license. She had to surrender hers so they'd give – because by rights, I have the right to transfer them to my kin. But there you go. Flo, who has been on the water her whole life from the time she was a little girl, has to give up her license so her son can go. So, to me, it's not right. But that's all in pursuit of conservation, to conserve our resource. Half of the stuff they don't know about, though. It's like the horseshoe crabs.

NS: Some people have said that by having these – I am not taking a side on this, but some people have said that if you have these limits now for, say, five years, that it eventually will ultimately protect the resources so that you can continue –

BH: Well, they're not going to open it up. For me, every year, it gets less and less and less.

NS: So, this is becoming more of a permanent policy?

BH: Yes. Yes. They shut us out of something, we're shut out. They want to shut us out. I don't see the federal government giving out any of these permits, and I don't see the state giving out any of these, like more fishing licenses.

NS: So, this has been going on since the early '90s now.

BH: Yes. We get more restricted every year. We have more permits. The crab permit used to cover everything. Now, you have to have a horseshoe permit.

NS: Because was not the intention that this was going to be a temporary conservation measure?

BH: Everything. Same with the striped bass.

NS: Then there would be more equitable redistribution.

BH: Yes, but no, it doesn't work that way.

NS: It hasn't.

BH: No. We get more restricted. Some years, there's less tags. They've increased the amount of striped bass tags. But it's just like with fluke. These guys, you can go out and catch – say, they got a hundred pounds of fluke a day quota. By the time you get in your big dragger and you go out there, fire that thing up, and go out there and catch your hundred pounds of fluke, how much money are you making? I'll tell you, we get the same money for fish as we got thirty years ago – fish, clams, all that.

NS: A hundred pounds really is very little. I just know that when I have been out on dragger boats, you are supposed to catch several hundred pounds of fish.

BH: Thousands of pounds.

NS: Yes. Well, it was dependent on the size of the dragger, but at least the day draggers, you are getting seven, eight hundred pounds.

BH: You're talking about the man [who] has an investment there. That boat isn't cheap. That boat cost him. Even when that boat isn't fishing, it's costing money. It's sitting there.

NS: It is costing insurance, stock space, fuel, and all the rest.

BH: Yes. Yes. Just the maintenance on it. Then, you still have to maintain it. It don't sit there and stay in pristine condition. You've got to paint it. You've got to take care of your gear. If you're not running the gear, it takes even more maintenance usually. So, the way it's going, you see less and less guys.

NS: So, again, I ask you, what can people do to help you on a practical –?

BH: Well, they could get more involved in politicians – vote for politicians that are more for the commercial –

NS: This would be on the town and state level?

BH: Yes, for commercial guys. Basically, all the legislature is geared towards recreational sport fishing. They had the big say. They claim they got millions of dollars they spent or billions of dollars, and they got hundreds of thousands of members.

NS: Well, they do, but that does not make it right. [laughter]

BH: But to me, a lot of it is water quality with everything. Years ago, we should have had a bar and fleet with that.

NS: So, it is not just the license issue. It is the water quality. They will have to take care of that.



BH: Water quality because most of your fish spawn into an estuary system. You don't have an estuary; you don't have fish spawning. Bulkheads are not environmentally friendly when it comes to fish spawning. Usually, it's somewhere where the shore interacts with the water, where most fish, crabs, and that spawn. They're not out in the big ocean spawning. They come in the bays.

NS: Is there anything else you want to say that we should include in our article?

BH: That should pretty much cover it. You see, with all this, we are pretty – Flo will tell you that, give us water quality. We got water quality, and if we have spawning sanctuaries set up, we'll have clams. Maybe not in my lifetime, but –

NS: Do you have particular areas where you want the spawning colonies to be located?

BH: Yes. Those we already picked out. We okayed them with the town. In fact, I went in front of the town board –

NS: Is that something that we can make public so that people can say, "Support the spawning programs at these locations?"

BH: Well, pretty much, we have it set up. It's all in the works now. It's just a matter of getting these bids in and that.

NS: But is it around Great South Bay? What is their location?

BH: Yes. Well, one is out by Blue Point's line out in the middle of the bay here off of Bayport. The other one's right out here, basically. Just to the west of Patchogue River, we have a spawning.

NS: Is that closer to the shoreline, or is it more in the [inaudible]?

BH: That's close. That's right up in the cove here. So, it'll be protected. Because we're hoping to be able to do a relay with that one where we're going to buy clams from Raritan Bay and plan them right there. Leave them to sit there so long. Then we'll go in and dig them up, get so much of bushel, and dump them out in the other area, out in the middle of the bay. That's a requirement that the state has, that they go in areas that's [inaudible]

NS: So, that will not be in a protected cove area. It will be in the open water.

BH: Yes, but it's still protected. It's a spawner sanctuary now. We passed the laws – we went to Brookhaven Town, and Brookhaven Town passed laws pertaining to closing these areas to harvesting. To protect them, to make it a fine that if you get caught in there digging, they can ticket you and fine you.

NS: Are these places that you know where they are?

BH: Yes. They'll be –

NS: What about other people who are not commercial fishermen?

BH: They'll be marking them off. They'll be marking off.

NS: So, there'll be buoys?

BH: Yes. So, they can be policed by Suffolk County, Brookhaven Town. We can have people out there watching these – DEC. If you get caught in one of these areas digging clams, you will be ticketed. But this is all stuff we've worked on – picked out areas according to their dye test and according to areas that we didn't want closed up for a period of years either, or potentially productive areas, but still in an area that was suitable for the distribution of the spawn if the conditions are right.

NS: Okay. This is the end of this interview.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/16/2024