

Narrator: James Salce and John Sherwin

Interviewer: Walter Blogoslawski

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Principal Investigator: Walter Blogoslawski

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Abstract: On August 25, 2015, Walter Blogoslawski interviewed James Salce and John F. Sherwin about their experiences in the oyster industry. John F. Sherwin began his involvement in the oyster industry in the mid-1950s in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He recounts his early experiences on Henry Street, where he was introduced to the industry and started gathering oysters. He details interactions with local oystermen, including selling oysters to Lewis Oyster Company and later to Bloom Shellfish Company in Norwalk. Sherwin describes learning the trade, including the use of dredges and the evolution from manual to motorized methods. He also highlights the roles of key figures like Billy Ciaurro, a shellfish constable who later became the harbormaster, and his contributions to the local oystering practices. James Salce contributes by sharing family stories, particularly about his Uncle Benny Sorrentino and other relatives who were involved in fishing and lobstering. Salce provides insights into the historical context, describing the transition from sail-powered to gasoline-powered boats and the impact of regulatory changes on the industry. Both interviewees discuss the decline of the oyster industry in the 1950s due to overharvesting and environmental changes. They reflect on the shift from natural oyster beds to managed grounds and the role of companies like Bloom in sustaining the industry.

Walter Blogoslawski: It's August 25, 2015. I'm with James Salce and John –

John F. Sherwin: Sherwin.

WB: – Sherwin, who are going to discuss some of the early times in the fisheries related to the oyster industry. As a start to this, I'm just going to say, John, if you could describe some of your background in the industry, and Jim, if you want to chime in when you can.

JFS: Yeah, I'll tell you. I started out in Henry Street. That was where the sloops were –

WB: Bridgeport.

JFS: – in Bridgeport. On the end of Main Street, the last street on the left is Henry Street.

WB: What year would this be about? Guess.

JFS: The middle '50s. I think I got out of high school – no grammar school in '58. The middle '50s. I was still in grammar school. That's where the sloops were. I liked the water. They were all oyster boats there, every one of them. But they were all oystermen there. The sloops were there. I started hanging around there. I heard about the oystering and things like that. Then, I see some oysters on the Henry Street flats. I went, and I picked up right at the sandbar around – I forget who was with me – Mike (McGann?) – but we got them, and we got them, and we got them and threw them in Pete the Greek's boat. Then, the oystermen started – they knew me. I was a nice kid that didn't cause any trouble. I wasn't there to break windows or do anything wrong. I said to them, "Now, when you sell these things, [inaudible]." They started laughing [inaudible] Chase and all of them. "No, no, no. You got to make it look like an ice cream cone." Oh, my God. We had two bushels. We rowed over to Lewis Oyster Company. Bloom ended up with the whole operation there.

WB: That was a separate company at the time. Lewis Oyster?

JFS: Yes.

WB: In Bridgeport.

JFS: In Bridgeport.

James Salce: Lewis [inaudible] came from Lewis Oyster Company.

JFS: No, from [inaudible].

JS: Oh, [inaudible].

JFS: Lewis was separate. They owned the [inaudible] and the [inaudible]. I think [inaudible] –

JS: Steamboats at the time?

JFS: No, dredge – company boats.

WB: Steam-powered or sail-powered?

JFS: No, gasoline, diesel, or whatever. They were regular oyster boats – dredge boats. [inaudible] was the biggest one. The guy's name might have been Sherman that ran that. Anyway, we row over there, get up on the dock, and everything. The guy comes out – the guy ended up Lew's accountant later on. His name was, I think, Black – something like that. He says, "I got some oysters to sell you." Oh, this is interesting. "Where'd you get them? Over there? How many have you got?" "Two bushels." So, he paid a dollar and a quarter for the two bushels. All right. We're doing good now. Popsicles were still a nickel. [laughter] "Oh, look at this." Two bushels. That guy remembered me years and years and years later. I'm in Bloom's office. He was one of Bloom's accountants. He's sitting there. He had seen [inaudible], but I didn't see him for years and years and years. He's sitting in Bloom's office, and he said, "I remember you with Lewis." He says, "I bought those oysters off you." When he bought them, he reached – it was his own money, I'm sure. He didn't have to go to the books to get out 2.50. But he remembered me because I was like thirteen years old, something like that.

WB: This is in Hill [Hillard] Bloom's office in Norwalk.

JFS: Later on. Lots and lots of years later.

WB: Bloom Shellfish.

