

Narrator: Ken Makes

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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Abstract: This interview with Ken Makes, conducted by Nancy Solomon on April 12, 2016, delves into Makes' lifelong experience as a bayman in Hampton Bays. Ken Makes recounts his family history, emphasizing that his family has been settled in Southampton town since 1657 and in Hampton Bays since 1740. He details his upbringing and early experiences on the bay with his grandfather and father, both of whom were involved in bay-related work. Makes shares his journey from working on Wall Street to returning to the bay to support his family. He recalls the once-abundant eelgrass and the thriving shellfish populations, contrasting them with the current diminished state due to environmental changes and pollution. Makes describes his methods and tools for fishing and shellfishing, including the use of eel pots, fyke nets, and pound nets. He highlights the decline in baymen numbers from 175 in Southampton Township to around fifteen in 2016. Finally, Makes discusses the impact of regulatory changes and environmental degradation on his work.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. Today is April –

Ken Mades: Eleventh or twelfth.

NS: April 12th, 2016. I'm talking with Ken. How do you pronounce your last name?

KM: Mades.

NS: Ken Mades of Hampton Bays. He's a bayman. First, can you tell me a little bit about your own history on the bay, who you learned from, how long you've been doing this, and how you got started?

KM: Well, my grandfather worked the bays. He farmed, and he fished. My father, after World War II, when he returned from the Pacific, was in the Coast Guard, but he got a disability discharge from what had happened to him over there. He worked the bays also. I worked the Bays almost my entire life. My grandfather and other mentors that I had when I was very young – I got out of high school – “Do anything you want, but I want you to get an education.” I had friends in New York. I went to New York, and I worked on Wall Street for quite a few years. I attended the New York Institute of Finance. Started to have a family. My wife was from East Hampton, and of course, I had been born and lived my life here. Once we started to have children, life there was just out of the question. We moved back, and I remember Grace said to me, “Well, what are you going to do?” I said, “Well, I don't know yet. But I know what I can do in the meantime. I can work the bays,” which is what I've done. It's wound up [that] I've been doing it all my life now, and I'm seventy-eight this month. So that's a long time.

NS: Wow. Can you tell me when you were born and where you grew up?

KM: I grew up here. My family has been in Southampton town since 1657 and Hampton Bays since 1740, right when Foster, my great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather, was the first settler of the Ponquogue section of Hampton Bays. We still own a small piece of property from the original homestead. My mom still lives on it. She's going to be a hundred and two in May. Hundred and two, never been in a hospital, never had a surgery, hundred and two years old – on no medications. [laughter]

NS: Wow. Tell me about your growing up. What were some of your first memories of being on the bay?

KM: Really with my grandfather. With my grandfather on the bay, it seemed that we were always there for something. I mean, whether it was to get a few clams to eat or to catch some fish or some eels or whatever. Of course, as a boy growing up, it was a paradise here. You have to realize that right after World War II, when I was a young boy, I think we had a population of about eleven hundred in Hampton Bays. It was very rural. About ninety-five percent of the streets didn't exist, let alone all the development that went with it. It was a paradise. And the bay was healthy. It produced probably ninety-seven, ninety-eight percent more than it does now. When I started working on the bay to make a living, we had in Southampton Township about one hundred and seventy-five full-time baymen. There was plenty of product and always plenty of product coming on. Recruitment was happening in a successful way, whether it be fin fishery,

shellfish. You always knew that there was a future down the road. Now we're talking [in] 2016; I think we have about fifteen baymen, and there's very few under fifty.

NS: You said that your father worked on the water. What were some of the things that you did with him?

KM: Well, we clammed, and we fished.

NS: What were you fishing for, and how were you harvesting?

KM: Well, at that time, during those years, eel pots – there were bountiful amounts of eels. We had eelgrass. We had eelgrass; it was so prolific that in the areas where it grew thick in waters that were three or four feet deep, you couldn't run an outboard motor across there; it was so thick. You had to tip it up, and pole across the areas, and the areas were big. It grew practically everywhere. There were places where there was bare sand, where it wouldn't take root for natural reasons. There was a lot of tide flow possibly and sand that was moving with it. It wouldn't take root there. And it doesn't like to grow in areas that at low tide go below about two feet. When we had the eelgrass, we had the briar patch, like for the rabbit. If you take the briar patch away from the rabbit and you let the predators go, the predators have a field day. They'll get them all. This is what happened when we lost the eelgrass. When the shellfish spawned, the larvae got trapped in the rhizomes until calcification took place, and it was able to grow a shell, and then it sank to the bottom, and when it went into the eelgrass roots, it was safe from predators, from green crabs or whatever. It made it. It grew up. The same when all our fishes that spawn inshore, our winter flounder – and of course, our eels don't spawn here, but they arrive here as elvers in the spring. They had that wonderful hiding place that they needed to grow that first few years and be protected from predation. Lost the eelgrass – we lost everything, and the brown tide is the reason that we lost it. Brown tide, red tide, all kinds of tides – all kinds of bad tides.

