

Narrator: Alison and Larry Muller

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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Abstract: In this oral history interview conducted by Nancy Solomon on December 14, 2015, Larry and Alison Muller of Freeport, New York, discuss their family's long-standing involvement in the fishing and seafood business. Larry recounts his early memories of clamming, eeling, and fishing with his father and grandfather. He describes how he was born into the trade and began working on the bay at a young age, making significant earnings as a teenager. Larry explains the various techniques used for clamming and harvesting killies, including the construction of traps and the use of horseshoe crabs as bait. He also shares anecdotes about working on different fishing boats, particularly the Northern Princess, and highlights the substantial catches and the demanding nature of the job. His career included working at fish docks on Woodcleft Avenue and managing operations for Captain Ben's, where he handled the logistics of selling large quantities of fish. Alison Muller reflects on her own introduction to the seafood industry, which started in her childhood, riding along with her father during his long work hours. She later pursued a finance education but eventually returned to join the family business, utilizing her skills to adapt to modern business practices, including the use of computers for inventory and order management. The interview touches on the impact of Hurricane Sandy on their business, noting their fortunate relocation to a facility in Farmingdale that spared them from significant damage. Despite personal losses, including their home and a bay house, they continued their operations and provided support to other affected businesses.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. Today is December 14, 2015. I'm talking with Larry and Alison Muller of Freeport of Island Seafood. So why don't you first tell me a little bit about how you got into the fishing business?

Larry Muller: I was kind of born into it, I guess. From day one, I came out, and my father went out clamming – my grandfather. I didn't really have a choice – was just born into it.

NS: So, what are some of your earliest memories of being on the bay and working alongside your father and grandfather?

LM: What? Good parts? Probably when I was a younger kid, going on a boat and catching killies and getting horseshoe crabs and eeling and clamming. You're by yourself, and you're your own – I was thirteen, fourteen years old, doing my own thing, and was making a lot of money. For a little kid, going out and making sixty, seventy bucks a day, back forty years ago, was pretty good money. So making money, having a good time, nothing better than that.

NS: When were you born?

LM: Three blocks over.

NS: When?

LM: Oh, when? '56. I haven't gone very far.

NS: So, can you tell me a little bit about what some of your earliest memories were of going out clamming and eeling and killeying with your father?

LM: Oh, we used to go out (treading?) a lot. We would take an inboard Garvey, like forty feet long, thirty-five feet long, six-cylinder Palmer in it, and we would get – I'll never forget – peanut butter and jelly and orange soda every day. Peanut butter and jelly. My father would put them inside the engine room, so it was always warm orange soda and hot peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And I was like, "We got to do something about this. This is crazy." We'd go out (treading?) all day long. We used to go to the Black Banks, and you'd get nothing but [inaudible]. We'd get twenty, thirty bushels of [inaudible], almost sink the boat, but you made no money [inaudible] because they're only like three dollars and fifty cents a bag, I think, back then or three dollars. Just doing that and going out was a lot of fun. Floating around. Then we got to go to the bay house, go out there. I used to catch killies and stuff.

NS: How did you catch killies?

LM: How do you catch them?

NS: Yes.

LM: First, you got to get the bait. You got to – in the springtime, the horseshoe crab run up on the beach. So you get those, and you make yourself a horseshoe pen. You store them up all

summer long. Take the horseshoe crabs, throw them in the boat, bring them back to the bay house, put them in the horseshoe pen. Over the summer, you cut them up, and the eggs are what the killies go nuts over. You put them in the trap, and you find a good spot. You want to get at the mouth of a creek, a narrow creek, where they go in because when the tide comes in, the killies rush into the creek for food and then rush back out when the tide goes out. So if you got the right one, you fill the pot up pretty quick, and then you only need ten traps to get sixty quarts if you know what you're doing back then. Now, it's probably different.

NS: Did you make your own traps?

LM: Oh, yeah.

NS: Can you tell us how you made them?

LM: You just make a square. First, you've got to make the frame a square. Then you put the wire around it. And then you're going to make the nozzle. The hardest part was making the door. You had to go find some rubber hinges, I would say, because you couldn't use a regular hinge. It had to be rubber because the hinge would rust. It just flipped up. It was very easy to make. Took you quite a while to do it. But once you get one down pat, you just go right along. You get a couple of years out of them because they rust apart [inaudible], bust up, or somebody steals them. But that's part of the game.

NS: So how long were you going clamming and harvesting killies?

LM: Probably – I don't know. On and off, clamming quite a while. Killieing, just when I was younger, when I was in high – just before high school, junior high, that kind of thing. But clamming went right up until we got – until I got married, after I was married, part-time. We used to go musseling for mussels later on because that was good. We would make a lot of money with that stuff. It only lasted like two years, but we would go out and catch sixty, seventy bushel in five hours.

NS: Now, how do you harvest mussels?

LM: Tongs. You go out for – like we used to go by the Coast Guard station, and you tong them up, put them on the boat on a board, wash them off, bag them up, throw them in the barrel. It was very easy to do. Again, you didn't make much money on them, but you caught so many of them that I could go to work during the day at the fish dock and then, after work, go out and catch forty, fifty bags by myself. At three bucks a bag, it was pretty good money for extra money.