JFS: Yeah. But the guy remembered me. For a dollar and a quarter. Oh, all right. I'm rich. Then, this is – I don't know. I never read the law because I heard, though, that if you had a motor on the boat, you couldn't have a dredge [inaudible] boat.

JS: You had a tong?

JFS: You had a tong. But see, the guys only told me that. I remembered – I'm thinking, "If I could go up in this dredge, I'm in trouble." But that's years later, and who's the shellfish policeman, the wop Bill Ciaurro. I knew he was coming after me. I had borrowed a basket off

Eddie [inaudible] because it was tied at Hitchcock's. I went over to return the basket two days later. Eddie wasn't there. I just put it on the boat. Some guys from Hitchcock was there. I said, "Listen, I expect Bill Ciaurro, but I can't hang around for him." I said, "You just tell him John was here, and he left." [laughter] I took off, and I got the dredge out of the boat just in case he was going to cause me trouble. I put it back in Henry Street [inaudible] –

JS: You were told [inaudible] –

JFS: Oh, yes.

JS: The dredge was [inaudible].

JFS: Yes, yes.

JS: That was the first of your experiences.

JFS: But he's the one – first, he told me how to go about that dredge [inaudible]. That didn't work at all.

JS: [inaudible] started with a (row?) dredge.

JFS: You'd go out – the thing was you'd go out, and you set the anchor here. Drop the dredge, go up, set the anchor, and then pull it in like this.

M: Hand over hand.

JFS: Hand over hand. But you're pulling the dredge rather than towing it. But that didn't work at all because you could [inaudible] horsepower to pull a dredge.

JS: To tow a dredge?

JFS: To tow a dredge under power.

JS: Then pull it up.

JFS: But that wasn't legal until '68.

JS: That was in the harbor there. In the river.

JFS: It was any place that I decided.

JS: It worked, yeah.

JFS: Now, my first dredging lesson was Bill Ciaurro, and this is what it amounted to. We go up into the [inaudible], we had this [inaudible] – his [inaudible] – and a little small [inaudible] – maybe it even wasn't a [inaudible]. But the dredge is legal – everything like that – twenty-four inches, something like that. He throws it over. He says, "Feel this line." [inaudible] "Feel that line. Yeah. That's not catching anything." Okay. He messes with the line, let it out a little bit, and he says, "Feel that line." Yeah. He says, "That's catching good." Okay. He does something else again. He says, "Now, feel this line. Yeah. Too much line. Too much line."

JS: I could never tell that.

JFS: I could.

JS: I could never tell that.

JFS: I got good at it. He says, "That's too much line. Okay, good. Pull it up. Empty it out. [inaudible]." And we went back to Henry Street. That was my lesson. But over the years – I got good at what I did. I could set a line then – I'm good. I can catch good.

WB: With oysters?

JFS: Catching oysters, yes. Clams, that's a whole different thing. My son worked with me for a while. Then he worked with (Richie Barber?). You know (Richie Barber?), right?

M: Yes.

JFS: So, he worked with [inaudible]. I said, "Did you learn anything, John, from (Barber?)?" He said, "Not to stop." He said, "That does not fit in our schedules at all." [inaudible] That doesn't work. No. Anyway, to get back to the sloops now. In Henry Street, George Chase owned the [inaudible] and his partner (Morris Dufrene?) was his name. They were partners. But (Morris?) owned (*The Jewel?*). Originally, the (*The Jewel?*) was owned by George Chase's father. That was his boat.

JS: They used to call him Pop Chase.

JFS: Pop Chase.

JS: That was his name on the water. Pop Chase.

JFS: Pop Chase.

WB: How long ago was that, approximately? Turn of the century?

JFS: A little after that. They came up from Jersey, George Chase came with the [inaudible] and his father with (*The Jewel?*), and they came up there – this is what George said, that his father told him there's oysters up in Connecticut, in Bridgeport. They came from Jersey with the two boats up to here. I never met Pop Chase because he was gone.

JS: Benny knew him.

JFS: He was gone by the time I got hanging around there.

WB: You mentioned Benny. Excuse me just a second. Jim, if you could tell us just who Benny was so that people would realize who that was.

JS: My Uncle Benny. They were Sorrentinos. Three Brothers – Benny. There were actually four brothers. Benny, Chris, and Frank used to fish – dragging. A small dragger – forty-footer and a thirty-six-footer.

WB: When you say fish, you mean for flatfish?

JFS: Finfish.

