

Narrator: Tom Jefferies

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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Project Description: This project looks at how Superstorm Sandy affected the seafaring community, its residents, and its maritime traditions in Long Island, New York. The project was funded by NOAA/Preserve American Grant.

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Abstract: This oral history interview conducted by Nancy Solomon on November 3, 2015, with Thomas Jefferies, a 60-year-old commercial fisherman from Freeport, Long Island, details his life, career, and experiences, particularly focusing on the impact of Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Jefferies shares his background, describing how he was raised on the bay, influenced by his grandparents who owned a fishing station. Jefferies discusses the daily realities and challenges of being a commercial fisherman, emphasizing the importance of diversifying to adapt to changing conditions and markets. He primarily fishes for bait, supplying local fishing stations and charter boats, and underscores the significance of dependability in his trade. The conversation shifts to the effects of Superstorm Sandy, highlighting the severe damage it caused to his home, equipment, and the local ecosystem. Jefferies recounts the immediate aftermath of the storm, the loss of personal and professional property, and the extensive cleanup efforts. He explains how the storm altered the bay's landscape, including changes in channel depths and marsh erosion, which are crucial for juvenile fish and shellfish habitats. Despite the devastation, Jefferies reflects on the resilience of both the natural environment and the local fishing community. He notes the gradual recovery of the bay and the return of fish populations, though he also points out the ongoing challenges posed by severe winters and inadequate sewage treatment facilities.

Nancy Solomon: My name is Nancy Solomon. I'm the director of Long Island Traditions. Today is November 3, 2015. And your name?

Thomas Jefferies: Thomas Jefferies.

NS: So, can you tell us just a little bit about yourself and what you do?

TJ: Sure. I'm a commercial fisherman by trade. I'm sixty years old, just a few months ago. Reason I bring that up is, when I started life as a boy, I was brought up on the bay. My grandpop and grandma owned a fishing station. As time went on, I went to college. I tried my hand at several jobs, tried teaching, this, that. Kind of stumbled through life. In my late twenties, I kept returning to the bay for income, and actually, I felt better about myself with work. As time went on after that, I said, "I'm going to make a conscious effort, and I'm going to become a commercial fisherman. I am going to work the water." Things at that time were a little – how can I put it – a little more lucrative. The resources, I guess, were a little stronger at the time. We weren't as regulated as we are now, but every fisherman – I always bring this up – not the most popular guy in town because of it, but fishermen do need to be regulated to a certain extent. Anyway, in my late twenties, started working the bay, as I say, sincerely, meaning every day, twelve months a year, depending on the weather, of course. As time went on after that, saved some money and had – I've always had good support from my family. So what we did as a family unit was buy a place on the water where we're at now, and I work out of there and – or, here, I should say. Mostly what I try and do – my meat and potatoes or bread and butter, as fishermen will always tell you – is I do bait. I will catch bait – mussels in the spring for flounder, spearing sand eels in the summer for fluke bait, squid. I have a couple of good-size freezers, and I hand-pack things, and I market it locally. Most of my product doesn't even go out of town here in Freeport. Some fishing stations, charter boats, even avid fishermen. As time comes on, they know I'm reliable. Even if I don't have something, I will always get back to them. Dependability is a great asset in my little world. As time went on, I looked around, and I said, "Jeez, it's only me." My brother, I thought, would always be here, but he had retired. He worked with me part-time for several years and my cousin as well. But due to their circumstances with families and stuff, it was the right move on their part to work in the private sector. Myself, I just chased the dream and I'm still chasing it. Actually, I laughingly call myself IJM, Inc. It's Just Me. I've learned that I'm in charge of product, production, catching, marketing – whatever you have. I'm being a little facetious, but it is true. I've actually carved out a little niche. I can hang on as long as I'm healthy. I'm very proud of that and basically what I do on a day like today – it being November 3rd, I went clamming today. Tomorrow, I'll probably go clamming. What you do when you are a commercial fisherman is – the days of just saying, "I'm a lobsterman, or I'm a cod fisherman," they're gone. You have got to diversify and do whatever you can and where you can hack out a decent season. I've learned also not to – how could I put it? – I learned not to concentrate on one day and look at it as, oh, jeez, I had a great day, bad day, good day, bad day. I look at it in increments of the season. Right now, I'm going into my most depressing part of the season, meaning it's late – well, fall, but the winter is always tough. But you try and sandbag some money and work when you can in the winter. The past couple of winters, as we all know, have been extremely tough. Our bay here is frozen up last year pretty solid, so we didn't get out much. When I say we, believe it or not, there are quite a few of us left in this area, in Freeport. We stick together. We try and – how could I put it? –