NS: Now, for musseling, would you go during high tide [or] during low tide?

LM: Didn't really matter because you're in deep water anyhow. You're in fifteen feet of water, twelve feet of water, so it didn't really matter. Just that was the good part about it; you'd go in whenever you want. You don't have to go low tide or high tide – go any tide.

NS: What kind of work were you doing at the fish dock? Which fish dock are you talking about?

LM: I worked for all of them down on Woodcleft Avenue. Worked for Captain Ben, who used to unload boats, a lot of boats. That's when I used to catch a lot of fish. Used to catch whiting. They would catch a hundred boxes a day. That's ten-thousand pounds every day. Go back out the next day – every single day. And they just – they blew it. They kept on taking and taking and taking and never thought about maybe they got to come back, rejuvenate, and now there's not a one to be found. I mean, these boats, they were small boats down here that used to catch tons of whiting and stuff. And they don't catch one now. Now they're struggling. All of them are gone. I don't think there's one commercial boat left on Woodcleft Avenue anymore. When I was younger, there must have been at least twenty, twenty-five.

NS: Did you ever work on one of the fishing boats?

LM: Oh, yeah.

NS: What are some of the boats that you worked on?

LM: I worked on the *Northern Princess*. That was a boat that went offshore. I worked on that for probably a couple of months, I guess. But I didn't like it. You go offshore, and you're going for like a week at a time. That wasn't for me. I like to go home every night. And the little boats – mostly everybody was family on the little boats. They didn't need anybody else. I'd go in every once in a while if they needed a hand. But I worked on the docks, taking the fish off the boats, bringing it into the market, selling it. I still do it now. But I just don't take it off the boats.

NS: Is there one boat that sticks out in your mind?

LM: Oh, Clarence, definitely, Clarence on the *Sturgeon*. Boat's still down there. He was the best. He probably still is the best – a young guy, hard worker, and he caught a lot of fish, that guy. And another guy, Tommy Legeary – I worked with him on the *Northern Princess*. We caught a lot of fish sometimes. The boat would almost be sinking; we'd have so much fish on it. And it was a big boat at the time. It was like an eighty-foot boat. That was the newest boat around. We bought it brand new. So he was expected to be the best, and he did pretty good.

NS: So, tell me a little bit about the actual work that you were doing. Once the boats came in, what were some of your responsibilities?

LM: Well, you had to get everything ready – your ice, the cartons. You got to find somebody to buy them, which was the big thing because if you're coming in with ten thousand pounds of fish, you better find somebody you can get rid of it to.

NS: So that was part of your –?

LM: Yeah.

NS: So, where did you find the buyers?

LM: Well, we used to ship a lot to the market, New York market. Then we got a couple of guys down in Baltimore we used to sell to. Whatever we could – every day, make a list of phone calls and try to sell what you can. And if you couldn't sell them all, you'd hopefully tell the guys, "Back off, don't go out tomorrow because we haven't got these sold." Usually, the weather – you'd get a good day, then it would start blowing the next day, so you get a day off. Usually, it worked out. But sometimes it didn't; you got a load of fish you didn't know what to do with it. You just had to tell them, "Don't go out. We can't sell it."

NS: So, how did you know who to call to make these sales?

LM: People over the years. You get a relationship, and you try to find more customers.

NS: Were you working for somebody else who had some contacts or already or [inaudible]?

LM: Yeah, I worked with Captain Ben's. That's the company I worked for. I worked for them and did their – ran the company, the fish part, mostly.

NS: How long were you working there? And when did you work there?

LM: Probably around fifteen years, I guess, fourteen years.

NS: When were you working there?

LM: What's that?

NS: When. What years did you work there?

LM: Oh. When was I working there? During the '70s? Early '80s? Yeah, I guess like '80s –

Alison Muller: [inaudible].

LM: – early '80s, yeah.

NS: I also know you ran a fish market for a time.

LM: My uncle in Florida had one. And then, after I left, this guy, Captain Ben's, had probably three or four of them. But I didn't like that stuff. I'm not the kind of guy that's going to sit inside a building all day. I got to be outside, moving around. My father came to work [inaudible], we had one. He took care of the inside of the market, and I went outside and went on the road and started buying fish from different ports, going up to New Bedford, going up to Point Judith, Montauk, Shinnecock, buying fish wherever I had to get it, bring it back, and then sell it down here. It wasn't a great living, but it was a good – we did all right over the years. I'm not a millionaire, that's for sure. But I can't complain. It's had its ups and downs.

NS: So, what happened to the fish market?

LM: Actually, my father died. I said I'd had enough of it. I wasn't going to do it anymore because I couldn't find anybody to run it. I did not want to [inaudible] run it. That's one thing [inaudible] the place to work out of for me. But every time I had to wait there, I was miserable. So I sold it and just started doing wholesale, just driving and picking up fish and selling it and doing whatever I had to do.

NS: Tell me about the beginnings of Island Seafood. When did you form the company?

LM: A year or two before I left Captain Ben's, I started doing it. I would get up at six in the morning, drive to New Bedford, pick up a load of fish. And then, they were catching a lot of fish, so we wouldn't have a problem filling the truck up. And come back down, get back down here eleven, twelve o'clock at night, and then get rid of the fish the next day and, the next day after that, start all over again. It was a long day.