NS: How many eel pots would you and your father set?

KM: Not very many then because you didn't need to. Didn't need to.

NS: Tell me –

KM: Twenty-five, thirty-five, maybe forty at the most.

NS: What were some of the other things that you were harvesting? If you can go through by season.

KM: Fyke nets for winter flounder in the winter months. Mostly shell fishing there. We had an abundance of soft clams and hard clams.

NS: What kind of rakes were you using to harvest them?

KM: All kinds of rakes – tongs, what we called mud rakes that we used out on the mud that we raked out of the boat with overboard, what we call scratch rakes.

NS: Was there somebody that made them for you? Where would you get –?

KM: Oh, yes. There was a blacksmith – when I was a boy, there was a blacksmith in town that made rakes. He made all kinds of equipment for the baymen, yeah.

NS: What was his name?

KM: Olaf Anderson. Olaf Anderson, he lived back in – he had a shop on Canoe Place Road, right on the bay there. He made very good stuff. He was a very nice man.

NS: What was a typical day like when you first began on your own?

KM: On my own?

NS: When was that? What year?

KM: 1963, when I came back from New York. I shellfished almost exclusively. We still had plenty of clams. Began to set eel pots, fyke nets for winter flounder in the wintertime. I got trap net permits and started to fish pound nets.

NS: What were the most productive areas for you for shell fishing, for instance?

KM: Everywhere. Literally. I mean, there were areas where natural sets occurred more prolific than others, but they occurred just about everywhere. There was no area that didn't have shellfish. I can remember sets of clams where there were fifty or sixty to the square foot over big areas. Fifty or sixty to the square foot over big areas – soft clams and hard clams.

NS: Now, was it primarily right here in the bay or –?

KM: Everywhere. Everywhere.

NS: What are some of the other places?

KM: From Brookhaven Town – I mean, of course, I'm going to Southampton town because that's the area that I fished. Right from the Brookhaven town line all through Quantuck, the Quogue Canal, Tiana Bay, all up to East Quogue, all down here, the whole East Bay. It all set up beautifully.

NS: Would you ever go up to Noyack Bay or Mecox Bay, that area?

KM: Oh, sure. I built my house on Mecox Bay oysters, literally. Literally, yeah.

NS: Nice. Who taught you about pound trapping?

KM: Well, Bert Smith was fishing pound nets, and I got information from him. The first year, I got enough poles and spent the whole summer after work each day building the trap leaders and the pounds themselves. It takes about a month of labor to build a pound net with the poles and all.

NS: How many pounds of traps did you have? Just one or –?

KM: No, I had two the first year. I went up two a year. My son, my oldest boy, was getting high school-aged then. At the peak of it, we set eight in the fall.

NS: Where were they?

KM: Tiana Bay, Little Shinnecock, up to East Quogue, under Shinnecock Hills, on the beach side in front of the inlet.

NS: What kinds of things were you catching? Were they all pretty similar?

KM: A little bit different in different places. I would say sea trout or weakfish, winter flounder in large numbers, and there were always lots of little ones coming on. You never had to worry about over harvest because you would see in the pound nets, because of the fine mesh, that what they held – you would be letting go ten little ones for every one that you harvested. It was always like that. Used to catch eels in the pound nets, summer flounder, fluke, porgies, butterfish. The menhaden fishery going back before the lobster die-off in the sound – it's never come back and never will. Used to sell in the spring of the year, maybe about 150,000 pounds of bait to the lobstermen. A lot of work.

NS: Yeah.

KM: A lot of work. There still is a bait business, but it's out of state now, other than for the recreational fishermen for menhaden that they use for their chum. But we'd get blue claw crabs, white perch. White perch is something that we also don't see very much of anymore.

NS: I was going to say.

KM: Very little. Although there's been a little bit of a resurgence over the last year, it's been generally – it's kind of like – the white perch fishery has been kind of like if you turned the Dow Jones industrial average upside down for the last twenty-five or thirty years.

NS: When would you put your nets in, and when did you pick them out?