network ourselves. If one guy has a hook for someone for a product, I might get a call – “Hey, Tom, I know a guy who wants some spearing for fluke in the spring, and this and that.” We try and help each other. No one’s getting any younger. Actually, the average age of the guys – it’s mostly guys. There are women involved in fishing everywhere in the United States, but locally here, it’s mostly men, and we just try and stick together. The average age is probably mid-fifties. There are no young guys getting into it to speak of. I mean, it’s sad, but it’s just the reality of commercial fishing in the United States. I recently read an article that the average age of a commercial fisherman in the northeast is fifty-seven. So it kind of follows suit. We’re a dying breed, but you can’t just crawl in a shell and die, so we’ll hack it out to the end, and everyone tries to put a good product out, whether it be fish, bait, clams. There’s all kinds of diversification the past few years because, as we all know in the United States, we have a diverse group of people, and we have had an influx of Third World people, and, in the fishing industry, it’s actually helped us. Oriental people eat product that we used to throw overboard. We would call it trash fish. It’s really not trash. It’s high in protein. It’s just that we frowned upon it. But now it’s a marketable product – sea robins, for one, conchs, certain snails, certain crabs that we used to never even market we might sell for bait. They’re being eaten, and it’s good product. These people, they come, a lot of them, from island nations and things of that sort where food is number-one priority. Whatever it is. These people have to eat, and luckily they’ve been a little bit of a boost to us. I recently went into the new Fulton Fish Market. I call it Fulton. It’s actually up in the Bronx now, and it’s amazing the diversification. Things, as I say, that we used to throw overboard are now being marketed. It gives us a little more work and opportunity to target different species that haven’t really – I hate using the term hammered – but haven’t really been overfished. I believe the new term, and it’s a great term, is sustainable. A lot of things that we target are sustainable, and hopefully, as I say, we can continue to work. That’s all commercial fishing is about. If you have delusions of making a big hit and retiring, those days are gone. I’m sure maybe in the ’50s and ’60s and early ’70s in this area – I can’t speak for other states, but on the south shore of Long Island, it’s very tough. Any other questions?

NS: One of the things that’s of interest to people like me and the general public is how things have changed since Sandy. I’m curious. What are some of the things that you caught before Sandy that you no longer see and things that you didn’t see before Sandy that you now catch?

TJ: Actually, when we had superstorm Sandy, I stayed here in my apartment, and we had over five feet of water down below. Lost a lot of things. That happens. Luckily, no one got hurt. But the next day, I can remember I went out, and I’m not one for emotions, but I was pretty broken up. I kind of said to myself, “Thomas, this is it. You’ll have to – if you don’t find something else to do” – I was fifty-seven at the time. For several months, no income coming in. I ate some savings up. Luckily enough, there was disaster relief unemployment. I took advantage of that. I qualified for it. I kind of hung on. Came around April or something, the phone started to ring again. “Tom, could you get bait? Could you get some mussels for flounder fishing?” And I’m like, “Holy jeez. There is hope.” Then I was a little apprehensive going out in the bay. I hadn’t really done anything except taking a ride and looked around for months. The bay was closed to clamming, fishing. When you get a hurricane or a storm of that magnitude, the season is over. All you can do is hope that the species that you target are very resilient and will come back. Luckily, the next spring, I had a fairly good spring. I was surprised. There was spearing, pretty good. The clams didn’t open up for a while because that’s

understandable because there was so much run-off and oil. Anyone who lives on the south shore, Jersey shore, knows the contamination that was put on the great Atlantic Ocean. But it did clean up. After, I guess, six or eight months, they opened up the bay to clamming. We really didn't come across any different species or anything, but the bottoms had changed. Places where there used to be deep water, where I might set my net, they'd shoal up. A lot of debris. There was a tremendous amount of debris that was underwater that you didn't really know was there until you set your gear. But sometimes, a structure like that is where life starts for fish and shellfish. They have little places to hide. Around a wreck is always good fishing. So somehow, as time went on, it was very depressing because we still have houses that are empty here, empty lots. A lot of people just took off, went for greener pastures, and I don't blame them. But Mother Nature is very resilient. I was totally impressed. Every month it got a little stronger. Actually, the next year in October, I went bass fishing with a gentleman who has a commercial boat out in Shinnecock, and I try and fill my bass allocation with him each year, and I have for the past eight to ten years. I can't really get a handle on it right now. But we went out, and in one day, I filled my quota. You would never think that after a storm of that magnitude, the fish would be there. But fish, crabs, they'll hunker down, they'll move to deep water, and, as I say, I was just totally impressed with the fortitude that these animals or creatures, whatever – not knowingly; it's all on instinct – how they came back. Birds, osprey were here, terns, things that we count on every year. These are signs. A fisherman doesn't watch the – or read the calendar. He'll look. In my case, when I see egrets in the spring, there might be some bait around. When I see terns, I know there's bait around. Don't look at the calendar – look at the birds, I was told by my grandpop many years ago. But as time went on, I think the storm did take its toll, but between the fortitude of – I can only speak for the friends I have here who are commercial fishermen – and we're not a tough lot, but a hardy lot. When you have something that you enjoy even when it's snowing and it's cold and you had a bad day, but you know that at this point you can hang in there, the resiliency of not only the species but of our commercial fishing guys here, the strength is amazing. We have a couple of guys who are, believe it or not, older than me, and they still got in a boat in the spring. We have one guy, Anthony (Sukstadt?), who's a great friend. He saddled up on the spring, got ready to go fluking all summer, didn't miss a beat. And he's probably well into his eighties, but he understood, "This is what I do. What else am I going to do?" The fish are better off than we were on land with the flood and the torrential rain or whatever – the wind. But it was just – it was scary and for quite some time. And luckily, we bounced back. I don't think we're a hundred percent. Actually, this year was the worst year I've had for bait. Nothing to do with Sandy. In thirty-two years – I can put my finger on it, and a lot of other fishermen can. We've had tremendously hard winters the past two to three years. Last year in the month of February, I believe we didn't have a day over thirty-two degrees, and when you get a freeze like that, I've learned over the years that these clams and crabs and fish, they can't take it. They will just die. They don't have the – when the storm came, superstorm Sandy, they left, they came back. When you get a freeze like we had the past couple of winters and endless snow, snow on top of snow, the water gets too chilly. Nothing can survive. It's almost scary. So that, in my eyes, took more of a toll on what I do this year than Sandy did the year after Sandy – the next season, as I call it. But the winter, I feel, is tougher because – not to candy-coat a hurricane or a superstorm or any kind of storm of any kind, it's just – it comes, and it goes. Last year, we had snow before Thanksgiving. I had snow in the corner of my yard well into the end of March. I mean, it was relentless. We had a very – how could I put it? – chilly spring, if any spring at all. We went right into summer and I found, and I believe, that species

