Narrator: Chuck Tekula

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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Abstract: This interview with Chuck Tekula, conducted by Nancy Solomon on May 31, 2016, explores Tekula's life and experiences as a bayman and fisherman in Center Moriches, New York. Born in 1951 in Amityville, Tekula grew up with a passion for fishing, inspired by his father who frequently took him on fishing trips. He discusses the evolution of clamming techniques, the impact of ecological changes on the bays, and his own career transitions, including a period working as a custodian and union representative. Tekula highlights the cultural and economic significance of clamming and fishing on Long Island, noting the changes in regulations and market demands over the years. He shares personal anecdotes about the camaraderie among baymen, the challenges posed by environmental and regulatory shifts, and his enduring love for the bay despite the physical toll it takes.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. I'm interviewing Chuck Tekula of Center Moriches, who's a bayman and fisherman. Today is May 31st, 2016. I'd first like to start by going into how you got into fishing. Where were you born? What were your first memories?

Chuck Tekula: I was born November 10, 1951, in Amityville, Brunswick Hospital. My parents were original owners of a Levitt house, house in Levittown. My father had a job, worked for the post office on the mail trains, which gave him a week – every other week, he had off because they would take a trip from the GPO, general post office, in Manhattan and, at first, he was doing trips from there to Washington, DC sorting mail all the way there and then all the way back. They'd lay over in Washington – that'd be one trip – and come all the way back sorting mail on the train. That was the elite of the post office. They did a long, big spread in *Newsday* about them maybe about twenty years ago. But they retired them in the early '70s.

But he loved fishing. He was brought up in the Bronx. And he would take party boats from the Hudson River in the Bronx all the way to the Atlantic Ocean and fish. Then he told me stories of taking the fish home in burlap bags on the subway. But he loved fishing. And I did too. He brought me up to love fishing. And he would actually take me. My mother would call us both in sick sometimes when he wanted to go fishing, and me sick from school and him sick from work. We'd go on a party boat, mostly out of Freeport. I loved it. I even wrote about it. In fourth grade, we had a yearbook, and I wrote a little story about how I was a captain of a gillnet fishing boat and catching sharks and herring. This was in fourth grade. My father worked for the post office, but I would see the commercial guys. And I really had this really big awesome respect for them. I wanted to know everything. And I could just see they knew. You could just look at them, and they knew stuff, and they weren't telling anybody. In 1972, my father was retiring from the post office, sold the house in Levittown, bought a house on the water in Amityville. He bought a clam boat, old planked tong boat, a decked-over tong boat. Back then, that was mostly how they dug clams was with the tongs on decked-over boats. Now it's mostly raking. You don't see too many tong boats left anymore, but the old-timers were all – it was just all tongers; there were thousands of them. And this boat leaked like a sieve. I would spend weeks in the spring caulking in between the planks so it wouldn't leak too much. He was supposed to work with me when he retired. He retired, and he just couldn't hack it. He went out a few times. Then he stopped. He got another part-time job that he quit after a while, but I kept going. It was the recession in the '70s, so I would get jobs, other jobs, and they'd lay you off after three months. As soon as you're eligible for benefits, you'd get laid off. It was all minimum wage, so really couldn't make a living at it. I was getting married and got married and started doing right away – got married, had a baby within a year. In 1975, my first daughter was born, Sara, and I started – it was like a miracle. Suddenly, I learned how to clam, and I was doing very well, working out of the house in Amityville, going all the way to Babylon, all the way to Robert Moses bridge. There was a lot of good clamming over there, selling – there was buyboats on all the docks then. And at Bergen Point, I was selling to Fire Island fisheries, which is the Sleagers, I think their name was. The Sleager Family owned that. And they had dredge boats in the bay. It was big-time. At that time, it was the biggest employer on Long Island was the bay. There were ten thousand licenses, clamming licenses. I don't know if you remember or if you've been there, or if you've seen pictures, but you could walk across the bay, basically, on the clam boats. And this was every, every single day. When I first started working, the clammers basically ran

the bay. You could not drive a boat beyond ten miles an hour and put up a wake because that would put the tongers off their little spot where they were clamming, and you'd get a clam through your windshield, literally. So nobody went fast. If they did, they had a problem until, one day – and I read about it in the papers – they did it to the wrong person. They did it to a judge. He just made a big thing about it. Now there was a special law about harassing boaters. That ended that part of the control. It's basically the same process, how we've lost – the traditional baymen's position on the island has been death by a thousand paper cuts, just one law after another law after another law, until, eventually, it's not that there's no money to be made out there. It's that it's so much stuff you have to put up with, with all the boat traffic and all the laws and the licenses you have to deal with and law enforcement agencies. You just don't see young people getting into it anymore.

NS: Let's back up a little bit. Were you harvesting anything else besides clams?

CT: At first, it was just clams. I got into fishing because I'd be coming home from clamming, and I'd see schools of bluefish, at first, right outside where I lived. So I learned how to chase the fish and actually catch maybe a dozen of them on the way home with a rod and reel. What am I going to do with the other fish? Well, I'm selling the clams. I'll sell the fish. Back then, you didn't need licenses for fish. You could sell to anybody. I would go to a local restaurant in Massapequa. I made a contact with the chef there, the owner. I had some fish; he'd buy them. So I'd make an extra twenty dollars or something like that. Then we started getting these runs of porgies, little porgies, and little sea bass. There was no size limits back then. So these were like four-to-the-pound porgies and maybe three-to-the-pound sea bass. They're little things. But there were so many of them. I learned how to fish them. I'd find the edge. I had a little depth finder on my boat. I'd find the edge where they were. I'd have five little hooks on a line, three in like a tree, tied together, and two above that. If I wasn't catching three at a time, I'd move. It'd be drop-down, feel a little bite, wait a second, pull up, and catch three porgies, take them off the hook, re-bait the hooks, [and] put them down. I'd end up catching two, three hundred pounds of these fish that were four to the pound. Then I'd drive to Freeport and get twenty-five, thirty-five cents a pound. And I'd take a day off from clamming doing that. Then, two doors down from us on the canal in Amityville was a guy who's a baker, this guy Steve. He worked at night. He started gillnetting during the day, a little, just a couple hundred feet of net – three, four, five hundred feet of net. He'd go out of Jones Inlet. It was a long ride. He'd come home, and he'd make two or three hundred dollars catching weakfish and bluefish and striped bass, whatever, part-time. And I went a couple of times with him, and I fell in love with it. So around 1982, I think it was, I boat a boat and a motor, a Sea Ox, a twenty-three-foot Sea Ox, a boat and motor package, commercial boat style, brand new. I started fishing, first out of – I bought an old piece of gillnet from Charlie (Schweikart?), who's dead now. Redbeard was his nickname. He started Towboat Moriches, which was the first, actually, sea tow company. Now, it's Towboat USA. Those are the red boats that run around. The yellow boats are the famous sea tows. Charlie (Schweikart?) started that. He also had a stand in the New York Fulton Market. He was a dragger and a gillnetter. He got into dragging, first gillnetting, in the bay, when the weakfish run started in the late 70s. We had the big weakfish run started in the Great South Bay. He had a runaround net that had been run through by a ferryboat. It was in – oh, what was it – Walters. I forget his [first] name – him and his wife. His wife would make the nets. They lived in Bayshore. Forget his first name. His last name was Walters. He was a fisherman, a very well-