JS: Bottom fish. [inaudible] Then, later on, they put lobster pots in. Now, with the lobster pots, nobody wanted lobsters pretty much back then. It was considered a scrap fish. One of the stories was when they'd catch a lot of lobsters, they'd sell them to the farmers because they would feed them to the pigs. That was the story I heard because they weren't worth much money. That was before entrepreneurs got into the picture, I guess and realized what they could do with lobsters. My Uncle Chris and my Uncle Frank were mostly dragging. My Uncle Benny wanted to try oystering. Again, Billy Ciaurro – that was his nickname on the water – or Billy, the wop. I guess his regular name was William Ciaurro. But nobody ever called him William Ciaurro. He later became harbor master. But like John was saying, he was a constable – shellfish police. He was involved a little bit in politics, but he was a fair and square guy. He wasn't one of these guys that –

JFS: Yeah, he was good.

JS: Straight. He kind of favored the oystermen. He had the (*Katie G?*), too, right?

JFS: Yes.

JS: Was that a sloop, John? Or was that just a –?

JFS: No, the (*Katie G?*) was a small oyster boat about fifty-foot long, but a dredge boat. I worked on that. The (*Who Cares?*) was gone. I never saw the (*Who Cares?*). But he had that on Henry Street, too. That was before my time just a little because the boat he had then was the (*Katie G?*), and it was a dredge boat.

WB: Was it towed? Was it powered? Or was it sail?

JFS: Yes, power – gas.

WB: Gas power.

JFS: He ended up working for Long Island Oyster Farms by – he came down to Henry Street there and asked who owned the boat. [inaudible] Anyway, he ended up working with that boat for Long Island Oyster [inaudible].

WB: Who was this? Billy.

JFS: The wop.

JFS: The wop.

JFS: The reason Long Island wanted him – this was Nelson who wanted him – was to clean out The Gut. The Gut was loaded with mussels this deep.

WB: This is “The Gut” in Bridgeport.

JFS: Yeah, the Lewis’s Gut there. All Billy had to do was go in and swing at the dredges and load it up with [inaudible] and take it out and [inaudible] because the boat was –

JS: Shallow [inaudible].

JFS: It was only fifty feet – shallow drag. It was a good boat and everything, but nothing like today. He would do that and move the mussels twice a day and things like that. [inaudible] ended up – I worked with him [inaudible]. Then [inaudible] actually worked – those two hated each other, but they worked together then.

WB: When you say you got rid of the mussels, the mussels had zero value in the marketplace.

JFS: Right. None at all. But that was polluted, too, down there.

WB: It was grossly polluted, the Lewis Gut.

JFS: But now he said – he was [inaudible]. Billy told me that the further up The Gut you went, the cleaner the water got. But that was up [inaudible] everything was up there.

JS: That was after the '38 hurricane.

JFS: Oh, yeah.

JS: Where the cut was in the Gut.

JFS: That used to be open one time. I remember when they filled that.

JS: There used to be a road there at one time.

JFS: I never saw a road until now.

JS: No, you wouldn't, but the other fellow –

JFS: The Gap, it was called.

JS: – Pete (Bernosky?) – right?

JFS: Yeah, I knew Pete.

JS: He said there was a road that went from Stratford to – it used to be called Steeplechase Island at one time. Then it became Pleasure Beach. There was a road there that Stratford denies ever being there, but there was a road. They used to take the wagons – horse wagons – on that road to go to Pleasure Beach, which was Steeplechase Island at the time. That's one of the reasons you get that freshwater – I mean, the water that would flush –

JFS: [inaudible] in –

JS: – the flushing water. Yeah. But they never put the road back.

JFS: No. (Conkling?) and (Ford?) – I saw them working on the job when they were building that.

JS: They put jetties in on the Sound side.

JFS: Sound side.

JS: You know what they're doing now? We were there –

JFS: Don't go too far because we got to get back to the oyster –

WB: We want to get back to Lewis's Gut and the fact that the mussels were moved out of Lewis's Gut so that oystering could continue or start.

JFS: That was [inaudible] Island Oyster Farm. They even brought in the *Quinnipiac*, but I don't think they could get it up through the bridge.

WB: What years do you think that happened?

JFS: Christ, I don't even know.

WB: '40s, '50s. No, you were in the '50s.

JFS: '50s. But the wop took me on that to show me that – he says, "This is diesel outboards." Because it has the inborn engine in and what's – like an out-drive unit now. It was just a big barge.

WB: The *Quinnipiac*?

JFS: The *Quinnipiac*, yeah. That ugly-looking, stupid thing. But it did the job, I guess.