have more of a tough time rebounding from that than a hurricane – a major hurricane – because I believe it's just the speed that the storm comes and goes, where winter is, as we all know, a long and cold process.

NS: Now, you mentioned that the bay was closed right after Sandy. Can you talk a little bit about why they closed off the bay, what you remember seeing, and why it was closed for so long?

TJ: Rightfully so. When I say the powers that be, that's the New York State DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation], the FDA [Food and Drug Administration]; they closed it, and rightfully so. Our bay – I can only speak for our bay, Town of Hempstead waters here – was polluted to the max. I mean, the run-off I can only imagine. At night, we could smell oil leaching out of the ground, tanks all over, abandoned boats that would leak, leaking gasoline or any kind of chemicals. When I say the bay is closed, the governing forces came in and, as I say, rightfully so, just closed all shellfishing. We don't need people to get sick for greed or whatever. What got me was the length it was closed, meaning timeframe. But we do have, in the State of New York, I believe, good testing, good solid testing program. Here in the town of Hempstead, I know we have a good program. Every Monday, I would see the town boat out, and they will take water samples in the same area. They'll document that, and they're looking for certain chemicals or lack of, good water, bad water. This gives us the ability to put out a good product, a safe product, that people enjoy. A local product is – how can I put it? – the shelf life is stronger than something that comes from out of state. Plus, I can only – we have quite a row of restaurants here on what we call the Nautical Mile in Freeport, and seafood is number one king. People love to know that the seafood they're eating comes locally. They love to see the boat come in, the men unload, and then they feel better about what they're eating. It's a fresh, good product. But the bay was closed for quite some time to shellfishing. As far as bait fishing, what I do – I had no problem the next spring into the summer. I actually put up good numbers and did pretty well. But clams don't have the ability to swim, as we all know, and they stay in the bottom. Same with crabs. And they're subject to the chemicals or run-off. As I say, here in my – as I call it – little paradise, I would rake the lawn or whatever you call it, my backyard, almost every couple of days and still find like oil (petals?), things I thought were only indigenous to the *Exxon Valdez*, things I had only seen pictures of. As I said, as time went on, the earth – I am thoroughly amazed at its resiliency and nature's strength.

NS: So how long was the bay closed off for clamming, and how long was it before you could catch bait fish?

TJ: Well, as I said, I didn't even attempt to go to work until – mostly what you do after a storm of that magnitude is you clean your house, you help your neighbors. I had my – one of my boats was over the dock, up in the street. I mean, it takes time, and you have to prioritize everything. I don't need to get my boat in the water tomorrow. I need to get electric. We went several weeks without electric. It happens. I mean, these are natural things. The local electric companies had to turn off the electric for fear of fires and sparking up. So we had no heat, and as everyone knows, a few days after superstorm Sandy, we had a pretty cold nor'easter drop five, maybe six inches of snow. It got a little testy around here. But you're in it for the long haul. As far as clamming, I think it opened up around the 4th of July. I'm not sure, but it took quite a while.

The storm was October 29th, so that would be several months, six months, possibly even longer, for the bay to get good testing. Our local Department of Conservation and Waterways didn't go out the next day after the storm. There was no need to. I mean, this place was like it was a war zone, for lack of a better term. But as time went on, even our Conservation and Waterways department, our lab got flooded down in Point Lookout. State-of-the-art place, but it got pummeled. So it takes time. First, you have to get your house in order. Then you get your gear in order. Then you start thinking about going back to work. But as far as clamming, and I don't clam much in the summer, the guys I speak to said that they had a good year. Clams, they are – Jacques Cousteau said they are the cleaning agent of the ocean. They filter water. That's what they do. That is their job. So they were pretty busy for a few months there, I'm sure, filtering out everything. But clamming opened up, I believe, around the 4th of July the next summer, which would be 2013. We kind of righted ourselves, and actually, I've had a couple of good seasons up until this year, and I attribute it mostly to our tough, tough winter. Hope we don't have that again for quite some time.

NS: Now, were you able to start catching bait fish before you went clamming?

TJ: Yes. I started in 2013, as I say, probably around the normal time I would start. I saw terns, osprey came in right on schedule, you know, and the egrets. As I say, these birds are telltale signs of bait fish coming in, fluke coming in, striped bass. You know, they're the first thing you'll see – that we will see. Clamming, as I say, opened up around 4th of July. But fishing, bait fishing, I had a good year, good numbers, steady, and – but our fish do migrate out of here, meaning the bait fish, you know, late October into November anyway, so they might have been out of here before the storm and really not subjected to it that much. I really don't know.