AM: Yeah. He would go up there Monday, Wednesday, Fridays. And then Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, he would do the deliveries around here.

LM: Yeah, they didn't see me much during the week. They'd see me one day a week, Sunday, and that's – pretty much see me sleeping all day long.

AM: But if his truck was going by, we could tell which – oh, that's Dad. [laughter]

LM: Yeah, I would –

AM: At four o'clock in the morning.

LM: – [inaudible] down the street [inaudible] so they'd hear me going by. And did that for a long time. Then I finally got a guy to drive, a couple of drivers, and then it was a lot better. Then I spent some time at home. But it was good. We had a lot of fun.

NS: So Alison, tell me about your beginnings in the seafood industry.

AM: I guess I only started probably just from birth too. We all were born into it. Actually, one of my first things with business in general – and I spoke about this in college – is that my first memory – what made you want to go into business? And I was like, "I don't know. I had a pink briefcase. I would get in the truck with him and go up to New Bedford and [inaudible] bill book and start writing bills out." He had a big thing of keys, so I had to have that, too. So I'd pretty much copy what he had.

LM: I used to take them in the truck with me in their car seats.

AM: Yeah. We'd have our Barbies in the back, hanging out.

LM: We'd be gone for eighteen and twenty hours. And they'd be in there – her and her sister Laura. I had a truck with a sleeper in the back. They would bring their Barbie dolls and all that stuff, and they would go with me for eighteen hours. Every day, we'd see Happy Meal, McDonald's [inaudible].

AM: Yeah, we always had to get some kind of fast food. And then, if we could stop at one of the truck stops with the TVs, we were thrilled.

LM: Yeah, the truck stops have the TVs on the counter when you're eating. Meanwhile, we'd run that road [inaudible], and there's water flying out the back of the truck and ice and stuff.

AM: That was kind of like my first entry into it. Even to this day, our customers are like, "We remember when you were little. You were writing us bills then." And so I actually went to school. I went into finance for a while. Then I was moving around a lot and knew the company was here. I wanted to come. So instead of going into finance more, I used that education to apply to this business and came home, pretty much, to put my roots down.

NS: So when did you come back and start working?

AM: Probably about three or four years ago. My sister also joined us again about a year ago, two years ago.

NS: Now, this is right after Sandy?

AM: I came back right before Sandy, so I was already living here for that.

LM: Yeah, [inaudible] back here for like two years or a year and a –

AM: At least a year before Sandy.

LM: Yeah, we built the boathouse.

AM: Yeah.

NS: So tell me what happened, both in term – well, let's talk about the business first. What happened when Sandy –?

LM: With the business, with Sandy?

NS: Yeah.

AM: All of our stuff is up in Farmingdale.

LM: Nothing.

AM: Yeah.

LM: Not a thing.

AM: If anything, the hardest part was, for about two weeks, we were – we had no electric.

LM: No electricity. But I had a generator.

AM: Yeah, so the only thing would probably be the Internet was having a problem. We couldn't open up anything at the shop. We'd have to use lights – the cars to pretty much light anything up.

LM: Yeah. I was very fortunate because I used to be down on Woodcleft Avenue. It wasn't big enough. I needed a bigger building, [inaudible] building, and we moved out of there and moved to Farmingdale, in an industrial area. We were, knock on wood, very fortunate that we did that because, if not, I would have been out of business.

NS: What are some of the things that you had in Farmingdale?

LM: Well, there's many trucks, forklifts, a pretty big cooler.

AM: Warehouse space.

LM: All the stuff you need to operate a seafood transportation business. It's just a bigger scale. These guys down here have little coolers. You drive the forklifts in and drive them out and whatever you need.

NS: So everything was okay?

LM: Yeah.

AM: Yeah, we didn't have a problem. If anything, we were in high demand because everyone that was on the water and had problems [and] were looking for places to put their fish and buying their time. We have refrigerated trucks.

LM: Yeah, we were helping out a lot of people.

AM: So we were trying to do whatever we could to help our customers that actually were given a lot of trouble from Sandy because we weren't affected as much, at least as a business. If we were able to help some of the customers that are loyal to us, we were jumping on that.

LM: The only thing that hurt us was that nobody was buying anything for two or three weeks.

AM: They had no place to put it or to work out of [inaudible].

LM: So we were holding it for them and going around in circles because you could only bring enough that they could sell that day. And a lot of them just didn't open up because they had no electric, either.

NS: Tell me, what kinds of customers do you have? Where do you sell your product?

AM: We go all through Long Island, all the way out to Montauk so it can be bigger distributors and places like J. King [Food Service Professionals] that give to the restaurants or just fish markets, all [inaudible].

LM: Yeah, we don't sell to restaurants. We'll sell to people that will –

AM: Sell to the restaurants.

LM: – sell to restaurants. We just do wholesale.

AM: Yeah.

NS: Now, what about the fishermen, like up in New Bedford, in the places where you were buying the fish? What was going on after Sandy?