JS: That was a barge?

JFS: Yes.

JS: That held a lot. They had a sucker, too, didn't they? The *Quinnipiac*?

JFS: It had some kind of thing. I think it was a sucker.

JS: To suck up the bottom.

JFS: Yeah. That was the only thing it was good for.

JS: Cleaning ground.

JFS: You were [inaudible]. It was like a huge out-drive.

JS: Yeah, and it would lift up.

JFS: You had this big, big 671 in there, and whatever mechanics have [inaudible], there might have been two [inaudible]

JS: Would actually even tilt up somewhat.

JFS: Yeah, yeah. It was the out-drive thing. All I thought is a big, ugly, stupid thing that wasn't going to do me a bit of good. That was the *Quinnipiac* [inaudible].

JS: I saw it one time working off of Seaside Park, sucking up. But that was – that's another story. [laughter]

WB: So, we're back at Lewis's Gut now. [inaudible] going to plant oysters in there, or were there natural-occurring –?

JFS: I think they might have planted some. They [inaudible], but they did catch a set, and it worked. But I never worked on it there. I think they might have sent in – well, no, the wop was the one that did everything to it, I think.

WB: The harvest?

JFS: Yeah.

WB: And then, where did you go from there?

JFS: Stayed in school like every dumb other kid. [laughter] No, my main thing was Henry Street. To go back, Chase owned those boats. I sailed on the [inaudible], and I sailed on *The (Jewel?)*. And also, the *Pricilla*. I never sailed on the (*Jessie Johnson?*). That was, in my opinion, the best looking. That was [inaudible]. But the *Pricilla* – and that's still alive in some museum over there in Long Island or something. That was the prettiest boat. It was truly a sloop [inaudible] low [inaudible] and everything. It was white, and it really looked nice. It had the

dirty sails and everything. Then, Bezak screwed it up and made a Marconi rig, which is you tilted the mast a bit, and then the sail was different.

JS: Like a handkerchief, like a triangle instead of [inaudible].

JFS: That's what they called it – Marconi rig. Everybody was saying he ruled the boat. He owned that with his brother, and his name was Earl Svertesky, and his brother was Dick. Earl was “Bezak.” That's all everybody knew him by, but the boat ended up in a museum over in Long Island – the *Priscilla*. The (*Marian?*), too. (Lou?) [inaudible] that, and he went from oystering. But (Louie?) had a job, too. They all pretty much were longshoremen. Every time a ship would get laid off, all the oystermen were longshoremen except Chase. When the oystering died off, Chase went to work in Remington Arms. What happened to the boats was Mrs. Chase, my great friend, destroyed the boat because she wanted him to change this and that. I remember when it had a small aft cabin that wasn't much bigger than this on the roof. She wanted this, and she wanted a yacht, and she was there not every day, but that's George's thing. He changed to her likings.

M: Make it more convenient for her to go on it?

JFS: More convenient, or a little better than to go boating – she didn't want to go boating on a raggedy-ass [inaudible] sloop – the one in [inaudible] and all that kind of – so, she ruined that. Then, the (*Jewel?*) was wide, very, very wide. They said it couldn't sail much. I sailed on it with (Morris?). Then again, (Morris?) didn't know that much about sailing. It wasn't like having [inaudible], so that got totally destroyed, too, when he put a cabin on [inaudible] cabin on. It was like just putting a square house on top. When [inaudible] got it [inaudible]. That's my good friend Tom [inaudible]. The boat was like a hundred and twenty years old.

M: At that point.

JFS: [inaudible] something. [inaudible] “I got a letter from that Mystic place. They think it would be nice if I donate [inaudible]. Don't they know this just cost me seven hundred or eight hundred dollars?” I forget what. [inaudible] bought it off (Morris?). Then [inaudible] ended up marrying Chase's daughter. The (*Jewel?*) went away. I guess that [inaudible]. I'm not sure.

JS: A lot of them, they sunk them offshore.

JFS: Not the [inaudible], I don't think.

JS: Years ago, that's what they do.

JFS: Maybe they did [inaudible], but if they did, [inaudible] would know. He would have had a hand in it.

JS: Put some stone in them, open the ports –

JFS: Yeah. But that happened to [inaudible] –

JS: As long as they weren't on the dragging grounds. [laughter]

JFS: Yeah.

WB: You were talking about oyster sloops that weren't powered that were down at Henry Street. We then changed – we're changing over from that period to the hydraulic period. What's coming now? In other words, the sloops are being –

JS: Well, this was seed oyster bay. We're thinking all [inaudible]. We're not talking [inaudible].