NS: You mentioned that there were more sandbars, more shoals in the bay. Were there other changes that you noticed in the bay, in the environment, in the marshland?

TJ: Oh, yeah.

NS: If you could describe that.

TJ: A lot of erosion. We have a group of people who are privileged enough to have bay houses. My family has one. We lost ours. We just actually got approved the other day for rebuilding, three years later. We brought it in under the wire. A lot of houses, bay houses – as I say, I believe there were thirty-two there at one time – and quite a few were swept away. I mean, when you get that kind of surge, I'm amazed no one got killed. Anyway, we've been allowed to rebuild them. There's quite a few right now that are, I would say, halfway or maybe, even more being rebuilt. My family, as I said, just got approved the other day. We're very excited about that. We got our lease from the town of Hempstead, and we intend to rebuild.

NS: I'm talking more about changes –

TJ: In the marsh, yeah.

NS: – in the bay and in the marshland. What did you notice?

TJ: Well, depths in the channels were changed. They would be a little narrower. As I say, how many million tons of sand and grit and rock even were shifted in the marsh. We lost a lot of marsh. The sad reality is that is probably the most important thing in juvenile fish. They need that marsh. A lot of people look out at the marsh. You know, they'll go down to the end of the nautical mile and there's a great view out of the open bay. It's nothing. It looks empty. But that's where life begins for most of our species, and a lot of it was beat up on, for lack of a better term. Large chunks were actually moved. There's one place out in Baldwin Bay here, we call Bay (Hazic?). That's gone. I used to be able to dig mussels on there. Three men, my cousin, myself, and my brother, we would get twenty to thirty bushel a day off of this one piece. It's not there anymore. It's just gone, you know? It was almost comical, riding around one day – "Jeez, it's gone. Where is it?" I thought I lost my bearings. But other than that – docks. We still have an amazing amount of empty houses here in Baldwin Bay. There's a little peninsula called Bay Colony – beautiful homes at one time. If I come in on a late tide bait fishing or clamming, there's no lights on. Maybe one out of three houses will have lights. It was a catastrophic storm, and it did take its toll. But as I say, our group is a hardy group, and we're in it for the long haul. But not too many young guys getting into it.

NS: You mentioned that these marshlands are essential for young shellfish. Are you seeing changes in the populations of those shellfish?

TJ: I did well clamming today. It's a resource that if the water quality stays good and the flow is good, here we're very lucky. We're very close to the inlet – Jones Inlet. We get a six-to-eight-foot tide drop every day. On moon tide, it could be ten, maybe even eleven feet. What I'm getting at is that gives us the [ability] – we get fresh water from the Atlantic every twelve hours. I mean, right now, it's high tide here, but this morning at seven o'clock, when I left to go clamming, might have been seven feet down. It was quite a bit. So how many gallons of good, clean ocean water come in and flush the bay? When they do that, the clams are going to be healthier; the mussels are going to be healthier. All the shellfish, as well as finfish. But the marsh has taken a beating. Again, I bring up a winter with ice. Ice is – it'll just shave off giant chunks, believe it or not, as big as this table or even bigger. What I've also learned – you go to school when you're a fisherman all your life. You'll see things different every season. You have to bend; you don't break. Marsh does not seem to rebuild or come back. When it's gone, it seems to be gone forever, which is very dangerous because, as I say, for all intents and purposes, that's where life begins for most of our local species. Not pelagic species, meaning species that are way out in the ocean – tunas and shark and things like that. It's a necessary part of us, and thank God, here on the south shore of Long Island and in the town of Hempstead – as I say, I can only speak for our little area – someone had the foresight many years ago to put large parks on the open bay. By doing this, they kind of stymied the development of bulkheads. And everybody loves to live on the water. It does have its price because of the tides and the storms. But bulkheading takes away the marsh. It hinders the flow of water to a breathing thing, meaning the marsh. Once that's gone, it's gone forever. But development here in the past, say fifteen years, has pretty much stopped. There are some good environmental groups that have lobbied against it, and housing is almost non-existent, being built on the south shore in the town of Hempstead, that I can see here. We need the marsh to survive. I mean, that's where fish and crabs and lobsters come from. Not lobsters. I'm sorry. Shellfish.

NS: Are you seeing declines in those shellfish because of the decline in the marshland?