LM: Those guys didn't get hit that bad up there, to tell you the truth. They got – they're prepared for it. They had probably a month after that that nobody did anything because they couldn't get out and get all that stuff back together. But I don't think they lost any boats. Everybody knew it was coming. Everybody prepared. They're big boats up there. They're not little boats like around here. They're eighty, ninety, hundred-foot boats. They're heavy steel cargo.

NS: Were they still catching their typical catches?

LM: No, they dropped right off to nothing. It took a good six months to start catching fish again, a little bit because half of them lost – the boats weren't damaged [inaudible], they lost their gear. And then, if they caught fish, they brought it to the dock, there was no dock to go to, to unload it, so it took probably six months for [inaudible] to get back into the swing of things and start all over again.

NS: So, what were you doing during that time?

LM: Same thing. Trying to get all our stuff back together and helping people get their act together, and just praying I had enough money to make it through the week. We did alright. We helped everybody, and [inaudible] came back a little bit at a time, and I was – I lost my house, so I was focusing on that. And that was a real big issue. I really didn't care about too much else except that.

NS: So where were you living during that, until [inaudible]?

LM: Actually, we were living in the same house. But we had no electric, no heat. Then finally, they hooked us back up to electric, but we still didn't have heat. I was taking the floor –

AM: We were [inaudible].

LM: – [inaudible] house every night, come home from work, ripping the floor up, throw it in the fireplace to keep the house warm. Every night, I'd come home [and] cut up the floor to keep going. And then, finally, the town gave us some portable electric heaters. But we're still living in a house because we had no place to go.

AM: And the house was gutted until –

LM: And we had to –

AM: It didn't have insulation or anything.

LM: We cut four feet down and took the insulation out. But there was still mold and stuff. And we had no place to go. We stuck it out and stayed there for a while. Finally, we decided that the house was not salvageable. It shifted off the foundation, and the foundation wasn't good. In order to raze the house, it would be cheaper to buy a new house because, even if you razed it, you're just going to raze an old house. You don't want to raze an old house that's not good. So we decided we'd build this house here. And this is a prefab. But it was probably one of the best things I did, but worst two years of my life – and my wife and my daughter. It was nothing but hell. And lost a couple of dogs because of the storm. They were down low, sucking in the fumes from the mold and stuff, and they both got –

AM: Respiratory infections.

LM: – respiratory problems, and they died. Finally, my other daughter bought a house down the street. We moved in with her for – I guess we lived there for like a year or a little less than a year while they built this one. But I went full circle. I had my little room, my little TV, my little bed. And you had no place to go. It wasn't your house, so you really didn't – it was my daughter's house, but you get out of work, and you're like, "Where am I going to go?" So I used to come over here and sit in the driveway or something. I had no bay house to go to, couldn't go there. It was a terrible two years.

AM: Pretty much right before Sandy, everything was at its peak for us. The business was doing well. I moved home.

LM: Yeah.

AM: That boathouse was done, so I lived here. The bay house was really doing very well. We put a lot of money into it there. And then Sandy came along. My house is gone. His house is gone. The bay house has moved.

LM: Yeah, we lost everything in a matter of hours.

AM: About ten hours. Yeah.

NS: Let's go back a little bit to the fishing industry. So, New Bedford – people couldn't go fishing for six months. What happened in some of the other fishing ports where you did business?

LM: Probably pretty much the same thing. They had to get their act back together and get their docks together. And hopefully, boats could go out and find the fish and stuff. It took a long time. And a lot of things just never came back, like the mussel beds in Chatham; they disappeared because they got sanded over.

NS: What about some of the migrating species? Did you see some kinds of fish that you used to see all the time just disappear or new things come in?

LM: Well, nobody got out to get anything for a while, so no one really knew.

AM: Well, I know, after Sandy, too, we did have some weird growth that – I think Rob (Waldner?) even mentioned to us that there is some new stuff growing in by the marshes. I'm not sure exactly what it is.

NS: But are you seeing species of fish that are now here that didn't used to be or things that you used to see a lot of when you were buying from people?

AM: [inaudible].

LM: Yeah, there's just very little spearing. Not too many killies anymore. And flounders are almost nonexistent around here. And they used to be pretty plentiful. It's just a lot of things are dying off. They just took too many. Striped bass are coming back strong. Fluke are coming back strong because they put quotas on them and size limits, which is good. But some of the other things, they just took, took, took. And it ain't going to come back. So now, what we do is a lot of farmed fish. Farmed salmon. We do a lot of farmed salmon. They do farmed cod now.

AM: Tuna.

LM: Haddock, tuna, cod, halibut. Pretty soon, everything is going to be farmed fish. There's not going to be that much fresh stuff. If you get fresh, you're going to pay a premium quality price for it because there's not a whole lot of it left anymore. When we started, we used to – the main thing we used to do was flounder, the flounder filet. Now, we don't even see it that much. We used to bring tons and tons of flounders and fluke down. And not that much anymore.

NS: So you've been through your fair share of storms and hurricanes. What are some of the key differences between Sandy and some of the things that had come before it?

LM: The water.

AM: It got in the house.