JFS: [inaudible] The other guys – the Henry Street guys – none of them ever – except Bill Ciaurro – worked for the [inaudible]. He was the only one. He worked for Long Island Oyster Farms. He ran a boat when they were building the throughway. Then, [inaudible] –

JS: That was in the '50s that the throughway went in.

JFS: When they built the throughway, yeah.

WB: Are we talking natural growth here?

JFS: Yes.

JS: Yes. [inaudible]

JFS: Every one of those guys that I mentioned were strictly natural growth. Bezak – all of them. (Louie Day?) turned his boat, the (*Marian*?) into a dragger [inaudible], and (Louie?) was truly a craftsman. That mast that he had in the (*Marian*?) – he made that myself. And also a lot of planing. He started with a square twelve-by, and it gave a perfect – a lot of days later, though. These are guys that really, really knew what they were doing.

WB: Boat builders and mechanics.

JFS: Yes. He was by no means a boat builder, but he could do anything.

JS: Repair anything.

JFS: Yeah, fix or repair. (Louie?) was in a class by himself as far as anything to do on the water.

JS: And the engine – he made a – did he make that first little radio?

JFS: Oh, the CB, yeah. That was (Louie?). (Louie?) was a great –

JS: You could buy kits back then, years ago.

JFS: (Louie) had the (*Marian?*). As far as I was concerned, it was between Bill Ciaurro and Chase as to the best oysterman. [inaudible] the dredge on – especially with Chase. You learned a lot from Chase, something I tried to tell you because Chase would set a line. You're sailing, you're working – whatever – and he'd set the line. Now, that means it's going along, and it's catching. Ten minutes later, he'd be back. Now, what we used to do – they would have a – at the end of their dredge line would be a block of wood. You tied to the dredge line into a [inaudible] take some line, a little smaller – looked like that. So, you tied the dredge line into this little small [inaudible]. If you caught a [inaudible] – don't forget now, the boat is big. You cannot stop that quick. So, if you caught a [inaudible], that little thin line would break. That's gone. At the end of the dredge line is a wooden buoy. So, everything is left there and picked up later.

JS: To make the next run. Pick it up.

JFS: But we used to tie – even on the (*Jewel?*), we tied into that all the time. We only had like four dredges, but still, we tied into the [inaudible] and let it [inaudible] and pick it up later.

JS: When we worked with Benny, when we first started, we used to use a [inaudible] if we had to hang. Wouldn't tie it to a post or towline that you were – or the dredge line. They're hand dredges now we're talking about.

JFS: [inaudible] in the boat's now, you're only using normally one dredge. You can stop. If you catch a [inaudible], you stop. But on a sloop, you could have four. You're not stopping. So, pop it, let it go, and pick it up later.

WB: Right. And you've got the wind in the sails. You've got to dump the wind out of the sails. Then, the boat would have to go into the wind.

JFS: Yeah, pick it up on the way back. Like I say, you feel the line, and you know this is catching good. Ten minutes later, George would come over. You could let it in, let it out this much, or take it in this much. But he was always on top of that – no mud, no nothing. You're catching good. But he was constantly messing with the line. He wouldn't just go sit down, have a cigarette. He didn't smoke anything. But you know what I mean. He was always aware of what was going on – feel the line. Let it out [inaudible] it in. Just a little at a time, but always [inaudible].

JS: Pop Chase – didn't he have a –?

JFS: I didn't know him at all.

JS: Oh, you didn't know him.

JFS: Because he was dead.

JS: This is one of Benny's stories.

JFS: He was dead.

JS: When he worked for Pop Chase. This is off the Bridgeport-Stratford natural bed. They'd be working in natural growth [inaudible] seed. Naturally, in hand dredges, they didn't use power. They used sail [inaudible] use a dredge. Pop Chase sometimes would be the only one catching, moving, with no wind.

JFS: The sail would be up [inaudible] [laughter].

JS: What he had – he had a well where the propeller was. There was an [inaudible] with a well with a cover over it. When he would go out, if there wasn't any wind, he'd put a propeller on his shaft with some kind of cotter pin to hold it. He'd start the engine, and the exhaust went into the water. It didn't come out the stern. He had it so you couldn't see the exhaust. He would be catching [inaudible], so to speak – working that way. The other guys, sometimes they' be shaking their head about it. They know what was going on.

WB: But nobody reported it.

JS: No, no. It was more fun than anything.