TJ: No. Right now, we run a good seeding program here in the town of Hempstead, meaning our own lab grows seed clams until we put them out. They seem to take. What's hurting us in the town of Hempstead is, of course, Sandy took its toll. But I think we bounced back pretty well. Not a hundred percent. The winters, as I say, have taken its toll. But here we have a sewage problem. We have antiquated sewer plants, and we have a high population density and this, I think, hurts our finfish and shellfish population more than the loss of marsh because that's kind of been stopped with the stopping of development, meaning reclaiming land and building on it. But our sewage treatment plant, one in Bay Park, is antiquated. Hopefully, some monies can be released to take care of this because we have had, to the west of us, a large piece of the bay that has been closed for many, many years because we have a couple of municipalities that refuse to upgrade their sewage treatment plants. I believe I'm correct in saying this – I hope I am, from what I've read and some meetings I've attended – that if they hit a certain number of gallons of sewage that the plant can't handle, it will just release raw sewage, and that's the kiss of death. That will kill you and I. I mean, sewage causes disease. It can be treated. I believe the term is tertiary, which is the cleanest that the sewage can be treated, and it almost discharges water that is as clean as goes in, in the beginning. But I wish that we could see the monies being released for our sewage treatment plants. There's one in Bay Park, as I say, and Cedar Creek, I believe. They're just antiquated, and we do have the technology. We probably have the money. But for some reason, it hasn't been released. I believe that it was going to be released after Sandy. I'm not up on this a hundred percent, but it's just disheartening because it hurts everybody. It hurts the recreational fishermen, the recreational boater, someone wants to go swimming. It's just something to be taken care of.

NS: So you mentioned some of the damage that was done to your home. Can you talk about the damage that was done to your boats and your equipment and the docks?

TJ: Sure. Well, I was halfway lucky. I stayed here, and I had taken my boats out. They're only functional boats. They're called Garveys. They're little clam boats. I have two. My uncle built them – very proud of that. I always bring that up. But one was out in the street. It kind of took a beating a little. The other was on the fence. I lost a motor downstairs. Actually, I was a little luckier than most because I stayed and I don't think I'd ever stay again. It was a little nip-and-tuck there for a while, but I was able to – I would put my waders on and go down and adjust the lines and make sure the floats weren't floating free. But a lot of people evacuated and rightfully so. As I say, it was very scary. I actually got knocked down under the water in my waders, and for a split second, I was in fear of my life, for lack of a better term, but I came upstairs. We're on the second floor here. I closed the door, and I told my girlfriend – I said, "That's it. We're not going outside. Close up everything. If we lose anything, we can always get it again. Nothing is more important than our lives." But it was a tough night. Very spooky. Very eerie. I prayed a lot, and it went our way. So lucky in that. But damages incurred for me were minimal because I was here. But as I say, if a storm of that magnitude comes again, I don't think I'd stay. I would fear for my life. [laughter] I did.

NS: What did you have to replace in your fishing business?

TJ: Well, I prepared for this one pretty well. I didn't lose much. My season, meaning my bait season, was pretty much over. I had turned off the freezers a week or two before, which I usually do around Columbus Day in October. I was winding down and getting ready just to go clamming through the winter. I was lucky enough that year to fill my bass tags, my bass allocation, right before the storm, not knowing that the storm was even there. It was just luck. I believe, from the people I've spoken to out at the DEC, that year was the lowest that bass allocations were filled because of the storm. As I said before, once you get a storm like that, all bets are off. Fishing – you could be the best fisherman in the world. You're not going to catch a [inaudible]. It's over. But luckily I came out standing up, only because I was here and my friends, the group I work with, we all pulled together. You do what you can, but you don't know until game time how bad it can be.

NS: So, what were some of the preparations that you made?

TJ: First, taking boats out, bringing as much stuff up to a higher place as I thought. But, you know, five feet down at street level is a tremendous amount of water. I lost all my tools, some sentimental things, pictures, and the like. I would have never thought they'd get into cabinets – meaning the water. But, as I say, I was lucky. What we did as a group –we'd take out my neighbor's boat. He's a clammer and a crabber as well. And we'd do mine – put them here, put them there, tie them down as best we can, and just prepare for it. It's funny how you pull together. You might not see eye to eye on the clam bar or on the fishing grounds. I mean, you tolerate each other, but fishermen are territorial to a certain extent. But we have a lot of heart. When something like this happens, it pulls you together. It's a unifying thing because we're all in the same boat. Life and limb is at risk, but material things, your tools of the trade, are at risk, too. If you lose them – some of these things are very hard to come by. They're not manufactured anymore. Like my nets, I didn't lose any, thank God, but I buy the material, [and] I hang in my own nets. It's very time-consuming. You don't want to be doing that every year unless you have to. I was lucky enough. I came out not unscathed, but just bruised, not really beat.

NS: What were some of the things that you did lose? You mentioned your tools.

TJ: Just tools. A couple of outboard motors that I kept downstairs that were backups. When you do it for a living, you do not want to miss a day. If your motor breaks down, you have got to have another one you can throw on the next day and get working, and then you'll have that – bring it to the mechanic and have him fix it. But I was pretty much lucky. As I say, some freezers, small freezers. My big freezer unit, which is my meat and potatoes when I'm packing bait, that kind of floated away, but we were able to jack it up and push it back. The compressor was on top, so that didn't get damaged. I was lucky there. Sometimes it's just luck of the draw. I know guys who lost their boats. I didn't lose mine. I was lucky. There were a couple of things that worked for us during Sandy when you reflect on it. One was we didn't have that crazy wind, thank God. You know, eighty, one hundred mile-an-hour. I've never seen that. I don't care to. We did have the tide and the surges, everybody knows. I was surprised the next day when I went out in the yard. I mean, everything was helter-skelter, but one of my boats actually came down plum on the ground. These boats don't have automatic bilges. As I say, they're