known fisherman in Bayshore. The net was sitting there in a pile, waiting to get repaired. I didn't know prices of anything. It was a junk net. It wasn't worth more than a hundred dollars. He charged me four hundred and fifty dollars for it. I took it home, took it apart, repaired it best I could – I knew nothing about making nets. Repaired it best I could. First day out with my brand-new boat, I got a spot in Harry's boatyard, which was at Greene's Creek in Sayville. Now it's Greene's Creek Marina, I think. I've seen them advertised on TV. But Harry's boatyard was the famous boatyard; all the West Sayville dutchmen had their tong boats in there. I got a spot in there. It was the first day I'm fishing – well, first week, it was late in April. That was when the weakfishermen would start. Now, I'm running around with this beat-up net. The way they would do it back then was the big weakfish would come in and get under the pods of bunkers. The bunkers would – they emit this oil. They make a slick. And the slick, you could smell it. You'd smell bunkers. There's a sweet kind of – it's almost like watermelon, they say. It's like a watermelon flower. It's a sweet smell. Even old, rotten bunkers, you throw them in the bay, and the oil still smells sweet. It's just this oil that's really – they use it for all kinds of things. But this, you would see the slick. You'd have to figure out the tide and the wind to where the fish were. You had a net that was the mesh was bigger than the bunker, so the bunker – you wouldn't catch the bunker. You'd just catch the weakfish underneath. If you hit them right, you'd get several hundred pounds of these big weakfish. Well, I'm trying this. The boat, it's a pretty big boat to be pulling, especially in a wind. Figuring out the tides and everything, I think I caught, one time, two weakfish doing it that way. I'm so frustrated. I borrowed the money. I got a loan for the boat. I'm totally frustrated. I'm driving home. Now, this was – I'm working out of Sayville, and I'm working in around East and West Island, which is off of East Islip, Bayshore area, just over near Fire Island, by Robert Moses right there, Sexton Island, all those areas right there. I'm coming home. I see this – just there was like a voice came out of the sky; it said, "Put your net over there. I answered the voice and talked. But somebody'll steal it. I said, "Well, somebody could steal it out of your boat. I couldn't argue with that one. So at least it's in the water." So I just put it right on that edge. One piece of eleven hundred feet of that beat-up, old, used net. Marked it appropriately and left it there overnight, anchored, anchored in, set it with the tide so it doesn't get all messed up with weeds and stuff. I come back the next morning, five o'clock in the morning, perfectly calm. From a mile away, I see the water was – it was like four-foot deep, and this was like a twelve-foot-deep net, so it went from top to bottom. I see seagulls sitting on the net. As we get closer, I see white bellies in the net. It was the first day of the bluefish run in the spring. So the bluefish were worth money. I had eight or nine hundred pounds of bluefish and three or four hundred pounds of weakfish. Got back to the dock at eleven o'clock in the morning, sold them, and made a good piece of change for that one day. Then I got busy, made another net, and set that spot every day for that spring, 1983 maybe it was. For two or three years, I almost worked exclusively in this one area. I found clams right there. I was catching [inaudible] my bluefish pots, catching blowfish in this one little spot. Scallops came that year in that one spot. So it was like, in these two, three years, I made my whole living in this one little – it wasn't just me. It was other people working. So, it was great. I was hooked. I was hooked. I went from just digging clams to fishing and scalloping and then musseling. Then I went into crabbing and bought a house in – actually, I was living – we were living in Brookhaven, bought a house in Brookhaven, right next to Bellport, right on Bay Lane, right off of Bay Road, which ends at the bay right there. So I'm working. I'm traveling to Sayville every day. The fishing died out this one spring. What I would do is, after the weakfish run ended, which would be in mid-June, then bluefish would come in. They would seem to be schools that

would come up every afternoon. And I would go in the afternoon and chase the schools of bluefish. What I learned coming home from clamming in Amityville –learned how to pinhook these bluefish, watching the schools and what they were going to do. I used that to chase the bluefish schools. Instead of catching them one at a time, I'm catching the whole school at once. I made a perfect net for it, like twelve-foot deep, small enough mesh to catch that right size, two-, three-pound bluefish, and just sit there and watch the birds and just see how the school is making up. The whole key to being a fisherman, to being a bayman, is knowing what's going on under the surface. I say there's two – people who work on the bay as a living for years, the difference between what they see when they go down to the piece of bay that they know and what somebody who's a weekend warrior fisherman who goes – thinks about it all week long, he's working, and on the weekend, he goes out to go whatever he's fishing for – striped bass, weakfish – he goes down to the bay; he sees the water. The bayman sees the bottom. Even though it's just water, the bayman knows the bottom. I know this piece of bottom better than I know my own backyard, this piece of bottom, talking about this whole Moriches Bay – because I've worked every square foot of it. I know where the weeds grow. I know where the mud is. I know where the shelves are. I know what kind of clams are growing in every place. I know where the tide's running. I know where the natural channels are, where the dredged channels are. That's basically how you do it. So that's what I was putting together with chasing these bluefish. I loved it. I just completely loved it. I loved taking people out with me and showing them, showing my wife's cousin, my kids. All four of my kids worked with me on the water. Now, they're all doing other things, doing great. I have three grandkids. Just met my newest one last week, (Louisa?). It's just a beautiful thing. And they all credit the time – being raised where we were, in Brookhaven, I basically exclusively worked that part of the bay. After I moved, after fishing died out in Sayville this one spring, I just got a spot in a boatyard. There was a boatyard right around the corner from our house, and there was another one down at the end of Beaver Dam Road, Squassux Landing, the big village. I got spots in both of those places. I had two boats. I had my clam boat and my tong boat. I just started learning that bay. Then I wasn't going back to Sayville anymore and just working in that bay. We moved there in 1978, moved out about ten years later. So basically, for seven or eight years, my wife wasn't working. Now it's ex-wife, but at the time, she was a stay-at-home mom, raising the kids, four kids, three kids – four kids then. That one piece of bay – everything was coming from there. The kids just learned that and incorporated that into their lives, that they would go down. There's Daddy out there. There's his boat out there, and he's coming home with the fish. They'd see the fish. And I converted it to money. It converted into our life, which is just – it's perfectly sublime. It's absolutely beautiful. But with all the regulations now we have and everybody looking over our shoulders as to what we're doing and trying to save the world by controlling what we're doing, it really encroaches on that perfection. But it's still a beautiful thing.

NS: What are some of the ecological changes you've seen in the bay from when you began to –?

CT: Well, the water has risen probably about, from the time – actually, I noticed it really first when I moved here and started working here. First, I was launching my boat when I moved – we moved to Virginia. Things got – the fishing and the clamming, and everything was really going downhill in the late '80s. And my ex-wife had connections down in the eastern shore of Virginia, and a lot of fishermen were going down there, and the word was that was the Shangri-la. It's like the old days. What you didn't find out until you moved there is that they will never

accept outsiders. The eastern shore of Virginia is that kind of place. Just about everybody that moved there moved somewhere else, moved up to Maryland, moved to the other side of the bay. So we tried it there for a year. The marriage was falling apart. So I moved everybody back here, and we moved to a house in Center Moriches. And I started – first, I was still working in Bellport Bay. But then I transferred over to here and was trailering my boat because dock spaces were really at a premium. I was trailering the boat to the town dock on Maple Avenue. I noticed, from the time – this was the early '90s – from the early '90s, probably 1991-92 to about '95-'96, the regular high-tide mark went up about eight, nine, ten inches in that period of time. It really hasn't risen since then, as far as I can notice. But in that period of time, it definitely rose quite a bit. As far as the health of the bay, this bay here is beautiful. The clams are great. The quality, they're very – we call it a fast bottom. From the time that they're tiny seed to legal size is probably about five years here, which is called – it's a fast bottom. You can see it in the growth marks of little clams. The year growth mark is usually, a lot of times, it's white. From the time it stopped growing last season until the time it grew for the next summer season, the shells are white. Then they get darker. But the new growth is white. It's a beautiful-looking clam. There's a sharp edge to them. The shells are brittle. They're full of meat. They're just beautiful clams. So it's healthy. You get every species. There's got to be six different species of filter-feeding shellfish that grow all over this bay.

NS: When you say this bay, what bay are you –?

CT: Moriches Bay. Yeah. It's the Great South Bay that has had the problems. As far as I know, there's no other body of water that's had the problems that Great South Bay has had. And everybody gets the same brown tides, red tides, the toxic tides they're talking about. Everybody's getting some of those to one degree or another. But for some reason, the shellfish, the clams in the Great South Bay used to be the best-producing bay for shellfish, clams, and oysters until the oysters died from a parasite in the 1950s. But there was nothing like the clams, the quality, and the amount of clams that would come year after year after year in the Great South Bay. Now they don't grow there anymore. I mean, they do. What's happening is they get a set of clams, and it gets in the papers, a new set of clams. They had all kinds of reasons why, and they're studying it. Now they have the new breach there. They're saying that's going to bring it back. But nothing's bringing it back. We've talked about this. I know what it is. It's the sewer plant because it was predicted. We went and had all kinds of meetings not to open the sewer plant because you're going to kill the shellfish. Bluepoints [Oyster] Company had their own scientists, and there was nobody who knew more about growing clams than Bluepoints Company back then. Their clams were famous all over the world. First, it was oysters. Then it was clams. They basically broke the ground on shellfish agriculture. They said, "[If] you open that plant, you're going to kill the shellfishing in the bay because you're going to take the fresh water out of the system." Now, the system here is completely different than anywhere else, any other estuary that I know of, because this – Long Island is glacial. We don't have bedrock mountains and mountain-fed streams. The way it works – and I know this because my daughter and son-in-law did this project, this plant-a-wish project where they planted trees all over. They planted an indigenous tree in every state of the union. Now, they did all this work of interviews all over the country. This was four years ago. And they needed help transcribing these interviews. So I did this for like four of these interviews about logging companies. It's all about how this works, that when it rains in an area where there's bedrock and mountains and mountain-fed streams and