JFS: No, no. Everybody was – yeah. When it was still illegal to use the winch and everything, but Bezak had the *Priscilla*. Everybody's working in the natural bed. But Bezak had this deck winch with the niggerhead on it.

JS: That was powered, though, wasn't it?

JFS: Yeah. Powered, yeah.

JS: You could use a hand winch.

JFS: Yeah. But he's got this powered winch. So, (Louie Day?) who tied right next to him over at California Street – "Look at this. Isn't this something? We're pulling by hand. Look at this." So, he takes – (Louie?) takes a crayon and marks the niggerhead. "We'll know tomorrow."

JS: [laughter] If the crayon's erased?

JFS: Yeah. Because if the crayon mark is gone off the niggerhead, now we know that he's using the winch.

JS: The rope wiped the crayon right off it. [laughter]

JFS: You know what Bezak did. Right away, he knows it's (Louie Day?). "Well, that son of a bitch. Isn't this something?" Well, we're going to show him (Louie Day?). He takes the dredge and bolts it right to the cable. [laughter] [inaudible] I heard another story. This was down in Emery Street – I don't know – before me. (Louie Day?) shot a seagull, and he took the seagull over and he put it on Pop Chase's boat. The old man saw that boat –

JS: And then left.

JFS: – "My god, this is bad luck." And it was (Louie?) that shot it. So, he brings the seagull back, and he hoists it up on the (*Marian's*) mast.

WB: This is Pop Chase?

JFS: Yeah, Pop Chase.

WB: He didn't want the gull on his boat.

JFS: No, no. (Louie?) shot it and put it onto Pop Chase's boat. He takes it back over, puts it up on the (*Marian?*), and he hoists it up. (Louie?) comes down and laughs. They said he snapped his mast that day or something. [laughter] [inaudible]

M: Probably to [inaudible] or something.

JFS: Yeah. Now, talk about [inaudible]. Everybody was working off the [inaudible]. Tony Patches, that ended up owning the (*Jessie Johnson?*), drank a bit but not that much. He was a union plumber. But he didn't get drunk or anything. In the wintertime, he'd sit in the cabin at California Street, drink a bit, and then just throw the thing out to the snow. When the thaw came, there were kegs and half-pint bottles all over the place. Working down off Seaside Park one day, and Tony's got the (*Jessie?*). He's way down on the end. Tony just liked to go out and goof around. He's a union plumber but got the boat. He was not an oysterman to begin with. He's way down there. The oysters were up by the [inaudible]. Right outside the breakwater, there's a couple of lines like that. If you look at the map, it went like that. That's where the oysters are. Chase is there. Everybody's there. I was there on the (*Jewel?*), I think. But Tony Patches comes up, made two loops, and he hit two boats in between. [laughter] But Tony would just stay by himself.

JS: Why'd they call him Tony Patches?

JFS: Well, see, he got the (*Jessie Johnson?*) from [inaudible], and the boat was old and everything. At one time, it looked good, but then it got a [inaudible], and the mast was here [inaudible] boat was shaped like this. So, he started to patch it. He would put lead patches on deck, this, and that. Then he got the roof and cement – took plywood. That's how he got "Patches" because he patched everything on the (*Jessie?*).

JS: Everything was patched –

JFS: Everything was patched. Patches.

JS: – all over the place.

JFS: All over. But then when [inaudible] told me that he was going to take it up to Murphy's Boat Yard, he says that they'll burn it up there. I said, "John, the boat won't burn. It's going to melt."

JS: All that lead. [laughter]

JFS: [inaudible] the boat will melt. It won't burn. But now, to get back to – the wop gave me that lesson, but you couldn't legally dredge. You had to tong. I tonged a little bit, but it was in The Gut. I tried on the Henry Street flats. I tonged a little bit, but not like the guys in the river; they were in a class by themselves.

WB: When you talk about tonging, you're talking about – there's a big rake.

JS: Oyster tongs.

JFS: Oyster tongs that go down. What you do – you put them down. Go like this. Gather it all up together. Pick it up. Swing it over. Dump it into the boat.

WB: So, you're manually doing down twelve to twenty feet in the water, picking up oysters off the bottom, raising those oysters in the tongs that are closed, dropping them on the deck, and then sorting them, and then doing that again.

JFS: All again.

JS: [inaudible] The handles are called [inaudible] if I remember right.

JFS: [inaudible]

WB: But this is all muscle work?

JFS: All muscle. All muscle. The guys that tonged, this muscle up here in your back – they had muscles like that from this –

WB: Motion?