called Garveys. They're just a functional vessel. There wasn't much rainwater in there. And I said, "Jeez, I don't think it rained that much." After time went on, it did rain that much. So we were lucky in two out of the three things didn't really transpire, the wind and the rain. But we were on alert here just last month with Hurricane – that was out in the Atlantic – Joaquin. I'll tell you what. Once you're bitten, you're [twice] shy, as the old term goes. I was – "Oh, man, we don't need this." They were talking winds of a hundred and thirty – and I talked to my brother and I said, "John, man, a hundred and thirty miles-an-hour." I said, "We got to leave. You walk out the door, you'll be killed. I mean, stuff will be flying all over." But luckily, that veered out into the open ocean. As I say, now when I hear the hurricane word, I cringe, and I do every few days watch the national tropical update when it comes on about ten to the hour. And I'm like, "Oh, thank God. It's quiet in the Caribbean." You talk about a smile – *ah*. But it's just – keeps you on your toes, but there is nothing you can do except prepare for it. Prepare for the worst, and hopefully, it goes your way.

NS: As you've mentioned, there have been other storms and hurricanes in your lifetime. Can you kind of compare them to Sandy?

TJ: Well, we, in this area of the country, had been spared for quite a number of years. We did have a couple of nor'easters with tide – relentless tide – but it wasn't that big surge of Sandy – five and six feet. When we had Hurricane Gloria in the mid-'80s, we were lucky here that that came at low tide, where Hurricane Sandy, superstorm Sandy, came on the moon at the peak of high tide. It was perfect. I mean, in a horrible way. You couldn't ask for the weather gods to have all gotten together and create this. I mean, on the full moon, which is the strongest puller on the tide of the month. That's when we got hit. Actually, we got hit twice that day. The tide in the morning was up in the street, and it only dropped – came over my bulkhead – it only dropped – my neighbor measured it – he's a dock builder – twenty-one inches. So low tide was extremely high tide. The tide never receded. It just built up on it. I actually went over to my parent's house. They live in Freeport – not on the water – half a block away. Elderly – ninety-one and eighty-six. I begged them, my brother and I. At low tide, I had to walk down with my boots because low tide was in the streets, and it was bizarre. We begged them [to] please come to my brother's house, which is on Atlantic Avenue. We always were taught that's high ground, good ground, because of the big trees. They wouldn't go. Okay, God bless them, but it was a little unnerving because we didn't – told them we cannot contact you when this comes. You're kind of on your own here. My brother, as I say, who lives on Atlantic Avenue, which is up north from here, was kind enough to say, "Come on, mom and dad". But the storm was so catastrophic, and the tide surge so strong, [that] it got in my brother's house. I mean, this went to places that people had never seen. My mom said she can remember the hurricane of '38, but she was very young, and you didn't have as many houses here. This would all be – where I live now – this would all be cattails and marshland. But since then, it's all been developed. We have houses on top of houses, which is fine. As I say, everyone loves to live on the water, myself included. But you got to pay the price sometimes. It's different. I have new neighbors next door – just a quick story. They're from inland – highlanders, as I call them. But they're good neighbors. Now, as standard issue, they keep boots in the back of their car because there are many times on a moon tide with the storm – not a hurricane, but a storm – tide's going to get in the street pretty good down here and in a lot of other places on the south shore: Lindenhurst, Babylon, Massapequa. You have to park your car quite a distance away on better ground and it's

comical when I see my neighbors open up the trunk of their car, put on their boots. You get used to it. But when you get a big one like that, it's tough. But, as I say, Gloria, we got off pretty easy. I have down below some marks since I've been here – I've been here twenty-five years – of tide. Irene, fourteen months before Sandy, was up pretty good, maybe two and a half feet in the street here. But we bounced back again after that. And fourteen months later, we had Sandy. As I say, for a while down here – I say down here because we are on reclaimed land – I felt like a human punching bag. Every time you turn on the weather, "Oh, here comes another one. Here's another nor'easter. When's it going to end?" But maybe it's cycles, maybe it's climate change. Whatever it is, you have to get with the program and deal with it, especially if it's what you do for a living. My office is out in the boat, on the water. Every day it changes. We had an easterly, as I say – not only this Hurricane Joaquin earlier in the month which, thank God, went out to sea – but we had a persistent easterly here. Sun was shining – beautiful. But when I say east, that pushes the tide up into these back bays where we live on the south shore of Long Island and over in Jersey, from what I understand. The tide never gets a chance to recede and it just builds up and builds up and builds up. Luckily we dodged a bullet there. Barring a couple of nor'easters, in my lifetime – my parents talk about Hurricane Donna, which would be in the early '60s – that was pretty bad. But I really can't remember that. And Gloria, as I say, we were lucky. It still took its toll on places – don't get me wrong. But it came at low tide. So the tide surge with that tide drop that I talked about earlier of six to eight feet, you get a tide pushing four to six feet, you're still ahead of the game. But we were just lucky that it came at low tide.

NS: Can you tell me a little bit about when things get back to normal here in your home?