KM: Back when we had lots of winter flounder, we used to – last week in March, we used to set our pound nets. We'd fish through until about the end of June. We have a regulation, a town regulation, that we have to take them out at the end of June here.

NS: When did that regulation come in?

KM: Oh, long time. That's okay with us because we didn't want to fish the summer here. It wasn't a type of fishery that we would want to do in the summer. We'd put them back in around Labor Day.

NS: How long would you leave them in for?

KM: Leave them in until late November, a little after Thanksgiving. A little after Thanksgiving.

NS: Did you have anybody working with you?

KM: Sometimes in the spring. I mean, my son worked with me until he went to college. In the spring months, back in the years when we had to handle a lot of bait, I used to have someone go with me in the spring. But I used to do it by myself in the fall.

NS: Now I know eels need horseshoe crabs.

KM: Well, you don't need horseshoe crabs to catch them in the pound net.

NS: No, but in your pots.

KM: In the pots. In the pots, yeah.

NS: So, how has the horseshoe crab situation changed in your life?

KM: Well, it's like everything. There isn't anything as good as it once was. I mean, the numbers are still good. I don't think they're at risk at all. I don't see any red knot starving to death. I mean, I've heard that some are arriving – some aren't real fat. Well, I've been a hunter all my life, and I've shot plenty of waterfowl all my life, and sometimes they're not fat. [laughter] But I don't believe that the red knot are threatened at all because of the horseshoe crab harvest. I think that it did need to be regulated, however. I think that in this state and others that it's being handled quite well now.

NS: Are you doing any eel pots now?

KM: That's what I was doing this morning when you called.

NS: Do you have enough horseshoe crabs for the pots?

KM: Barely, but that's always a problem in the early spring, yeah. I freeze some in the fall. A friend of mine, he's got his first pound nets in, and he started catching a few. I put a few fyke nets in to catch – a couple of fyke nets in to catch a few now. So I don't need a whole lot a day because a small piece of bait is good enough for the eels.

NS: Can you tell me –? I'm guessing that you harvest horseshoe crabs and store them for later use. How do you store them? Do you freeze them? Do you have a horseshoe pen?

KM: I used to have big pens, and now I just put them in live cars, the same as the lobster keeper cars, because I don't have to store a whole lot. I fish eels in the spring and a little bit in the fall, but not a lot.

NS: Do you use horseshoe crabs for anything else?

KM: No. The main use for horseshoe crabs is for the conch fishery. That's at least ninety percent. Coast wide, I would say at least ninety percent for the conch fishery.

NS: Now the pound nets themselves, can you tell me where you get the material, how long it takes you to make the net?

KM: Well, we buy the webbing from the manufacturers. There are a couple. There's one in North Carolina. There's one in Tennessee. They last a long time. I've got nets that are thirty, thirty-five years old that are still good. You might have to replace a little panel here or there once in a while in the wear spots. But they last a very long time.

NS: Do you fix the nets yourself?

KM: We make all our own nets. There's nobody to make our nets. We make all our own nets, and of course, we do all the mending. There's constant mending. For every hour on the water, there's an hour on the shore in this business. For every hour a farmer spends in the field, he's got an hour in the barn. It's the same thing.

NS: I know there have been some recreational boating accidents involving pound traps. Have you had anything -?

KM: Never have, no. No, never have. No. There's been recreational boating accidents with people hitting boats, bridges, navigational devices. You're supposed to watch where you're going. They're very visible, these pound nets. I mean, they're huge. [laughter]

NS: Now, are you required to put lights on your pound -?

KM: Yes, I am, yes.

NS: What kind of boats do you use for what?

KM: Wooden boats that are glassed over.

NS: What style are they?

KM: Well, they're called sharpies. Called sharpies, yeah.

NS: Who builds them for you?

KM: Howard Pickerell, Chris Pickerell's father.

NS: I knew Howard before I knew Chris.

KM: I'm almost knocking on the door of eighty, and he's building me a new one this summer.

NS: How wonderful. That's wonderful.

KM: You got to think ahead. He's in his seventies now. I don't know how much longer I can count on him. This one might go to hell before I do. [laughter]

NS: How many boats have you had in your life? Is that the only kind of boat you've ever used?

KM: Yeah.

NS: So how many –?

KM: Oh, let's see. Eight or nine. Eight or nine boats.

NS: I'm guessing your first boats were all wood.

KM: Yes, they were. They were all wood, and when fiberglass came along – for my use, no one builds a fiberglass boat that is suitable to do the work that I do. I still have a wooden boat for that reason, but it's glassed over.