rivers, the rainwater hits the bedrock, and then it flows under, underground, until it gets into a stream. Then it gets into a stream and then flows into a river. That's where the freshwater gets into an estuary, in the Carolinas, in Washington, DC, in San Francisco – not DC – Washington State, Oregon, in San Francisco Bay, all of those big major estuaries comparable to the Great South Bay, that's how it works. The shellfish, like oysters and clams, that's where they grow where the water mixes, saltwater and freshwater mixes, so the big shellfish beds are in the mouths of the streams and rivers. Great South Bay, we don't have mountain-fed streams. It's all a big pile of sand and rocks, gravel, sand, and rocks. So the water, the rainwater, goes all the way down into the aquifer. And how it gets fed into the bays – and the Great South Bay especially, because it's big and wide – is it upwells in the middle. So unlike any other estuary, the Great South Bay's best shellfish, clam, and oyster-growing areas were in the middle of the bay, the mud holes in the middle of the bay – sandy and muddy holes. So they call it the middle grounds in Patchogue. But that's where the clams were best. And it's where the freshwater upwells. When you take the fresh water out of the system, the public – all the houses and the buildings, you feed that now into a sewer pipe, that goes to a sewer plant, went out [inaudible] pipe into the ocean. Instead of recharging it into the ground, what you have now is saltwater intrusion, and it changes the whole makeup of the bay. So now the clams grow on the south side of the bay in the mouths of the creeks, and they don't grow in the middle grounds anymore. They don't grow where they used to grow anymore. They won't grow there anymore, no matter what you do. Opening up a breach in the barrier island, all that does is bring more saltwater in. Maybe it'll flush the bay out. It's not going to help the clams grow. You need that freshwater influx, the upwelling. So that's what killed, as far as I can tell – in my estimation, that's what killed the clams in Great South Bay. As long as you have that situation there, nothing's going to bring the clams back. Now, you open up a breach; the fishing's going to get better, of course, because now you have an opening where the salt water comes in, and all of the baitfish, they don't live here year-round. They migrate. Now you got an opening where they can migrate, and they need that change of water. They need that oxygenated ocean water. They're filter feeders, too, most of them. They need that mix, so they get – you get the phytoplankton in the bay, the algae, the microalgae, and also the plankton from the ocean, which is tiny little animals. They all need that mix to really have their food, so that makes that better. But as far as the clams, as far as I predict, they will never come back in the Great South Bay unless they – and they're never shut down. They're actually expanding the sewer plant. The sewer district is expanding out this way now.

NS: Yeah. What about Moriches Bay?

CT: Well, Moriches Bay is great. You get everything here. Everything. You have the fish; you have the clams. Like I said, there's four different kinds or four or five different kinds of clams that are growing. There clams [inaudible], what we call deckers, and they're all edible. You get the deckers, which are the slipper shells that, in certain parts of the bay, they cling to everything, little half-shell thing, and they cling to each other. You get some places they're piled up. The bottom is covered with them. There's some areas [with] what we call duck clams, and you would see – once in a while, in the Great South Bay, you'd see one or two. And they look so much like a littleneck clam that you can mix them in, and nobody would notice. But you can't over here because everybody knows what they are because you catch bushels and bushels of them in some spots. Now they say that the flounders need the clams because they do what's

called valve nipping. I don't know if you ever heard that. Well, that's because the clams don't come out of the bottom, and they don't open up so that you get inside to eat the meat. But in order for them to feed, when we say the clams are up, you hear that saying, well, they're up and feeding. They come up to the surface. They stick one little edge out where the valves are. That's why they're called bivalves because they bring the water in and push the water out. Those little two valves come out, and they're feeding, so it's a little piece of meat. Well, in a hard clam, that's tough. That's the toughest part of the clam. I'm talking about winter flounder, which has big, fat lips and no teeth. They can't nip that off. I've cleaned thousands of flounders caught locally when I used to work in the fish market. I've never seen them with a belly full of nipped valves. But these duck clams, they're little, they're rounder. It takes a trained eye to be able to tell the difference. I could do it automatically, but you would have trouble sorting them out on the cull board. When you leave them out, you leave them in a bucket of water, and if it's warm enough, the valves come out like this far. The clam's only this big. The valves come out like this. It looks like a yellow worm. Now, I could see flounders, and you could just pull that apart easily, so that's flounder feed, and that's why they call them duck clams because the ducks feed on those valves too, and diving ducks go down and nip the valves. So we have tons of those here.

NS: Has that changed over time, the kinds of clams [inaudible]?

CT: Well, everything's cyclical, so you get – like this one area I'm clamming now – funny you should ask that. This area I'm clamming now when I first moved here, you couldn't clam it. It was just this tight mud bottom. It was like an end of a sandbar in the middle of the bay, the east side of the bar. And you just couldn't pull a rake through it. But there were clams there. Well, this one spring, we get what's called worm mud. During the spring, when it warms up, the worms come up, and they expel soft, whatever it is. Suddenly, there's fluffy mud everywhere with these worm trails in it. It fouls the rake, and you can't catch any clams in it. There would be spots where you get into it. You'd hit it. Oh, OK, I hit. This grab of the rake is worm mud. I have to remember that. You mark the spot, and you don't hit that anymore. This one spring, the whole bay was covered with worm mud, including this one area. So I had to move. I was clamming in Narrow Bay, which is in between Bellport Bay and Moriches Bay, Shirley-Mastic area over there. And I came back, and I looked around, and I went into this area where I'm working now, and you could work it. It softened the bottom up, and the clamming was great. At first, [when] we were working this, we were actually catching so many duck clams that we got a couple of buyers. The duck clams are – they're bitter tasting. You can't eat them raw. If you cook them, you have to dip them in butter, like you do a steamer clam. They call them butter clams. They don't call them duck clams in the restaurants. It's hard to sell them. But we could sell like a bushel a day, one or two bushels a day – it was a pretty good deal –rather than throwing them back. But now, I went back to that spot, and there's only a few of the duck clams. The hard clams have moved in. And it's good. The clamming's good. The clamming's easy. It's good. It's pretty clean. Only now, these deckers are moving into the spot. Now, I don't know how bad that's going to get because that gets so bad sometimes that it'll foul the rig.

NS: So, if you could compare twenty years ago to now, are you seeing more of one type of clam versus a different kind of clam?

CT: Like I said, the hard clams seem to be taking over from the duck clams in this one area.

NS: What about overall, in some of the places?

CT: I really don't see any major ecological changes. It's just things change over time; they shift. But yeah, I don't know. I could say that there used to be a lot of razor clams. I haven't done any of that. But I guess it's because the market really opened up for these razor clams. They look like a straight razor, long. They're hard to – you can't just dig them with a rake or anything. You can't even dig them by hand because they're so fast. You can grab one, and it's almost going to pull you down in the hole; they're so strong. And their foot, it's called – that's what they move by – actually comes out really far, and they create a trail, and they'll be at the surface to feed. You try to grab one, and it just pulls back so hard. And then you try and pull it out by hand, and you'll break the meat off. So they cut them out with a – they use an outboard motor with a sled on a stand with a sled. It's usually a two-man operation, with one guy has [inaudible] a special stainless-steel grate that they put behind the motor – the motor with the prop – and the guy controlling the motor just walks along and makes a trench. The guy trailing behind catches the razor clams. They're worth a lot of money. And there used to be four or five crews out here working. But now there's one or two – actually, one guy that works them regularly. And he'll find a little patch where they're big enough to sell. He'll work it for a couple of weeks. And then he'll have to quit and go do something else. But I don't think it's because of any ecological change. I just think because the market opened up for them, they cleaned them out. They're not extinct or anything. But they take a while to get replenished. As long as these guys know how to find them, they know where they're growing, and they know exactly when they're going to be big enough to sell, they go on the bed and hit them, and they'll fight over the spots because they're worth a lot of money. You make a lot of money with that.

NS: Who are your customers?

CT: Well, it used to be I could sell – when I first started, when I started with the gillnetting in Sayville, you could sell to anybody. You didn't need a fishing license. You just go out and fish. There were so many – everybody – I wouldn't say everybody but a lot of cops who had swing shifts; if they're working a midnight shift, they go fishing during the day. They would sell the catch. You could basically sell to anybody. But now, they changed the law within, I guess, it's probably about fifteen years that you get the fishing license, which you can't get anymore. And if you didn't have a dealer's license, you have to sell to a licensed dealer. I only had the fishing license. So now I sell a lot to Mastic Seafood, and I'll sell also to – some to Mastic Seafood and some to COR-J in Hampton Bays. And that's basically my whole – except if I have stuff that – if their markets are completely saturated, I'll have to ship to the Fulton Market. But in the last few years, it's mostly been COR-J because, last couple of years, my hip – my hip was getting worse and worse. I cut back on fishing a lot. They were the best price, so it wasn't like I was rushing around or anything because COR-J is a twenty-minute drive, and Mastic is five minutes away. So I cut back on my operations a lot because of my hip, but I had the hip replacement in July, and I'm feeling a lot better now. So we'll see what happens. I'm not a spring chicken anymore. I'm basically semi-retired, is the way I look at it. If I need to catch up right now because I just had – also had hernia surgery in March, and the whole month of April, I was completely out, didn't work. So last month, I had to put in a little more time to try and catch up

on my bills. But now I can – I'm going to start fishing, and, hopefully, it'll be good enough, so I won't have to kill myself.

NS: So, looking in the future, about how many days do you normally spend working actually on the water?