JFS: – constantly all day long.

JS: Strong arms, too.

JFS: Strong arms. But that muscle in particular.

WB: This is harvest now we're talking about.

JS: No, no.

JFS: No, seed oysters.

JS: No, seed oysters.

JFS: Seed oysters.

JS: Natural growthers. Natural growthers.

JFS: All natural [inaudible].

WB: Still seed [inaudible] –

JFS: But the river – the tongers –

WB: Housatonic [inaudible]

JFS: – were in the river. The tongers were in the river. In '68, when it was legal to dredge – yeah, '68. They didn't change it in the river until '69. The rest of the state, '68 –

WB: Except New Haven.

JFS: – but not the river.

WB: New Haven forever was no dredging unless [inaudible] company ground, right?

JFS: Yeah. I used to wonder if there was any natural growth in the river.

M: Well, the company boats kept cleaning it up, so natural growthers wouldn't have any oysters.

JFS: Here's the thing now. They passed the law in '68, not in the river [inaudible]

WB: State of Connecticut.

JFS: Yeah. In '68. Which made it nice because I'd been dredging for a long time before '68.

JS: Now you had competition.

JFS: Yes, but (Aly Richards?) came over. He came from the river. (Aly?) was the best [inaudible]. He came over and worked off the park. "Those guys are crazy. Are they out of their mind?" He only stayed two or three days and went back because he didn't like the dredging unless it was at night and you could do [inaudible], but I tonged and didn't like it. I said that I

would rather pull a dredge all day long than tong for four hours. Then, I used a bull rig. I said I would rather tong all day long than use a bull rig for one hour because a bull rig – you know what they are?

WB: No, if you could describe that because there's no way anybody –

JFS: Looks like a rake, a garden rake, but it's got a basket on the back like this. It might be, say, this wide.

WB: About two feet wide?

JFS: No, not even.

WB: Eighteen inches.

JFS: Better off, yeah.

JS: Foot and a half.

WB: Eighteen inches.

JFS: Mine was like this, and it had a twenty-four-foot handle. So, you put that out, then you flip it over, and then you got to pull this back in. I had twenty-four-foot [inaudible] on my – you do that for an hour, Jesus. But if there's anything there, you're going to get them. But it's one hell of a job. No wonder they were strong. I told that to [inaudible]. But used it for a while. I was getting clams with it. But if they're there, you can get them. But my God, is that work.

WB: All right. Let's go back now to after the natural growers finished; they would then sell their oysters that they had captured to a buy boat.

JFS: Yes.

WB: That buy boat would then plant those oysters on a particular company's ground. Is that how it was?

JFS: Yes.

WB: Could you describe a little bit of that?

JFS: Well, that was it. That was how it went.

JS: When John did it, the boats were under power. Before that, they had three-masted schooners. Some of them came up from the Chesapeake Bay. Benny used to sell [inaudible] Pop Chase or from George. The sloops would go to – a lot of times, there was more than one buy boat/schooner – three-masted schooners or two-masted schooners. If you saw a bushel up hanging in the rigging, that boat was paying a penny more than the other boat. Naturally, that day, they went to the boat that had the bushel hanging up in the rigging on one of the masts. Everything was cash.

WB: How much was a bushel back then?

JS: I really don't know exactly. I've heard a dollar, but I think that was market. I don't know about seed. It was a penny more, so it couldn't have been a dollar. It had to be less than a dollar for the sea oysters.

JFS: The first ones I sold were a dollar and quarter, but that was only two bushel, and that was the middle '50s.

JS: Yeah. We're talking the '30s.

JFS: Oh, no. I don't know anything about [inaudible] –

JS: In the sloops in the '30s before oysters depleted.

WB: That's the other thing. Eventually, the oysters became scarce.

JFS: So much so that everybody quit. That was around '54, I think, in around there. That was when Chase – everybody quit. That's why the sloops were all just laying in Emery Street because there was nothing worth working. They were gone.

JS: But I think part of the problem – they put the airport in. When they put the airport – they kept a lot of that brackish water from coming out to Lewis's Gut, which came around and came out into Bridgeport Harbor. I think the flow was tremendously reduced. All they have a little small pipe now. But at one time, there was a creek where you could take a cabin cruiser through to go from the river by where Mrs. (Downes?) had a livery, which was right by the number seven beacon? You went in there.

JFS: Into where? Into the river?

JS: Yeah, from the river where number seven beacon is, there was a little area just – now it's the dump with a little bit of the [inaudible] there.