NS: Let's talk about the demise or the decline of the waters. What are some of your observations?

KM: Well, there's a lot of change. I mean, of course, we've got a problem with a whole lot of things that don't belong in the water getting into the water. It's not just from septic or runoff. I mean, the way we live, all the products we use, it seems to be almost inevitable; the poison keeps spreading. I don't think – if you can't improve the water quality back to the way it was forty or fifty years ago, I don't even think you can maintain what we have now. Whether or not that's possible, I just don't know. I don't think everything will disappear completely. But on the south shore bays, our soft clams are practically extinct now. There's really no soft clam fishery at all here anymore. Some people will say, "Well, you guys caught them all." Well, no, it's just that recruitment does not take place. They don't successfully recruit themselves. The waters are more acidic for one thing, without a doubt, from all the runoff from all the – I'm not a scientist. I'm not an academic, but I know that the waters are more acidic. In the upper bays, nothing happens anymore. Recruitment is zero in the upper bays, where you don't have good flushing. I don't even know if calcification can occur anymore because of the higher acidic levels. It doesn't have to be up there that much. I talk to the academic community a little bit about this, and I don't seem to get any response. [laughter] I don't know.

NS: What are some of the things that you've seen the academics or the scientists try that have failed? Have any worked?

KM: Well, there's no point in planting eelgrass. It's a feel-good, hopeful thing. I certainly can't condemn anyone for trying to do good. But if you can't create the conditions where it will do well on its own, like I said earlier, you might as well plant it on Montauk Highway. It might live for a little while. Think about how much you can plant. We used to have thousands of acres of it, right? How many acres can you plant? [laughter] It isn't going to help.

NS: Have they tried any of the seed – the shellfish seed projects that we hear about?

KM: In the mid-'80s, when we had the worst brown tide [inaudible], mid-'80s, I mean, that was really horrendous. It never even cleared up in the winter. We practically lost our scallops. At that point, where you were talking about possible extinction in the area, I think it made sense to put some scallops in the water here so that you could at least hopefully get enough of a set so that you could keep it going. [TELEPHONE RINGS. RECORDING PAUSED.]

NS: I'm recording again. We were talking about the shellfish seed projects. Who was doing those particular projects?

KM: Let's talk about planting hard clams. Now before Shinnecock Inlet was here, we had no hard clams. A lot of people don't know that. It was like Mecox Bay. The salinity wouldn't support hard clams. We had oysters and soft clams, same as Mecox Bay. The inlet broke through. There was an inlet in Moriches. There were some hard clams in Moriches Bay. There were none here, zero. The set had to come through the Quogue Canal from Moriches. That was the only source. From what I've been told, the shellfish larva, before it actually calcifies in sets, can be anywhere from two days to ten days to twelve days old before it actually sets, right? But right after World War II, the Baymen were catching twenty or thirty bushels of littleneck clams in Tiana Bay per day. Per day. There were clams in the Peconic, through the Shinnecock Canal, a set came and set up the East Bay. Terrific clamming there. This is from zero. You don't need a whole lot of spawners. All you need are conditions that are proper. Now you can plant hard clams all you want; you can't duplicate what will happen in nature. You can't even get anywhere near close. [TELEPHONE RINGS. RECORDING PAUSED.]

NS: We were talking about the conditions.

KM: Yeah, if you can't reasonably duplicate the conditions, all else really is wishful thinking, feel-good stuff. I can't blame people for trying. I'm not going to embellish that.

NS: Are you still able to make a living?

KM: Oh, yeah, sure. I don't need to earn anything like I used to, but definitely. Only reason being, there's not a lot of resources, but there's no competition now. Everyone is gone. So we have it pretty much to ourselves, and there's still – close to the inlet, we get sets. Not like we used to, but we do because you got better water quality. The razor clams set. The mussels set. Not like they used to either, but they do. They do. There's not many people harvesting. I mean, we had bus – we used to have beds of mussels, maybe a fifty, sixty-acre bed, solid. Now you get little clumps here and there. They don't set like they used to either. There's another factor, too, with this destabilized inlet, which without, we'd be in deep trouble. We wouldn't have anything, really, I don't think. We'd probably be closed as far as having certified waters inside here. You've got an exchange of water probably every two days. Complete exchange of water. I mean, you've got a tidal rise and fall of three and a half, four feet. The average depth in Shinnecock Bay probably is below seven. If something does spawn in the shellfish, it's got a good chance of getting – with all the current that flows with that tidal flow, you've got a good chance of it going right out the inlet or ashore somewhere before it ever gets established anywhere over that time period.