LM: I've never seen water that high ever. I thought it was – it wasn't the wind. The wind wasn't that bad. I've seen a lot windier than that. But the water just kept on coming and kept on coming. And I was like this – I thought this was a dream. I thought, "This is not happening; this is a dream." And then it wasn't a dream. But it was terrible. I've been [inaudible] bay, and it's been in the bay house, and the bay house has been under, and my house was pretty close to going under. But when it was coming in or going out windows, I was like, "This is bad." The dogs are swimming around in the living room, and the furniture's all floating around in the living room.

AM: Yeah, we didn't leave. We stayed [inaudible].

LM: We stayed. I wasn't leaving. I expected to look out the back door and see the boats upside-down and to see propellers sticking up. But the boats were the only thing – not a thing happened to them. I couldn't believe it.

AM: We did have a floating dock over the back of one.

LM: We had a floating dock on top of one. But it didn't –

AM: We cut it.

LM: – sink. We cut the floating dock off and pushed it off the big boat.

AM: Fine.

LM: Not a scratch. I couldn't believe – I don't know how it ever happened.

NS: Were there special things you did to secure your boats?

LM: Oh, we tied them up like crazy. We tied the hell out of them.

AM: Even the neighbor's boat was – we had to anchor in part in the middle of the canal.

LM: In the middle of the storm, we're fixing his boat.

AM: Because his boat wasn't tied up properly. He didn't really know how to do it. And I was like, "This boat's going to come and knock down my house" because it's that close. So we went out. It was the beginning of the storm getting really nasty. We're anchoring his boat off in the middle, just to keep it more secure in the middle, with the [inaudible] pouring, going crazy outside.

NS: So pretend that somebody has just moved here and doesn't know anything about what to do with a boat in a storm. What did you do that they should know?

LM: You got to tie them away from the dock. We tied them in the middle of the canal, put ropes from one side to the other, if you could, or put an anchor out or something. Keep them away from the dock, so they just flow up and down because it doesn't get rough here. It's just that it's going to be real high and real low. If you're out in the bay or something, you'd be better off taking off and going out and tying off to a pole in the middle of the bay than rather tying it to a dock.

AM: With the tide getting up so high, that's when the boats don't have a dock to stop it from going over anything, and it's going to just jump the dock.

LM: Yeah, it's going to smash the dock. If you tie up to a pole, it's just going to go up and down, up and down, up and down, and probably be fine.

NS: Now, did everybody on the canal do that?

LM: No.

AM: No.

LM: A lot of them didn't. And a lot of boats were lost. There's still sunken boats all over the place around here. Going out in the bay – went out to the bay the next day or the day after; it was like a war zone. It was crazy. Boats and floats –

AM: Just getting out of the canal [inaudible]

LM: – and junk. Oh, boy. There was crap all over the place. You couldn't go fast. You could only go slow because you hit something.

AM: Yeah, you didn't know what was in the water.

LM: Got to go five miles an hour all the way out.

AM: I have a bunch of pictures of that, too, just going out that next day, trying to find the house.

LM: Yeah, the worst thing was that we couldn't get down to the parkway because they wouldn't let you on the parkway. But my daughter lived in Brooklyn, my other daughter, and she was coming home here. She took the parkway. They would let her on the parkway to get up, but they wouldn't let you go down. So she's coming up from Long Beach. She went through Long Beach to get over here. She's coming. I go, "Kristin, stop by the bridge and see if the bay house is there; see how it's doing." "Okay." She calls me up and says, "I don't see it." I'm like, "Well, put your glasses on. Maybe you need a set of binoculars or something." I said, "We just raised the house up." Just previous to the storm, we raised it up about three or four feet and put a lot of money into it to secure it and everything. I'm like, "No, it's probably there."

AM: Yeah. Hurricane Irene did some damage, so we improved everything right after that storm.

LM: So Kristin is like, “I don’t see it, Dad.” And I’m like, “Well, all right. Well, I’ll go out tomorrow and check it out. What am I going to do?” But there was one underneath the bridge, and one drifted away and got caught under the bridge and collapsed. It wasn’t ours, thank God, because I’ve seen the picture, and I know what my house looks like.

AM: Yeah, because that was in the news.

LM: Yeah. So we hop in the boat the next day, and we’re going down. We go through the little bridge. When I get on the other side, I’m looking; there’s no houses there. There was one. And I’m like, “That’s it. We’re done. If it ain’t there, it ain’t there.” So we go a little further, and I make the turn to come around and look. There’s my house right up against the causeway. I’m like, “You got to be kidding me.” It’s fully intact, all four walls, all the windows, all the doors. But everything is ripped; the whole inside is ripped clean. Half of the walls are ripped clean. But it was square, and it was all together. And I was like, “You got to be kidding me.” So right away – “We’re going to save this. We’re going to do this. We’ll put it right here.” We looked at it further, and the girls cleaned it out. I helped them a little bit. Because I was pretty depressed. I was like, “This ain’t happening this time.” I just put twenty-six or twenty-seven thousand dollars into it. I ain’t going to do it again. So we waited like a year, and we found somebody to try to lift it up because something – here was going, “no” and here was going, “You got to do it.” So we found somebody to lift it up. And they lifted it up and moved it up [inaudible] on the bank because it was half in the water, half out of the water where it was. His barge wasn’t big enough to pick it up, so he just moved it up a little bit.