CT: I would say it's an average of three or four days a week. Used to be [that]I would do six, but not anymore. In the last two weeks, I clammed five days. But it's not full days anymore. As a matter of fact, clamming – the one thing I like about clamming is I don't have to get up early in the morning. I'll wait and go out around noon and work until sundown and watch the sun go down, take some pictures of it, [and] post on Facebook. So it's a nice life, but it's tough. Clamming is labor-intensive. It's very hard on the back and everything. It's a lot of heavy lifting.

NS: With the gillnet, how many nets will you put out at a time? Is it just one?

CT: I cut it down to about two nets of maybe a thousand feet each, which sounds like a lot, but when you put it out in a big piece of water, it doesn't really cover much ground. I used to do a mile of net a day.

NS: Where do you set them?

CT: Basically, I try to stay out of the places where the boats are running. It's hard because there's – now there's houses. All the houses – half the houses that are on the water now, waterfront houses, I watched them build. It used to be hardly anybody had boats in their backyards. And now everybody has boats in their backyards because they got – if it's a house that's open to the bay, not a canal, you're really susceptible if a storm comes up and the winds blowing in that direction. But people now have boats on lifts. They lift it, so they – a lot of boats. In the summertime, I watched – in the perfect storm year, when the breach happened in Moriches Bay, I watched basically a hundred houses get washed away, and then they closed it up. And these houses were – they were all kinds of houses. Basically, they were squatters. People would just build a house over there, and then they ended up owning the property. There'd be all kinds of cottages and little ranches that got added on. There were no real mini-mansions. All those houses got washed away. Then because of the lawsuit that they had – now it's Westhampton Dunes, they call the village – they won – all the property owners won the lawsuit. The way the lawsuit was set up, I believe they each got like a million dollars, but they couldn't get the money. They had to rebuild. One builder, I understand, built all those houses, so now it looks like Howard Beach. And they're all the same mini-mansions. And they actually built new roads so they could build up more houses. So now there's more than a hundred houses there. These people moor their boats on the bay side. But the thing is, I put my nets in the same areas that I've been putting them for twenty-five years so that, if you're new – all the old-timers know to look for my net, so very rarely does anybody hit them. The people that do are newcomers and newbies. One of the problems is that somebody is marking this natural channel that comes into the bay from the inlet with PVC poles. First, it was clam bags tapped or tied to them. And now it's black flags tied to them. And that's how, legally, I have to mark my gillnets. So people think that my nets, which are supposedly warning them not to go between

these flags – they think they're channel markers saying go between these flags. I'll have people actually run right through the nets while I'm pulling them and then start cursing me out because – "What are you doing putting your nets in the channel?" I say, "This isn't a channel. That's marking my nets." But that's where I put my nets. It's basically in areas where I know the boats don't run regularly. I mark them very prominently. At first, I had some problems with people because it was only a couple guys doing it back then, and nobody as regular as me. I'm almost the only one left in this section of the bay, in [the] East Moriches area, that's doing it on a daily basis. I have a good relationship with the neighbors, the people who live there. I'll tell them, if you're going out fishing, you need some bait, need some bunkers, you can just lift my net, take a few out, so I try to keep a good rapport with the people. I've been pretty successful at it.

NS: That's good. So what are some of the targeted species that you fish for?

CT: Mostly now, it's bluefish because the bluefish – it used to be when the bluefish weren't plentiful, you can get a good price. But when there were a lot around, they had these big boats, and there was no limits, so basically, they're almost unsellable. You end up selling them for shark bait to a bait dealer and, a lot of times, having to throw them back because you got nobody. You send them into the market, and you get an "NS" on the thing, get no money. NS, no sale. They'd say they didn't sell them, which was a lie. But what it was was – they have to take care of their best fishermen first, so you'd end up – they'd end up selling them cheap just to get rid of them, and you get no money. But now it's basically the limit right now is a thousand pounds a day, which, for me, would be a very good day. Usually, I'll do three or four hundred pounds or two, three, four hundred pounds a day but get between fifty cents and a dollar a pound. The big boats now – they're only allowed a thousand pounds too. So the market never, ever gets completely saturated, which, for me, is a good thing. For big boats, it makes it tough for a big operation to make money with those kinds of limits. But for me, it's worked out.

NS: What other kinds of fish –?

CT: Bluefish. I catch fluke, weakfish, which is always commanding a good price. There's not always a lot of them around. That's a cyclical thing with the weakfish. We're basically on the northern fringe of their range, so sometimes we'll get a good run of weaks [weakfish], and sometimes we won't. There'll be a couple of years where they'll be coming. Never seen it come back like it did in the late '70s. That run was spectacular. Now, I would – if you asked me, now that run was basically in the central part, western portions of the Great South Bay, Sayville, Bayshore. That's where the big run was. What's changed there is the dredge boats. Bluepoints Company and the other dredge companies was all in that same area. And the Bluepoints Company had basically one-third of all the bay bottom in Brookhaven town. They had maybe seven or eight dredge boats working every single day, year-round. The dredge boat's stirring up the bottom. They're catching the clams, but they're also stirring up the bottom. Everybody knew that after the first – after the initial run and the big weakfish, the only way you could catch weakfish, basically, in the summertime, was to follow the dredge boats around because the small weakfish would be following the – you get behind a dredge boat, you just load up on them. Well, this was an everyday thing for hundreds of years. Bluepoints Company was in business for two hundred and fifty years doing basically the same thing, dredging oysters by sailboat and then with powerboat, then clams. And suddenly, it's ended. So was a perfect nursery area for the

weakfish to come and for the young to grow. That's not been replaced. So the clam boats also stir up the bottom too. So you had thousands of clam boats and the dredge boats, and now you go there on a beautiful day like today, go over on Robert Moses Bridge, you don't see anything. So what are the fish going to eat? But I've never heard anybody mention that in any of the reports, the studies, that that has changed. That's a big change. That's a huge change. So the fish may come here to spawn. But do the young have the food? I don't think so.

NS: In the course of a year, if you could do it month by month, what are some other things that you would be doing?

CT: We can start this time of year.

NS: Let's start in January.

CT: Yeah. In January, I'm clamming on the days that I can, depending on the weather. On days off, I'll be making either traps or nets or whatever else needs to get done, whatever I can do. I like to save that work for that time of year because I can sit here in the living room. I'll sit here and make crab traps, sitting here watching TV or sit in that chair. Like I said, I'm knitting a sweater. Learned how to make my gillnets by tying the lead line. Normally, the traditional way of making a gillnet is you hang – it's called hanging a net. You take the bottom line, which has lead line. Either the lead's inside the line or the lead's on the outside of the line. The top line has floats because the net needs to sink to the bottom, but then it has to stand up, so the floats are on the top line. A net has to be hung evenly. Now, I didn't know this. One of the first nets I made, I just hung bottom line, top line, didn't even it up and wondering why I didn't catch anything. And then, when I stretched it out, it was all twisted, and I had to cut one line off and retie it. So it has to be knot for knot. So the net is hung, but depending on the size of the mesh, it'll be between two or four, maybe six meshes per tie. And the tie will be maybe six inches. So you have these net needles, and you stick the net needle through the mesh. You tie a knot through three or four meshes, measure the six inches, tie another knot. Well, what they would do is have a center line and, depending on which size net it was and how you're going to hang it, you have a center line with marks every six inches. So you have three lines. You hang up the bottom line, the lead line, the next to the lead line, the center line, and then the float line next to the center line, and then you tie one and then tie the other to the center line markings. Well, I'm looking at this, I'm like, well, each knot, it's a half – two half hitches and a [inaudible], so the line goes around three times, twice this way and once the back to lock it in. So you have this little three lines of net. That's a mark. So if I know how long it has to be, I measure it against the net needle, I'll take the lead line and sit on this chair – I'm using old line, so it's a little bit dirty, so I'll drape towels on it, so I don't get the chair, the arms of the chair dirty. And I'll sit there with the net piled up on the floor, the lead line on one side, and pull past me, across my lap, and tie a knot every six inches until I get the lead line done. Then I'll take that and put it in the tub. I have them in the backyard. I'll put them in the tub, put them in the backyard, and it gets warm in the wintertime because it's a lot more cumbersome with the floats there because you have to measure the distance between the floats. It's easier to do when it's hung up. But now, instead of having a center line, I have the lead line that's already tied with the knots. So I hang that up. And then I'll hang up the float line with the floats on it that you have to space them, but they're not tied on yet. That's why it's cumbersome to do it sitting down. You have to actually

know how many. You have to count the ties so the floats are evenly spaced. But if you can see it, it's much easier. I'll just hang it up and do that in the backyard in the springtime. But in January, on a bad day, a windy day, a snowy day, I'll be sitting here like my mother, making an Afghan, watching TV. But on the days that are not so – on nice days, I'll be out. I'll be clamming. I used to try – I used to do a lot of crab dredging or some crab dredging. But now that's gotten specialized. There's big boats doing it. They made it legal to have these oversized – it used to be the dredges could only be thirty inches. Now I think they can be sixty inches. And you can haul with power. It used to be you couldn't haul with power. You had to haul by hand like it is with scalloping still. They changed it so that it's like it is in every other state. You can haul with power, big dredges. So you got these big fishing boats. In Moriches Bay on the Center Moriches side is the typical, traditional grounds to go dredge clams in this part of the island. And there'll be big boats, and they're moving fast. And if you try and get involved with that with a little boat, they crowd you out, so I haven't done much of that. But sometimes, I'll get a bushel of crabs while I'm clamming. In the wintertime, crabs have been worth a lot of money, so it's good extra money that way because the crabs go down in the mud. They're kind of migratory because they'll also go out in the ocean. But they'll move from one part of the bay to this part of the bay. Those areas where the freshwater is upwelling, they bed down for the warmth so they don't freeze to death. But they're not hibernating. They're still a little bit active. It warms up enough, they come out, and they'll move around, and they'll actually feed a little bit. So it's usually – when it gets cold enough, the crabs are bedded down in the mud, and you can dredge them. That's how they catch them in the wintertime.