TJ: That took longer than getting back to work. Even now, I have a shop downstairs where I'll make my nets and some traps, whatever. I lost all my tools. But even now, every once in a while, in the corner of my little workbench or something, I'll go get a mayonnaise jar for some screws or something, and I'll see rust in there. It more or less never leaves you. Another thing here. I've been amazed all the – I guess it's called [flora]. The flowers that we had here before the storm – Montauk daisies, some mums. I mean, I'm not a gardener, but these things came right back. I mean, it's almost holy moly, you know? To get your house in order took quite a while. As I said, my parents are elderly, so it was like double duty. But here I'm lucky in that my shop down below is cinderblock and then up here is my dwelling. So it was easy for me to clean up down below. I could open up the garage door, and actually, I just power-washed everything out. And it's tough when for about three to five weeks, the highlight of the day is the garbage truck coming down because [there was] so much refuse. And my neighbors – we all pool our stuff together. I must admit we have a good group here on Cary Place. We all dug in, and then we would limit ourselves because we were without power for a number of weeks to – I had a transistor radio. We'd listen to 1010 WINS once a night for twenty minutes, and that would be it. You go to bed. No heat. You saddle up, and the next day you just start all over again, cleaning and trying to get it back together. It wore you down, but in retrospect, thinking about it, it didn't seem as long now as it did at the time. I know that sounds crazy, but it was every day. But everybody was in the same boat. I mean, to get gasoline, I know we all waited on lines. Luckily, I had some gas in my fuel tanks in the boats, and I siphoned that out for my car. Food was a little tough for a while. All the local markets in the area were closed, and you had to go up to our main thoroughfare, Sunrise Highway, or even further because there were so many people just looking for meals. Then every once in a while – it's funny. We had a couple

of gentlemen come down here. One guy owned a bodega up in North Freeport. He came down the street, and he had a station wagon filled with bottled water, the simple things in life, toilet paper, and he just gave them out. You know, some cookies. People pulled together. You always get cretins and misfits trying to break into houses. We had that, as well. But I mean, at night, when it got dark down here at 4:30 because of the change in October, into November that year, I mean, black as coal and almost spooky. I'm not one to scare easy. But I was a little scared. [laughter]

NS: Sure.

TJ: Even now, in the area, we have a lot of – I brought it up – abandoned houses. We have houses that are condemned. It's sad. I grew up here. These people left, and they don't have the wherewithal or the money to rebuild. Insurance companies – excuse me, but I'm going to be graphic. The heck with them. They don't stand by you. They'll take your money, ten, twenty, thirty years, fifty years. I have an uncle who they took – and they give him a hard time about a claim. I mean, it's sad. When you need it most, they weren't there. They can candy-coat it with you're in good hands, or whatever it is. I apologize for my negativity, but I lived it, and so did a lot of other people.

NS: Would you feel comfortable talking a little bit about how it affected your income those years?

TJ: No. Income, there was none. I was lucky enough to qualify for disaster unemployment, which wasn't much, but when you're down and out, anything helps. It was milk money, food money, whatever, and it helps. And as far as income, as I said, I was lucky because I had filled my bass tags, which is a good hit in October before the storm. You eat up savings. As a fisherman, we were always taught sometimes it's not how much you make; it's what you do with it. I know it sounds crazy, but in my life, what I try and do is look six months to a year down the line because I realize, as time goes on, you have a hurricane, you're not going to be able to work for several months. A bad winter, you're going to be locked in. So you prepare for these things. I used to whoop it up a lot in the winter. I'd go to Florida, Mardi Gras. But as you get older, that can kind of wear down, too. So now, I'm very happy. I get my excitement getting in my boat – a thrill a day. You prepare for that. But my income, myself – I know a lot of guys who go fishing, it's not – the winter is the time to make money. In December – clams. Hey, clams are a sacred thing to certain ethnic groups around Christmas. The market gets high, and there's your winter money in the month of December into January. But it hurt other guys. I kind of hung on and, as I said, my grandpop and grandma – my grandpop was a fisherman, and he taught us not to be cheap – to be a little frugal and to prepare for it and live within your means. I was a little lucky, maybe luckier than most.

NS: I think we've covered quite a bit of –

TJ: I'm sorry. My voice gave out on me. I don't know what the heck happened.

NS: You sound fine.

TJ: Okay. How'd I do? I know sometimes I run off, and I don't even know what I'm talking about.

NS: Let me conclude this interview. Thank you very, very much for –

TJ: Oh, you're smiling. You're feeling better. Good. [Recording paused.] And at night, also, when I went out the last time, I –

NS: Okay.

TJ: Go ahead. You ask it. I'll respond to you.

NS: Can you describe the scene of what was happening here during Sandy? And also, what you smelled during Sandy?