NS: So it's too much exchange here.

KM: It's too much exchange, but if you didn't have it, we probably couldn't be certified. We'd probably be – the whole area would be closed.

NS: I know that the state has had a lot of new regulations on what to do with your shellfish once you've harvested. Can you just very briefly talk about what that means to you?

KM: I've got to take shellfish out of – in the summertime, at low tide, warm water coming off the flats, at eighty-degree water, and I have to get it to the dealer at forty-two degrees or below.

NS: So, how do you do that?

KM: I don't think anybody can. I honestly don't think it's possible. We've been doing this a long time, and we know how to take care of the product. I know it's been a problem. The problem came from the west.

NS: Yeah, it came from Oyster Bay.

KM: It came from Oyster Bay, and it came primarily because they've got a lot of clams up there, and they were stacking them up and letting the sun bake them. Once they start to gap, that's a problem. They lose moisture, and at that point, they're weakened. The shelf life goes down. Once the shelf life goes down, if they're too old, they shouldn't be eaten. It's common sense. Now, out here, on a really hot summer day, everybody goes early, and they come home early, a little earlier. We always covered the clams over with some wet burlap or something. All you had to do was keep the sun off. There's never been a problem. I don't see how anyone can comply with this. I honestly don't. Everybody's going to cheat. Let's record that. That's what's going to happen. That's what's going to happen.

NS: One last question.

KM: I'm clamming out of a sixteen-foot sharpie.

NS: I know. Where are you supposed to put a freezer?

KM: I need to get across sometimes six, eight inches of water to get to where I want to go, which is why I have to use this small boat. Oftentimes still, if I'm working where I'm catching quite a lot of large clams along with maybe not too many small clams, I might have ten, twelve packages of clams. I can't put an ice chest in my boat big enough for me to store those clams in. Let alone me have room to work and have my equipment.

NS: I know. I know. One last question. Have you ever had any close calls?

KM: Oh, I've been hurt, sure, plenty of times. This is a dangerous business.

NS: Was there one time –?

KM: We used to have winter. [laughter] I can remember Doug (Jayne?), who recently passed; he was a Bayman, a good friend of mine. I think it was 1977; we had a big freeze-up, and Moriches Bay had twenty inches of ice on it. We were driving our trucks out about five-hundred feet out onto the ice and then walking out about another five hundred feet and cutting holes through the ice with chainsaws. We had a stihl chainsaw with a twenty-inch blade, which wouldn't quite get through in places. It was standing right straight up and down. It was more than twenty inches. We had to take an old-fashioned ice saw, hand ice saw, and punch through that little bit and saw it out. We'd take the blocks out, and we'd clam and keep the clams. It was bitter cold. Some days, it was probably a wind chill twenty-five, thirty below zero. Then it

snowed. [laughter] You couldn't see where the old holes were. Of course, they skimmed over. One guy went in. We marked ours. We would shove some sort of a marker down in the hole when we left it because the snow would drift over the old holes that we had cut. It was dangerous. I remember one day we were out there, and the snow was dry and powdery. It was like a whiteout. It was blowing so hard that you couldn't see the shore from a thousand feet offshore. We were out there clamming. I can remember freeze-ups were common. Every winter, we had freeze-ups. I can remember lots of times breaking ice all morning just to clam in the afternoon with the boat just to get to where you wanted to go. Maybe two or three of us would get together with boats, and we'd break out a piece of ice to get to where we wanted to go clamming. There'd be some open water, and you could cut it out and drift off with the wind and tide. But it's a harsh environment. This finger was caught in a winch. You can see; it works. It's not pretty. I had this one almost cut off with an outboard motor. Yeah, Dr. (Anton?) fixed it up real good. [laughter]

NS: I don't want to take up much more of your time. Is there something that you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

KM: Well, I'm not a cynic, but I'm realistic. I understand it as well as anyone, whether they be from the scientific community – and that might sound like I know it all. I certainly don't. But I do understand quite well how this whole system works. I would say that – my hope is that, at least hopefully, we could keep it at least where it is and not let it degrade further. I hate to see it all disappear. I think about how it was and how it is now. It can make me cry. It can upset me that much. I try not to do that anymore. But there's just too many of us here, and the way we live, and I don't know – and there are more people coming. That's without a doubt. I don't know how much we can change. I just don't know how much hope there really is.

NS: Well, I thank you very, very much for sharing your history, your views, and your knowledge. This will be preserved for future generations.

KM: Oh, thank you, Nancy.

NS: That is the end of this interview.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/9/2022