NS: So, in the spring, when does the spring season generally start?

CT: Well, I used to shift over to gillnetting in the beginning of April when I was bunker fishing because the bunkers and menhaden – the big spawners come in usually the first week of April. When they come in, they come in. There'll be none, or maybe you catch a couple of bushels in the net to you're getting thirty, forty bushels a day and every day. Basically, that's all you're going to catch in that time of year. There may be a bass or catch a couple of flounder or something. But it's almost straight bunkers. And there were several places – Bill Sembler, the famous Sembler brothers, on the Patchogue River – I think it's where the marina is now, where –

NS: I'm talking about today. Would you be catching bunker today?

CT: Yeah. Well, now, actually, I'm going to start fishing – it's been, in the last few years, I didn't start fishing until June because May is good for fishing. You got bunkers. The bluefish come in, usually, the first or second week. The striped bass would be there, and the weakfish. Well, there may be a few weakfish in this part of the bay that time of year, but you don't really get a lot. The bluefish will come in. But as soon as they come in, everybody's got them, and the price drops. The bunker fishery now is there's only a couple of local guys that buy them. For me, I have to travel all the way to Bayshore or all the way to Huntington to sell my bunkers if I'm catching a lot of them. My customers are to the east. So I'm taking bunkers all the way to Bayshore, the bluefish all the way to Shinnecock, come home, and that [inaudible] I'll have to go out to set my nets again, so it's like I'm going twenty-four/seven if I do that. So the clamming, the last few years, has been steady enough, good enough, so that I can clam through May. And now it's working out perfectly because it used to be that the striped bass season didn't open until

July 1st. Just last year, they moved it to June 1st. So tomorrow will be my first day of gillnetting, so I'm going to put some of the net I made this winter – I can't wait to put – I love the way this net looks. I think it's going to catch great. That's going out tonight.

NS: Great. What about the fall, summer, and fall? What are some of the things –?

CT: Well, the bass season officially closes on December 15th. And I'm lucky enough – a lot of the inshore guys, to fill their striped bass tags, we get – it's been down to a hundred and ninety-six. We used to get over two hundred, like two-hundred and forty tags, which means that's the number of fish we can catch and sell. If you have a striped bass license, it doesn't matter if you got one little boat, or you're a rod-and-reel fisherman, or you got a half-a-million-dollar dragger, you're allowed two hundred striped bass for the year. You get tags, and each fish has to be tagged. The local inshore guys, a lot of them will go with the bigger boats because the bigger boats, they're set up, and they're out in the ocean. They can go all over the ocean, get where big schools of bass are, and they can fill their tags in a day. They fill their tags, and they open it up to bring other licensed striped bass fishermen out and fill their tags, and they'll split the money. I've been lucky enough to – I've only had to do that once or twice in my career as a bass fisherman because we have the bass here. But I won't fill them in a day. The best day I've had is maybe fifty or sixty fish in a day. But usually, if I get six striped bass a day, it's good because I'm catching other stuff. So the bass season, basically, in the summertime, I don't catch hardly any bass. It's too warm in the water, and the water in the bay gets seventy, eighty degrees.

NS: What do you catch in the summertime?

CT: In the summertime, I'll catch – well, the bluefish, they'll get different runs of bluefish. The first run of bluefish, usually in early May, are big blues. They come in, and they chase the bunkers. And then usually, by late May, the third week in May or so, a smaller run of bluefish come in, and they're chasing baitfish, usually, the anchovies, which are – a lot of people think they're shiners when they see them, but they're actually little bay anchovies. And they're filter-feeding fish, and they come in in hordes, and the fish just love them. The bluefish chase them around. Those fish will be maybe two, three-pounders. The first fish will come in – it depends – a couple years ago, we had ten-pound bluefish. This year, the fish that came in were about five pounds, so I didn't fish for them, but I saw them being sold. Now, the two or three-pounders are in. And then, usually, in July, late June or July, another run of blues will come in, where they'll be a pound or a pound and a half. So I have different size – different mesh in a gillnet catches different size fish.

NS: In the summertime, you're focusing most on bluefish.

CT: Well, that's the mainstay. But every year is different. Last year was almost exclusively bluefish. There were some weaks and a smattering of kingfish and spot and croaker, which are southern species, spot, and croaker. A couple of years ago, we had a great run of spot two years in a row, where I was catching these fish that were maybe three to a pound, two, three hundred pounds a day, and getting a good price for them.

NS: Yeah. Well, I remember you said that croaker is a southern fish. Are you seeing different kinds of fish more recently than you've seen in past years?

CT: The croakers, yes. The croakers we're getting on a more regular basis. We've also gotten a couple of runs of – I guess we call them baby black drum, which a lot of people think – they don't know what they are because they look like a porgy, about a half a pound, and they have black stripes. There's a porgy called a sheepshead porgy, which is a southern species that has black stripes, so people think they're catching that. But they're actually baby black drum, which are probably born here because the black drum gets up to a hundred pounds or more. We'll get some bigger black drum, fifteen or twenty pounds, that'll come in the bay. I'm sure they're coming in to spawn in the summertime. But we're seeing some of those. And croaker and more – I'd like to see a lot of croaker. I haven't seen – I caught maybe ten pounds in a day. They're a beautiful little fish to catch in a gillnet, beautiful fish to eat. They're like a porgy but not as bony.

NS: Yeah. Now, is that typically a southern fish?

CT: Yes.

NS: When did you start seeing them here?

CT: Well, we always caught one or two. But now, on a regular basis, I'll get three, four, half a dozen, ten a day.

NS: About when did that start [inaudible]?

CT: This started about, must be, about ten years ago. And they're also spawning because there was guys that they go to catch bait with a cast net off the town dock, and they were catching – they didn't know what they were, and they were keeping them alive to use them for bait, but I reckon that some of them are baby croakers.

NS: Are there other types of fish that are new to you, say, in the last ten years?

CT: Let's see. Not really. Not really.

NS: Are there things that you used to catch here all the time, and now you don't see them?

CT: Well, there's not a lot of toadfish because – oyster toad – ugliest fish you want to see. You know what a monkfish looks like? They look like a miniature monkfish, little brown, slimy thing with a barbelled mouth, a big mouth, and big googly eyes. And they call them oyster – they call them dogfish, too, because they grunt and almost bark like a dog. We get them in – people catch them on rod and reel sometimes. And you have to be careful because they'll bite. The bite is mildly poisonous. They'll bite, and they won't let go. There used to be quite a few of those. And you'd get them in the crab traps a lot and the gillnets a lot. But the Asian market suddenly opened up for them, and they were worth three or four dollars a pound live, even though there's practically nothing on it to eat. They got a big fat head and a skinny little tail.

And I've tried eating them. The meat tastes good, but there's nothing there. So I don't know. But who knows? Maybe they eat the head. I really don't know. It's just a matter of taste, I guess. But they pretty much fished them out because they trap – they go in crab traps. If you know where to go and how to bait them, you catch a lot of them. So there's still some around, but I don't see them like I used to.

NS: I'm sure you've been through your fair share of storms. I was just wondering if you can maybe talk about one or two and what happened to you. How did you get through it?

CT: Well, the one big storm was Gloria, back in the 80s, which, really – I lost like seventy-five crab traps. I was living in Brookhaven and crabbing in Bellport Bay. I was fishing a hundred and fifty traps. And I decided – because it wasn't sure where the storm was going to go, and then it was zeroing in on us. So I couldn't fit them all on the boat at once, so I took half of them, and I thought I was smart; I put them up on the flats, where they'd be safe, which was absolutely the wrong place to put them because the flats became – that was the worst tide ever, and I lost every one of those traps. That year, there were thousands of traps basically being fished in Bellport Bay, so you'd be clamming, and you'd find crab traps everywhere. So I got some of them back. Not all of them were mine. That storm basically put me out of work for a week. The lights were out. The power was out all over the island for a whole week. But it was good because it was a nice little neighborhood down there. There were a lot of families with young kids. We all pooled together. And one friend of ours had a barbecue pit in his backyard, a brick barbecue. Every night, we were there taking whatever we had, thawing out in the freezer, and playing guitars. All the kids were playing. So it was a great time, but it was – and the fishing – everything was over. Crabbing was over. After that storm, you couldn't catch anything. You'd try crabbing. The crabs were gone. It just washed everything away. It took a long time for that to come back.