TJ: Well, Freeport – we have our own electric department here, and we're very lucky in that. But as night fell and the storm kind of subsided, it was black as coal. I mean, it's amazing how spoiled we are with electricity. We count on it, and you take it for granted. But there was absolutely no streetlights, no lights except for a flashlight that we had, and we stayed that night – my girlfriend and I. As things subsided, every once in a while, I'd look off to the west, and I'd see not flames, but I thought it was heat lightning. I go, "Jeez, we have lightning." It was a little unnerving in there. But then there was like a purple hue to it, and it turned out to be the electrical transformers exploding that are on each pole or every other pole. I mean, I'm looking around, going, "Holy jeez, man." I can't believe what happened, for starters, and then secondly, what's it going to look like when the sun rises? Anyway, I'm out on my deck and I'm – I know we took a hit. Very, very bad. But you can't really see in there. Everything's out of proportion. Plus, you're disoriented and scared. Even though the tide is subsiding, the wind has subsided; it's eerie quiet. So I'm out on the deck and looking around, and I smell that electric smell of a fire – an electrical fire. Here in Freeport, just a few blocks away during the day, on the first tide, the morning tide of the storm, we had a house that burned up due to the storm – an electrical fire. Burned right to the ground. So I'm going, "Holy jeez, maybe I'm on fire." I don't know. Because it's very disorienting when it gets like this. So I went out on the deck, as I said, and I could make out my neighbor across the way, who's a great friend. He stayed, and his wife and son had left for higher ground. Anyway, I go, "Michael, Michael, is that you?" He says, "Yeah." And he goes to me – he says, "Do you smell fire?" "Do you smell smoke," I should say. You don't smell fire. I said, "Yes. Yes, I do." Then I said, "Am I on fire? Is this side of the canal on fire, or is your side on fire?" He looks around and he goes, "You're not on fire." And I go, "Well, neither are you." But the smell got stronger and stronger. It was coming from the east. So the next day, the sun rises, I look around. I go, "Holy moly. This looks like Illinois or Iowa after a tornado." I mean, there are boats in the street, a car up the block. It's all chaotic. My boats are in the yard, up against the fence. I'm looking around, taking it all in. I have no communication, no electric. I said, "Well, I got to walk over to mom and dad's." It's about a mile and a half, so I throw on my stuff and check up on them. I go over and they're okay, thank God. Okay. We'll have to start cleaning up the next day. There's nothing you can do. Then I said, "Let me go over to the Nautical Mile – Woodcliff Avenue." I go over, and I'm walking around. A lot of people are walking around. There's no straight path. You're walking through

debris and junk – whatever there is. It's all over. One of the fish markets I deal with, been there for over seventy-five years, Fiore Brothers, and a restaurant that was kind of a local icon, The Schooner – they're burned right to the ground. So I realized, being the razor-sharp guy I am, that that's what I smelled the night before. The fire must have been so intense. The fire department couldn't get down there. It just burned to the ground. Luckily, no one was there; no one got hurt. The gist of the whole Sandy thing is, here in Freeport, I expected to hear so-and-so died, so-and-so drowned. It was bad. But luckily, we came out unscathed, meaning physically, and the thought of drowning has entered my life because of what you do for a living, but never burning up. I was more scared of that that night than the floods because I knew from hurricanes previous or what I've read or seen before, hurricane comes and goes. You know, twelve hours, eighteen hours, whatever, it's gone, thank God. But the idea of burning up alive was not one of my favorite thoughts, and actually, it was a sleepless night. Do a little tossing and turning. Any little noise you'd hear, I'd look out the window. Then, as time went on, you know, you start to get your feet under you, so you start cleaning up day to day. But at night, we also found that we were getting a lot of looters. Not here in my little area, but people will take advantage of people who are hurt, and we have our own police department, and luckily, they would get on choke points, and you had to show your license to show that you lived down there to get down there. So kudos to them because, as I say, there are opportunists, and there are people that will prey upon people when they're hurt.

NS: You were also talking about how there were various things that are connected with houses, like oil tanks, oil burners. Can you talk a little about what you saw?

TJ: Well, oil heats the best, so the commercial says, until the two-hundred-fifty-gallon tank home heating oil breaks looks and goes floating down the street, which several of them did. I can only speak from what I saw, but I'm sure there were probably hundreds, thousands, on the entire south shore and two-hundred-fifty gallons of oil on top of water; when the water recedes, it's in the ground. I mean, we were slipping and sliding all over. It wasn't uncommon to see somebody take a spill, meaning fall because the ground was slick. It was like something out of a cartoon. I guess with time, that leached into the ground. My neighbor down the block, she had called the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], you know, when things kind of settled down a few weeks later, and they sent a couple of people down and said, "Well, we know what it is. It's home heating oil. It will leach out, and it will clean itself up in due time." But the smell was very tough for a while, and it would actually make your eyes tear.

NS: Did you see this in the bay?

TJ: Not really. I didn't go out in the bay for quite a while because nothing necessitated it, and there was too much work to do here. I mean, you get up at daybreak, and you gear up for what your task was. Maybe I'll get that boat together. The lumber that's all in the corner, I'll stack or – and you try and stay focused and do a simple task one day at a time. You can't do everything at once. You'd be overwhelmed. It was several months before I did clean out my garage. I took everything out, and I had to bring it back in because, to make my insurance claim, the insurance company would not take my word for what I had lost. They had to see it. So I had an insurance agent come down here January 19th. I can remember the date. And I was like, where you been? I feel like Custer – the cavalry, you know? I've been left alone, and I can be a little wise guy at

times. I didn't mean to. He was a gentleman. But I said I'd been stumbling over this stuff. It's junk. It still has water in it. It's shot. A couple of freezers and two outboard motors – whatever it was. All my tools. But it's their policy. They left a sour taste in my mouth, along with some other government agencies, but I won't get into that. It was just tough, but we overcame and, as I say, I end it with the bay and ocean are very resilient, and it will separate, a storm like that. People who want to stay on the water, love the water, boating people, or just people who love to go down to the beach and walk. Birdwatchers. It encompasses a lot, the water – the people it draws. I'm not saying we're a hundred percent out of the woods, but we've done pretty well over three years. I'm pretty impressed.

NS: Okay

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/17/2022