AM: That was Rob (Waldner?), the son, helped us do that.

LM: Yeah, the son.

AM: Because after that, he’s one of the only friends I had that also had a bay house. I was like, “How you guys doing?” He does dock building, so they helped us at least get it out of the water, so it wasn’t sitting in mud for half of the day.

LM: Yeah. Going back and forth with the town, the town said we could put it back as long as we put it back in the same spot. We couldn’t find anybody to lift it up to put it back in the spot because all the cranes around here were smaller cranes. So we found one guy after a year. Was it Freeport?

AM: Chris [inaudible].

LM: Chris [inaudible]. And he said, “Yeah, I’ll give it a shot. He says, “I’m not guaranteeing it’s going to stay together because you might lift it up, and the whole thing just collapses.” He says, “But I think I can lift it up.” So we agreed on a price. He went over there. He put the poles in. And then he went over and picked up the house, and it stayed together. It was a miracle. I couldn’t believe it. It didn’t look pretty because there was no siding, no roof, no shingles. But he picked it up, put it on the barge, brought it back over there, and put it in place.

AM: And then Chris, I remember, saying to me – he’s like, “I’ll try it. There’s no guarantees.” He’s like, “But you can’t be there because if this house crumbles, I’m not looking at you.” Because he knows it would be devastating for us. So he didn’t tell us when he was really doing it because he – obviously, we were out there checking on everything every day to see where it went.

LM: I was very surprised that it stayed together in one place. And it cost a lot of money, but he did the job, and he did do what he was supposed to do. Knock on wood. There was nobody else we could find to do it.

NS: Now, I know some bay house owners decided to stay with the traditional mud sill foundation. Tell me [about] your decision and why you made those decisions.

AM: With the last storms, we’ve lost a lot of marsh. And also, Ned’s Creek, where our house is, the boats are – they’re not respectful of the area. They’re going too fast. They’re beating up the marsh, and it’s all caving in. So, for us, if we put mud sills, we’re going to have to move the house again. So at least, with the poles, it’s sturdy; it’s there. If the marsh continues to beat up the way it has been, at least we were keeping our house safe because we are trying – we try to put the floating dock in front of the marsh to avoid further damage. But we can’t make boats slow down. And there’s bigger boats going through there. I don’t think everyone knows to respect the waters and what kind of rules there should be. So when we say, please slow down, five miles an hour, it’s not please because you just don’t like the wake. It’s please; you’re ruining the marsh.

LM: We must have lost since I’ve been there, fifty feet, fifty feet of –because I’m looking at the pictures, a couple pictures we dug out today. What it is today and what it was when I was a kid – it’s got to be fifty, sixty feet. So that’s at least a foot a year, almost sixty years old. That’s a foot a year. That’s a lot of – it’s getting smaller and smaller. Now, our house, they couldn’t – the crane, they couldn’t move it back far enough to get – that’s as far back as they could go. And he suggested you put it on pilings, and I said, “Absolutely, man. That’s what we’re going to do.” It ain’t going anywhere. Even if the marsh disappears, the house’ll still be there.

NS: And what are you doing for water at the bay house?

LM: Water?

NS: Yeah.

LM: Fill up buckets, a drum in the boat. We actually haven’t got that far. We finished the outside first to get sealed, and now we’re going to work on the inside. Hopefully, this summer, we’ll have it done.

AM: So we’re getting a water tank, and it’s going to go on the roof in the back. We’ll have enough water that we can fill it up, so you can at least wash dishes, maybe a little bit of an outdoor shower, quickly rinse off, but other than that, we’re not having well water or anything.

LM: Yeah. There's no well because you can't drink the water, anyhow. It's too much iron in it.

AM: We used to have a well next to us.

LM: For us, we're better off just – we live right here. Fill up a barrel, put it in the boat, pump it out –

AM: Pump it up.

LM: – and go over to the other tank. It's easy. It's quicker.

NS: So I'm going to backtrack a little bit because, Alison, I want to learn more about some of the work that you're doing at Island Seafood. So what are your responsibilities? How has it changed before and after Sandy?

AM: Well, I think we're just adapting to the different environment in seafood in general. In the past, like he said, fresh seafood was it. Then, slowly, there was frozen that was out in New Jersey at Preferred Freezers. So we started doing that ourselves. Now, we're also adding on another business part that we're doing freight [inaudible] from JFK. So we do the importing there, break down seafood, and bring it into the markets at night. So we're just –

NS: Where is the seafood that you're wholesaling –? Where is it coming from these days?

AM: All over the world.

LM: All different countries. Not too much from the United States.

AM: Yeah. Most of it is –

LM: Very little from the United States.

AM: Right. We're pulling it from Norway. There's stuff from Singapore. It's wherever the customers are really buying anything. It's where the [inaudible] are, so everything's overseas, and we just have the orders come in and break everything down, set up the orders, and ship it out or hold inventory at our cooler in Farmingdale.

NS: So tell me what it means to break it down. Walk me through that.