NS: About how long?

CT: I'd say it was a good month before everything seemed like it was getting somewhat back to normal. I don't remember what I did and how it was. I just remember, right afterward, trying to catch anything. The clams were down. The crabs were gone. The fish were gone. That was the worst one. Sandy, here, for us, it really – I didn't lose power. I lose power for maybe an hour or two. My boat was – I trailered my boat. I took it out of the marina, but I took it out on a trailer, so that was safe. The marina was completely a mess. They had boats and stuff all over, docks and boats all over the place, so I couldn't get back in the marina for a couple of weeks. So I had to go back to trailering and – but what happened was it was in the middle of the striped bass season when I'm trying to fill my tags. And the fishing was great up until Sandy. After Sandy, we had a breach here. Next to the east jetty in Moriches Inlet opened up, and it kept getting – it got wider and wider for a couple of days. The fishing was good. I was catching lots of – all kinds of – I got some big blues and bass, fluke. And then, right away, it was like within three days, they moved in boats to fill it in because they changed the policies completely. Used to wait. Now they didn't wait. They figured they knew how to do this now. They had an all-new way of filling in breaches. And they did it within a week; it was done. But what happened was the fishing died. And I think it was because of all the activity that they had. What they did was take sand out of the ocean. They learned how to pour it into the hole so that it would stay. I read

about it. I forget how they did it, but they learned how to do this. But because of all the silt and sand and everything, activity in the inlet, the fish weren't coming in, so the fishing just died. That was one of the years that I had to go out and fill my tags [inaudible] somebody else. But I did. It really didn't – financially, I didn't really get hurt that badly, so I didn't really apply for that grant money because it would have been hard for me to document that I lost – you had to document that you lost five thousand dollars, and I don't think I would have been able to do that.

NS: Was there another breach that hasn't been filled in?

CT: Oh, yeah. Yeah, well, there was three breaches. There was one in the middle of Fire Island, and then there's the one that's still open, right basically – what they used to call Old Inlet is now a new inlet because there was an inlet there. There was Old Inlet Beach that was actually a Brookhaven town beach [that] you could only get to it by boat. They had lifeguards there. There were bathrooms there and everything. There was a dock. You would dock there, and we would go there quite often. And now there's an inlet there, so now it's not Old Inlet; it's new inlet. I forget what they call it. I don't think they have a name for it yet. Yeah. Now that inlet, they decided to leave that one open. In my estimation, that was the one they should have closed first because, like I said, I lived and worked on that bay basically for ten years. I know how the dynamics work on an easterly storm, an easterly gale, because the reason why we get a storm surge during those kinds of storms, nor'easters and hurricanes, is because the wind actually – the dynamics of the wind actually push the water. So you get an easterly wind, and New York is like – this is New Jersey, let's say, and this is the reverse, we're looking at [inaudible] I'm looking at it right. I'd say this is the way it would be. This is New Jersey, New York City, and this is Long Island. An easterly wind, a nor'easter, pushes this way, so it builds the water up into what's basically a corner, where it has no place to go except the rivers and the streams, but it's really blocked off. So that brings the tide on the ocean higher because of the northeast wind. Let's say this is what we call Shirley Shore; it's practically a straight, perpendicular shoreline from the Carmans River all the way almost to Smith Point Beach. Now, there's the narrow bay, but it's a narrow opening, so there's water – the water comes through here. This is Mastic. Here's Fire Island. There's a narrow bay. And then it opens up into Moriches Bay over here. So you have the water being pushed in from the ocean side, and it raises – on the barrier beachside – on the ocean side, the water is extremely high during a nor'easter. But you have Shirley Shore here. You have Fire Island here. This is the mainland. This Great South Bay opens up this way. You have the wind pushing from the east, pushing the water in the bay to the west. We saw this happen all the time, and we knew when there was a nor'easter during the day, we could clam where nobody else could clam because the water in the rest of the bay was extremely rough. But we had Shirley Shore blocking it, so we could clam right along Shirley Shore. But we had to watch it because the tide would just go out. The water would just get pushed away. At times, it would get so low you couldn't get back in your creek, even with these little eighteen, twenty-foot boats. There was one storm that we had – the only time we ever got flooded in the house because we were on a floodplain was when we had a nor'easter where I almost couldn't get in. A couple of the boats – a couple of guys had to leave their boats out in the bay because the tide got too low; they couldn't get in the creek. That evening, as the storm was coming up, there were snow flurries, and the wind was howling. I took my little son Michael, who was probably five years old, and we took a walk a half a mile out into the bay bottom. Normally, there would be hip-deep water because the water was gone. It was gone. It

got pushed to the west. So on the west side, they got flooded – Freeport, Amityville. It was flooding down there. Well, that's how it's always been. Well, now there's an inlet, big opening in the barrier beach. Well, we got flooded that evening. My wife wakes me up at one o'clock in the morning – "I think we got flooded." I look outside, and I see this river going by the front of the house, whereas five or six –

NS: Now, which storm is this? Is this Sandy or Gloria?

CT: No, this was a nor'easter in the 1980s, 1986, or something like that. What had happened was the storm had passed by so quickly that the wind switched around from the east to the west at the same speeds, even faster, pushed the water back. So that's when Bellport Bay gets flooded. Well, when they were talking about having these meetings after Sandy about whether or not they wanted to close this, they had all the meetings in Bellport, in the Bellport area. I went to the first one. Dr. [Charles] Flagg, [professor at] Stonybrook, told them, "Well, you don't have to worry about getting flooding on a west wind anymore because you have an outlet." They had actually tested it because – I don't know if you remember – several days after Sandy, a hurricane came by. I forget the name of the hurricane. But they had this huge west wind, where normally Bellport Bay would get their flooding, and they didn't get any flooding because they had that inlet that now acts as an outlet at that time. Actually, the opposite thing happens on a west wind because, out in the ocean, the water gets pushed away from our area. You get extremely low tides on west winds. But in Bellport Bay, initially, you'll get extremely high tide. But now, they had the inlet to let the water out. So those people are happy. Keep the bay open. Keep the inlet open. Well, what he didn't say – and he actually used this metaphor – he said the way it works in the bay is, when you have the wind action going from west to east, it's like tipping a bathtub from the west side to the east side. The water goes down on that end and builds up on the other end. He said now you don't have to worry about it because you have an outlet. He didn't do the reverse because, if he did, we'd have to say that now it's like tipping a bathtub from the east to the west with the spigot wide open because now you have an inlet. When you have the low tide on an easterly wind in the Bellport Bay side and a high tide on the ocean side, now you have an inlet, and it's a gravity feed. The water pours into Bellport Bay. The wind pushes it to the west. You can argue with these people all you want to. If you're not a scientist, they will say to you, "That's your opinion. We have the data." And I will ask them, "Explain to me how it's not causing more flooding when not only do you have the wind pushing the water to the west, but you have an inlet letting more water in to be pushed to the west?" Since Sandy, all of those people know they've had more flooding on the storms than they ever had before.

NS: Now, how has that inlet changed the fishing dynamics? Shellfishing or finfishing?

CT: Well, I know the fishing down on that end is great now, more than they've ever had.

NS: What about for you?

CT: At times, it seems like it's pulled some fish away from my area. It seems like the fish don't hang out as long. But it could be helping me too on the other end because it's actually –

NS: You said definitely it's helping on the western end?

CT: Oh, yeah.

NS: Tell me what you've heard or seen.

CT: Well, they'll just say that there's loads of bass in the bay in Bellport, like they've never had before. The problem is it's against the law to gillnet striped bass in the Great South Bay. That's part of the Great South Bay, so you can't – I couldn't go down there and fish. I could do it in the ocean, but I don't have a big enough boat to go in the ocean now. The fish hang out. They know that now, and especially in the fall migration, the fish will hang out right outside that inlet. They'll come out of Moriches Inlet – because legally, you're not supposed to go in and out of that inlet. Even though some people do it, you're not supposed to be going out of the new inlet. They don't let you – they're not supposed to now. Sometimes they'll sit there and chase you. But the fish will be hanging out right outside that inlet. The funny thing is that even when that inlet – the old inlet closed up in the 1800s and hasn't been opened since, but it's been traditionally – on the outside of where the old inlet was was a traditional good spot for fishing. The fish liked that spot. There's nothing geographically, ecologically to make the baitfish hang out there, but they do. In my estimation, fish have – they have a genetic memory. For hundreds of years, that was a big inlet, and the fish would go there. Well, even though the inlet closed up, they still went there. The baitfish went there because their parents went there. It's in their memory. "This is where we go." They would go along the beach. "We don't get in anymore, but we hang out here for a while." And then the bigger fish go where the baitfish are, so it's always been – so now it opened up again, and bingo. You have the perfect situation for good fishing because the Carmans River is the best freshwater feed as far as a stream on Long Island. More freshwater comes into the bay from the Carmans River than any other stream or creek, maybe except for [inaudible] River. I'm not sure, but I always heard that Carmans River has that. Where you have that mix, that's where the baitfish love it, where you got – now, without that inlet there, the mix wasn't really there. That end of the bay, really, before the inlet was there, the clams weren't good quality. The fishing wasn't the greatest. And there was really no tidal movement. You didn't get a lot of seaweed. Didn't get a lot of spider crabs. The bluefoot crabbing was great. And that's because they had no competition from spider crabs and calico crabs that need the saltier water. Now you have that saltier water in there; now you've got everything. I'm sure, ecologically speaking, for multispecies, it's a great place. It'd be great if they could keep it open for that reason. But I'm really suspecting that there's going to be one storm where there's going to be no doubt that this inlet has caused major flooding to the west.

NS: Has it been good as a fisherman to have that inlet there?

CT: Well, for me, I haven't really – like I said, the only difference I might have noticed is that I'll hear that, let's say, that the bluefish are hanging out by the Smith Point Bridge, which is like half a mile from that inlet when I'm not really catching them over here. My way of thinking is that, well, they're hanging out there now because they have that inlet there. And they're getting what they need as far as the bait, every –

NS: But it's not helping you?

CT: Well, it's not helping. But I can't say it's actually hurt me, except it's a little frustrating sometimes when I'm expecting the bass to hang out for a week, and they hang out for two days. And I go set and, all of a sudden, "Where they'd go?" "Well, they're down in Bellport." I say, "Okay."

NS: Now, did you have to repair, do any repairs after Sandy?

CT: Not me. I had no damage. I only lost power for a couple hours. I know that, on the waterfront here, I think they had about a six-foot surge. And I know they're razing some of the houses, and some of the business down there lost a lot of stuff. But it wasn't so bad. The further west you got, the worse it got.

NS: Yeah. I'm curious. In all your years as a fisherman, have you ever been in a storm?

CT: Oh, sure.

NS: Can you share with me one time when –

CT: Two years ago – two years ago, three years ago, they were predicting thunderstorms in the evening, but they came a little early. I had nets all over the bay. I see these storms building up, and I'm watching. You could see lightning and how dark it got and everything. And I could see the wind coming. So I (frap?) the net in with all the fish and everything. You call it (frapping?) the net. We always called it that. There's fish and everything in it. Pile it up in this little – I had a little eighteen-foot wooden fiberglass Sharpie, and it wasn't self-bailing. Put it in the boat. I said, "I got to get out of the way." There's no place to go. I couldn't go home because I'd have to go right through the middle of the storm. So, I was just adjacent to Remsenburg Shores, right next to this huge mansion, beautiful Spanish-style mansion they just built. Across the canal, they just built a house there, but there was a vacant piece of property. So I went into the canal, maybe about fifty feet, tied the boat up, and started picking the fish. Then the storm just hit. It was seventy-mile-an-hour winds, nonstop lightning. I just had to sit there and bail the boat. Just rain coming down at two inches an hour, at least. It was tremendous. Tremendous storm. And these people, this couple, this nice couple, must have been watching the Weather Channel because there were tornado warnings; they're waving in the house for me to come in the house. But if I came in the house, the boat would've sunk. We had three different storms hit. I had to sit there. Actually, the first storm dissipated. I went back out and ran some more net and actually caught a bunch of weakfish because it stirred them up. Another storm came. I had to do it again. Come back and sat there again through the same thing. Then hail started coming down, and the lightning was hitting all around. Actually, this happened to somebody else; Jimmy Miller said this happened to him. He was out there in the same – he's got a big aluminum boat that's a lightning target if you want one. I'm looking up, and I'm praying. "I don't need to die right now." This happened to me before. My hair started standing on end. That's when the lightning is lining up for a place to go. I looked up at the sky. This bolt of lightning was coming right for me, and it just stopped halfway. Goodness. Then that storm dissipated. I had a good day fishing. I went to Shinnecock, to Cor-J [Seafood] to sell them. One of their freezers got flooded – the whole parking lot. They had it even worse because that's where it went. They ended up, I

think – six or seven inches they had an hour. That was the worst I've ever had to sit through. I've been in lots of storms like that.

NS: Are there warning signs for you of when a storm is going to hit besides the Weather Channel?

CT: Well, now, especially because the weather patterns have changed. That's the big change that I've noticed is weather patterns have changed. I've been watching the weather since I was a kid. Very interested in watching storms and how they move. And used to watch Tex Antoine on Channel Seven, and he would kind of give you a scientific explanation of how everything would go. I've always watched the storms. [If you] become a fisherman, it becomes a way of life. You have to watch. Because you listen to the weatherman, just follow the weather reports, you'll either starve or you'll drown, because days when you could have worked, you won't because they'll say something will happen. And when they say you're safe, you'll go out, and the storms are coming. So what I do [is] I watch the weather. I'll look at the National Weather Service marine buoy data sites and their forecast. I'll watch the Weather Channel or maybe Channel Two news. I like Channel Two news because Vanessa Murdock was my daughter Becky's best friend in high school. She was at her wedding, so we watched Vanessa. But anyway, I have to predict it myself. I'll look at the radar, look at what's happening, and – "Okay, which way is this moving? Do I have enough time to go out and make some money? Will I be able –? Am I safe enough to be able to put my nets out and be safe enough to expect I'll be able to get them in? It used to be that you could pretty much predict the weather patterns, and you can't anymore.

NS: How did you predict it? Aside from television and the reports, what were some of the things that you –?

CT: The normal pattern was that a cold front would come through, and you'd get a day of – it would clear up – a day of strong northwest winds. The next day, maybe northwest winds but not so strong. Maybe a day of calm winds. And then it would come around to the southwest, and another front would be coming. But what happens now, over and over again, is that the weather stalls all over the world. And that's what we just had. This tropical storm system – we're still in the middle of this tropical storm system. That's been cooking off the East Coast a whole week. That almost never happened before. It was a very unique pattern. I can remember Tex Antoine talking about an omega block because nothing's moving in the world. This was like in the 1950s or '60s. It was this unusual thing that almost never happens. Happens all the time now, where weather patterns don't move, and we'll get two weeks of east wind, or it'll be cloudy, misty, rainy for a week and a half. You just can't predict it anymore what's going to happen three days from now. Just wake up in the morning and go, "Okay, what's going on today?

NS: What are some of the warning signs that you look for when you're out on the water?

CT: Well, you can tell when there's an east wind coming. It's what they call a maritime layer, and the east wind you have to watch for because that can come up really strongly, really quickly, almost out of nowhere, especially when I was out in the ocean. In the bay, I don't have to worry about it so much because the bay doesn't really get that rough unless you get a screaming

westerly gale or easterly gale. In the ocean, it's wide open to the east and west and to the south. You have to know when that's coming. An east wind, there'll be clouds, these low clouds that'll be coming in off the water. And you'll just see them coming in off of the South Fork, going out over Shinnecock; there's an east wind coming. Or out in the ocean, there'd be no wind at all, and out of nowhere, you get a chop. You'll get a chop coming out of the southeast. That's a wind coming because the wind'll be blowing maybe ten miles offshore, but the front that's bringing the wind isn't moving, but the water is getting rough, and that gets pushed. The clouds are the best thing to be watching as far as any storms coming. It's just experience. It's just a total experience. What does that look like? Does that look like rain? Does that look like wind? Can you see a dark cloud with some lower clouds, little puffs of lower clouds that are moving fast? That's a wind. Besides lightning, the one thing you have to watch out for is wind, and you got to know what's coming. One time that I remember, when I was still just clamming, living in Amityville – this was in late 1978, something like that – no, it can't be '78 because we moved, so it had to be like '76. This beautiful summer day. They had predicted thunderstorms in the afternoon. But it used to be – this was almost a daily thing on that, in the middle of the summer, in that middle of a high-pressure area, you could watch the thunderstorms build up because what you get is the sun beating down on the land. Maybe there's moisture in the ground from the rain from the front that came through before. It warms up the ground and evaporates the moisture, and it raises into the sky until it hits a colder layer. You get a puffy cumulus cloud. They'll get maybe one, and that one's growing, and it moves from over Queens maybe to over Nassau County, and another one. And that one's growing, and the front one's growing even bigger. And then, in the back, you get another one. And this one's getting dark. Then, within a couple hours, maybe three or four hours, you see a bolt of lightning come out of that one. You actually watch the thunder – and it used to be a regular thing; you'd watch them. That's another thing that really doesn't happen like it used to. You really don't see – I really don't see that that much. But this was back in the '70s, and it happened. You'd watch these storms build up. This one really got really strong and really dark, but it was moving north. It was going over the middle of the island, so I wasn't worried. Nobody was worried. We were out clamming. Three or four o'clock in the afternoon – just kept clamming. Now it's time to go in and sell my clams. I go through the Robert Moses Bridge, coming through Babylon Bay. There's this cloud coming out of this thunderstorm, and you just see it build up, and it looked like a big Italian bread. It rolled out over the ocean. It was low, and it's just coming across the bay. We stopped just to look at this, say, "Look at this cloud." You see the thunderstorm and lightning over here and this cloud. I looked forward to the west. I see this whiteness over the water. "What the heck is that?" I realized it's a wall of wind. Underneath this cloud is what they call a roll cloud. It was a squall. I see this coming. I get back in the boat. I had to head into it. There was nothing else I could do. Suddenly, gets dark as it could be. I had this brand-new seventy-horsepower [inaudible] engine on this twenty-four-foot little skinny tonging Garvey that used to go at thirty knots, twenty-five knots. I got it at three-quarters throttle, and I'm not moving. Every piece of chop was coming over the cabin – and lightning. It lasted for about twenty minutes, and then it was gone. It turns out it capsized maybe half a dozen boats. It turned every atheist into a Christian. We're at the dock. So I was praying to God, "I swear, I'll go to church every Sunday," and people are saying – that was quite an interesting one. Another interesting one was I went out – beautiful day in the summer. I put some nets out. I was catching weakfish out in the ocean. I had the twenty-four-foot Proline at the time. I set the nets out to the east of Moriches Inlet. And then I decided I wanted to – you know, I got nothing to do. I'll go check my net, see what's