AM: Well, when it comes out from the airport, depending on what it is, it's either two hundred pounds a box for tuna, and they either have that on a big plate or these containers, which it's a pain in the butt to get out. So we either have to take all that down and then each box is sold to a different customer, so you build your orders, depending on that. And with the salmon, they come in plates of 161. So when it comes out, it's taller than me. It's huge.

LM: A big pile of fish in boxes.

AM: It looks pretty much like a storage unit, like a movable storage unit that –

LM: Probably half the size of this room.

AM: Yeah, so it's a hundred and sixty-one boxes. And usually, we've had up to like six plates in one night. So we have a lot of people there. Each fifty-pound box needs to be checked. You have to look for the size. You got to make the orders from that. We already have the orders, usually, with us, so we're stacking up [inaudible] pallets, so we can put it in trucks because the plate won't fit in a truck. You have to restack everything.

LM: It's all hands-on. No brains, just brawn.

AM: Yeah.

LM: I pick things up and put them down.

NS: So are you there at the airport when all this is coming in or [inaudible]?

LM: If I have to go. I don't like to go.

NS: How many people are working to make that happen?

AM: It depends on how much stuff we have. Each plate, I at least have one guy because – I haven't done 161 boxes by myself. That's hard work.

LM: It's a lot of work. It's ten thousand pounds.

AM: Yeah, if we have like three plates coming in of salmon, I know I need at least three guys on there telling everyone what to do and how to do the orders. Usually, if he's needed, he'll drive; he'll be there if we need him. But yeah, usually, it just depends on how many guys there are, how much stuff we're getting to [determine] how many people, how much help I need. And also, the time crunch – most of the flights are coming in, and they're not available for us to even pick up until seven or eight at night. And that stuff needs to go in the trucks by midnight, if not earlier. So we're pushing to get everything out immediately.

NS: And you're doing all of this at the airport?

AM: Most of it, yeah. Everything's done at the airport unless it's something that came from inventory, which we'll be picking up flights at the airport, and we still have product back at our shop. So we'll have teams of people pretty much doing stuff at the shop, doing stuff at the airport. We'll put it all together and send them out.

LM: The seafood industry is very strange the way it works. Everything happens so quickly. The salmon, we'll get it, and it may take them two days to get it here, but we'll have it delivered in three hours. The fish out of New Bedford – most of it was swimming yesterday, and it's down here. You can't get any faster than that. It's unbelievable how quick this happens.

AM: Yeah, everything will be sold completely, and we wouldn't even [inaudible].

LM: And the stuff that comes down from New Bedford and Boston, it could be eight hundred or nine hundred pieces, and it's all done within three hours. I'm still amazed at how quick everything happens. UPS is good. But I think we beat them out when it comes to stuff like this.

AM: Yeah, we get it all done within –

LM: Because you get all the little boxes, all the little [inaudible]; there's no set label per se. Every box looks different. So you might have to – you might fit a hundred boxes and five of them, you can't figure out where they got to go because there's no label on them, so you go, "Hmm," figure this out, look through the bills, look through here, look over there. And for some reason, most of the time, we figure it out, but it's just amazing how much stuff you go through and how quickly it goes. And then people call you up and complain. You're like, "Oh, you."

AM: [laughter] You're like, "Do you know what we had to do to get that to you?" [laughter]

LM: You're late. I just went through forty-thousand pounds of stuff, buddy. It's going to take a little time. But people are different. They want their stuff, so you get to them. It's not easy. If I had my thing to do over again, I wouldn't do it.

NS: So let me ask you, Alison, because you mentioned that you had a finance background and you went to college, and you were applying some of the things that you learned to this business. So what are some of the things that have changed as a result?

AM: Oh, well, from my past, I was doing financial advising. I've learned really quickly that you have to deal with very stubborn, difficult people. So in this business, I think that definitely helped because I have to work with customers that are very difficult at times. But, I think, just having – [knowing] all of his information and growing up in it, it was just a natural fit for me to change over. It was also good for me to go out, see what other things were out there in the world, give it a shot, and make my own decision – okay, no, I want to do this. Because I don't think I would have been as comfortable with making that decision if I never even went out there and tried something else. So now, I know this fits, and it's the right fit for me.

NS: How has the computer changed what you're doing?

AM: Well, he did everything by hand. Now, we're trying to do –

LM: I still do it. I'm just trying to learn the computer a little bit now, and tell you the truth; I really don't want to know too much because that's what I got her for.

AM: Yeah. I [inaudible] on it.

LM: I'm on the tail end of my career here.

NS: So what do you use it for?

AM: We use it for inventory tracking, we use it for orders, anything and everything we – invoicing, anything. We use a computer for all that. The one thing I would say is that no matter what, in any situation, the best thing to do is actually get on the phone. Don't text. Don't email. The method of getting in touch with someone does not change. Get on the phone. Make the phone call. Personal attention or actually sitting down with somebody makes a world of a difference. So we make that effort to actually be a part of our customer's orders and be present. We're available twenty-four hours a day.

NS: Bringing it back to Freeport, do you work at all with any of the fishermen or baymen here, this part of the business?