going on. On the way out, this friend (Todd Cooke?). I don't know if you know him – bayman. I forget his father's first name – was a very famous bayman back in the day. He calls me over. He's pinhooking blackfish at the jetty. He says to me, I'm looking, and it looks pretty rough. He says, "Yeah, they're predicting ten-foot swell for about the next five hours. It was totally unpredicted. It just suddenly came up on the radio." I got out. It was an offshore wind. And I used to surf back when I was in high school. It's a beautiful surf, but not a beautiful surf to be out in a boat in. And I decided I'm going to go out. And then this three-wave set came in, one bigger than the other. And there was nothing for me to do except go right into it. Made it over the first wave. And then there's a second wave. It started to feather when I got to the top. And the third one was bigger. It was probably about twelve-foot or maybe higher. I don't even know. And it was breaking as I went over. I'm like, if – one, if I was ten feet wrong, I was going over with this wave. And the whole boat came out of the water, and *pfshhhh-boom*, and I made it. So I went out to look at the nets, and the waves were breaking on the net, so there's nothing I could do. And then I turned around and looked, and I go, "How am I going to get in?" There was nothing but breaking waves. But a good thing, I had a good motor on that boat because I got ahead. There was a little space. I got ahead. And then another set came. I outran it and got back in. But it lasted, I heard – the guy, Billy (Tunney?), is a guy I went out and filled my tags with that one year; he was out that day, and he had to get somebody to come in and guide him in. One of the other fishermen, Richie (LaRocca?) Jr., who fishes out of – they were fishing out of Shinnecock. He called him and said, "I can't get in." Richie LaRocca was – he and his brother were both firemen, city firemen. They would go out in anything. And that was just a joke because they run into burning buildings as a living. Breaking waves is nothing to them. It's water, and water can't hurt me. That's my friend, you know? So he went out in that. And he said it was amazing how he guided me back in. But it was the same. It just came out of nowhere. It was just that there was some kind of – had to be some kind of disturbance that only lasted for a few hours somewhere out in the Atlantic. It just brought a four or five-hour event of big swells. And went out the next day and pulled the nets like it was nothing. No damage. There was fish in it. Yeah. The ocean can be your friend, but it can be also an unforgiving mistress, I guess you could say. Unless you're out in it every single day for a living, you don't get it. You really don't get it. I worked on ocean boats with Richie LaRocca Sr. and monkfishing. You get out ten, fifteen miles, where you can't see land. There's a real sense of place. It's comfortable. It's a home. It's just hard to explain.

NS: You also mentioned you worked in a fish market.

CT: On different occasions, yeah. After a while – I forget why, but I moved my boat. Actually, I was packing my fish at Kingston's – Johnny Kingston's place. That's when he and his family were running it. I got a dock space there, as long as I packed my fish, so I was there. But the deal was I packed my fish with him, sold him whatever he needed, and if he needed me to do anything, I'd be there for him, so at times I cut fish for him. I shucked scallops there.

NS: When was this, roughly?

CT: This was in the '80s, the mid-'80s. Yeah. That was until I moved the boat to Bellport Bay, and I really wasn't fishing out of Sayville anymore because I learned it. Everything I was doing there in Sayville, I was doing in Bellport Bay. That was good times. That was good times. I tell

people not to believe anything that you read about how the fish are disappearing, the bay is empty, and the shellfish aren't growing anymore. I have to laugh at this whole project, these oyster projects, where they're planting oysters; they're going to clean the bay. There's no science behind it at all. I was at a meeting up in Port Jefferson because they wanted, this one bay steward wanted to have Pirates Cove up there part of Seatuck, Seatuck Bay or Seatuck Cove, he wanted to close it, because that's where he was planting – had his special oysters that he had genetically marked with a band on the shell. He was planting there to clean out the bay. He wanted to close Pirate Cove because they would open it up, and they were actually harvesting the oysters he was planting – or he was planting them in closed waters, and they were sitting, and they were growing in Pirate's Cove. He wanted to close it so that it would clean out the bay. The people at this meeting – it was like a public hearing – they're going, "Yes, since you've been here, I see that the bay is clear now." At our education project program, I'll tell the kids. I have to explain to the kids when the bay is clear [that] it doesn't mean it's not polluted. When it's cloudy, it doesn't mean it's dirty. The cloudiness is healthy. That's algae. The bay needs the algae. It comes every year. You can't filter microalgae out of a bay. I don't care what you do because this bay here is paved with filtering shellfish. But this time of year, when it gets warm enough and the sun comes out – it's clear in the winter and the spring. It's crystal clear. As soon as it warms up and the sun shines, the algae blooms. You come out the next day, and it's cloudy looking. You can't see in three feet of water. Well, that's when the clams wake up and start feeding, and the bunkers and anchovies come in. Bunkers are filter feeders. There'll be more fish than water in the bay, I always say, when the bunkers come in. Well, how come the water doesn't get crystal clear when all these filter feeders are suddenly feeding? Because what does algae need to –? Algae is the fastest-growing organism on the planet. It needs three basic things to grow. Needs carbon dioxide in the water because it's photosynthesis. They take in carbon dioxide and emit oxygen. They need the nitrogen because that's what they feed upon. And they need the sunlight. You get all of those things together, the algae grows to a certain point, and then it stops growing because the one thing that is gone is the sunlight because it gets too cloudy. So if you filter some algae out of the water, what happens? The water gets clearer. You have more sunlight; more algae grows instantly. So you can't filter algae out of the water. So putting a hundred thousand – a million oysters in the bay isn't going to do anything to pack – they say they're packaging the algae. But at this meeting, this bay steward is saying they filter pollutants out of the water. I raised my hand. And I asked (Kasner?), the Brookhaven town guy, I ask him – I asked the steward, "What is it filtering out of the water?" He says, "It's filtering nitrogen." I asked, "Is nitrogen a pollutant?" He goes, "Not that I know of." I said, "If they're filtering pollutants out of the water, how can we eat them?" Would you eat your pool filter? No. They're feeding on the algae. Plus, they're not nitrogen-based animals. They're like us. They expel the excess nitrogen. So they're taking in the nitrogen and expelling most of it out, just like we do. That's why our cesspools are causing nitrogen to get into the groundwater because we don't need that much – and we eat all these plants that are full of nitrogen. We don't need that much, so we expel it. So that whole thing about – we got to have this – they're going to bring the shellfish back to the Great South Bay because they'll clean the nitrogen, it's not true. It's absolutely not true.

NS: Where do you see yourself working –? How long do you think you'll be working? Do you want to continue working?

CT: I don't know. I'll be sixty-five this year, so my options are dwindling, as far as – I worked for Suffolk County – Suffolk Community College – for ten years. I was a custodian there. But I was also a union rep and got myself elected to the top union position in blue-collar at the college, and didn't realize the political situation I was in. I was a little too effective as a union rep. That's why I'm back fishing. Long story. But I actually parlayed that and also a book that I wrote into getting into Touro Law School. But at the time, I was suing Suffolk County and Suffolk Community College and the school district, and –

NS: You don't have to go into that. If you could talk about – do you see yourself working on the bay in the next ten years or [inaudible]?

CT: Yeah. I don't think I'll ever stop. I don't think I'll ever. I see these guys doing it. I see a couple guys, they look my age, and they're in their eighties, and they're still doing it. I don't know. I really don't know a bayman that stopped working before he had to, before he couldn't anymore, even though a lot of them didn't need the money.

NS: Do you like working on the bay?

CT: I love it. I'll never stop doing something. The clamming, I may have to give up eventually when my shoulders give out. But as far as gillnetting, whatever, whatever I can do, I'll just keep doing it.

NS: I think that's a good stopping point for us.

CT: Okay. Great.

NS: Thank you very much for this interview.

CT: Thank you for inviting me, asking me. Thank you very much.

NS: You're welcome.

CT: Good to see you.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/18/2022