LM: Some of them. Yeah, most of them are all gone. Most of them are dead. They don't sell to any of the fish places down there at all or any of the restaurants because they just – they don't pay. And I can go other places. Most of my stuff is out east, in the Hamptons and into the city and stuff. But around here, they're just – I know them all. They're all pretty good guys. But they don't pay. Maybe it's changed now. It's been fifteen years since I sold [to] them.

NS: Do you buy product from any of the commercial fishermen or baymen?

LM: No. There's none left.

AM: Yeah. Usually, we would be buying. Once in a while, we'll have to pick up shipments from some of the boats at Point Lookout or bring them the gear. We bring them netting and all that stuff. But other than that –

LM: No –

NS: Tell me about that. You provide gear for –

AM: Oh, yeah. Well, there's big companies up in Boston that sell the nets and all that stuff. So all the fishing gear, usually, we do that a lot. We'll bring the fishing gear out to them. So they bring it to us, and then, any of the traps and things that they purchase from [inaudible] or whatever, we bring out to them [inaudible].

LM: Yeah. Bring out the nets and their gear and stuff to guys in Shinnecock and Montauk. Once in a while, we'll get some fish from them. But most of the time, they ship their stuff right into the New York market. And there's no room for us in there, I guess, to bring any of it in because it happened late in the day. Once in a while, we'll get it, but not too often. It's their own trucking company out there, their own thing. And the guy's been there for forty years. So if it's not broke, don't fix it. But we still do stuff. We're pretty friendly. I know everybody out there, so. [Telephone rings.] Sorry about that. [Recording paused.]

Unknown: [inaudible] rather be around here than in Afghanistan if you're going to be a journalist.

NS: Oh, no. I'm not a journalist. It's all about the stories and the memories.

AM: Long Island is nice.

NS: So tell me, what's going to be happening with the bay house going forward?

LM: Well, we finished lifting it. We completely finished the outside. All new windows, new siding, new roof, new deck. This summer, we're going to work on the inside. Hopefully, we're going to get it done before the summer starts, so we can actually use it this year.

AM: Even though you wouldn't know, it was not finished inside. We still were out there, hanging out there all summer just because, hey, we have the house back. So it could be gutted anywhere. We're still going to [inaudible]. We don't know where else to go. [laughter] [inaudible]

LM: Yeah. It's not like they used to do in the '30s or '40s, when they'd go [inaudible] up lumber and put them together. Now, you got to buy brand-new material. You can't buy any junk. You want to do it; you want to do it right. And doing it right costs a lot of money. But it's not even the money part. It's the part about getting it from point A to point B. That's the hardest part, getting the material down there.

NS: Now, I know, over time, you, just for personal use, you've done clamming and fishing. How has that changed in the bay, say, over the last twenty years?

LM: The sports fishermen still do all right, I guess. But clamming's almost nonexistent. And killies – they're gone. [inaudible] spearing once in a while, but everything's on the down sweep, and they got to let it sit and come back.

NS: So for yourselves, though, are you doing anything, just –?

LM: Commercially, out there?

NS: No, recreational.

AM: Well, when we were kids, we would go clamming and get horseshoe crabs and sell those for extra ice cream money and things like that. But now, between working a regular company – when we're out there, we're just cruising around, hanging out [inaudible]

LM: If we want clams for our own personal use, we'll go out and get a few.

NS: So, are you doing that at the bay house?

LM: Yeah. Oh, of course.

AM: Yeah. Just but we're not collecting it to sell or anything. We're just – more for fun.

LM: Everybody likes to put your feet in the mud once in a while.

NS: So you're treading? Are you doing any raking?

LM: No, we just go treading. Actually, my wife likes to do it more than anybody else. I don't know. I guess there's nothing like having soft – stepping in soft mud, squishing through your toes.

AM: Yeah. She would get clams and put them all in her bathing suit and everything, then unload them. She'd be picking them up with her toes.

LM: Yeah. You get that smell.

NS: Mary, do you want to come join us?

Mary Muller: No, that's okay.

LM: You get that bay house muck smell.

NS: Do you have any favorite family recipes?

LM: My father used to make some good clam chowder, but I don't even remember the recipe. But when I had the fish market, we used to sell it. We would sell a lot of that stuff. You couldn't make enough of it. In wintertime, it would sell – make a big pot of it two or three times a week. But he's dead. I don't know what he put in it, but it was pretty good.

NS: [laughter] You don't have your own recipe?

AM: No.

LM: No, I never wrote it down. But you got to use good stuff. Whatever you put in, if it's good, it's going to come out good. We [inaudible] the chowders and stuff and [inaudible] and stuff, so we didn't use any frozen product. It was good.

NS: How about you, Alison?

AM: Yeah, not really. I haven't really done too much cooking with [inaudible].

LM: Yeah. Go figure. I'm in the fish business, and none of them like fish.

AM: I guess it's just so available; we don't use as much. Now, a lot of times, we'll bring it home when we know it's good product, so we bring it home. But when it's good fish, anything's good [inaudible]. But we don't go crazy over recipes and things like that.

LM: Yeah. I eat a lot of – well, I try to eat as much fish because I’m the fat guy. I got to lose weight, but I’m the only one that likes it. They don’t like it that much.

NS: First, thank you very much for sharing all of this background and your experience.

LM: [inaudible].

NS: And that concludes this interview.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/12/2022