JFS: Yeah, that was [inaudible] (Fordham's) place.

JS: No. (Fordham's?) was the one north of that.

JFS: Yeah. Well, I don't remember any –

JS: You don't know Mrs. (Downes?).

JFS: No.

JS: Well, (Freddy Goodsall?) used to kick Mrs. (Downes's?) livery out. She rented boats, and she had a little marina there. Before they put the South Main in, there was a creek that went from the river – more than a creek. I don't know what you'd call it. It was bigger than the creek. It went from the river by number seven – just south of number seven beacon. That water went across. There was no airport. You could take your cabin cruiser through there.

JFS: Yeah, but go back to the oysters. He doesn't know where number seven is.

JS: Well, I think that's part of the problem. [inaudible]

JFS: Yeah, that might be what you think. Regardless of what part of the problem was, the fact is that –

WB: Overharvest –

JFS: – the oysters were gone.

WB: Yeah. [inaudible]

JS: Yeah, but it's not just overharvest. If you're not getting the sets, it doesn't matter whether you got oysters or not. If you have a few oysters, you can get a multitude of oysters –

JFS: If you have a clean set.

JS: – if you've got the right conditions.

JFS: Right.

WB: You have the right conditions.

JFS: If you have a clean set on the bottom.

JS: They like the brackish water more than the salty water. Lately, the salinity's been going up. That's why we have so many clams. Seems like the salinity in the Sound has increased. But they're doing something over there. I'm upset about it. I don't know if they're expanding the runway or not.

JFS: But wait, let's get back to – never mind the runway.

WB: Yeah, we're talking about [inaudible] –

JFS: You're telling him that – don't forget where he works, and you're telling him about the salinity of the water.

JS: Well, yeah, the disease, too.

JFS: Okay. Let's get back to the fact about the natural growers, okay?

JS: I wanted to get that in there. That's a point. Whether they cut it out or not, I don't know.

JFS: And it went to [inaudible]. Like I say, [inaudible] and I go on the (*Jewel?*) – George Chase – but then –

WB: How many bushels would you catch in a normal day for [inaudible]? In other words, before you got rid of them?

JFS: [inaudible] and I'd do a hundred.

WB: Hundred bushels. Okay. A day. So, that was all back-breaking hard labor.

JFS: We didn't consider it hard because –

JS: You enjoyed physical exercise.

JFS: – compared to what? Every time you'd squeeze that line – I had forearms that looked like Popeye, for God's sake, because it was nothing but muscle because I was solid [inaudible].

WB: Right. So, you slept well at night.

JFS: Yeah. That was another thing, too. It was hard work, but we didn't – one time I said to [inaudible] Fourth of July. I said, "People that live in Brooklyn would give their left nut to be out here with us." He goes, "Yeah, and we have an air show." But we're working on the Fourth of July off the park – working on the (*Jewel?*). But it was good. One time, we took a load of oysters to Bloom in Norwalk. The (*Jewel?*) had a decent four-cylinder [inaudible] diesel, and the [inaudible] water was just a loose hose, and throw it over the side to cool the engine. But we left Norwalk at night and [inaudible] forgot to throw it over the side. We're halfway back. He says, "John, I'm going to take a look around the boat." "Okay, go ahead." It's dark. Then [inaudible] "John, John." "What?" "Turn on the lights." Turn on the lights, I look, and he's up to his knees in [inaudible] water because he didn't throw the hose over.

WB: So [inaudible]

JFS: So, everything that was coming from the engine is going into the hull.

WB: The cooling water.

JFS: Yeah. But those were all fun things. That's all I knew about the sloops. Everybody could oysters because there was [inaudible] still did. He was a longshoreman. But most people were longshoremen.

WB: So, they had another job to go to besides oystering?

JFS: Yeah. Chase went into Remington Arms. (*Louie?*) was a longshoreman. Bezak was a longshoreman. They were all –

JS: (*Freddy Goodsall?*) was a longshoreman.

JFS: Yeah. Then Tony Patches, like I say, he was a plumber. They all had something. The good thing – if you were long-shoring, every time the ship left, you'd get laid off. So, they'd immediately go oystering.

WB: When you say a longshoreman, you mean unloading major boats –

JFS: Unloading cargo ships.

WB: – in either New Haven or Bridgeport.

JFS: Yes, or Bridgeport.

WB: And we're talking about lumber, coal, oil.

JRS: Rubber [inaudible] New Haven [inaudible] rubber. That's a dangerous job.

JS: The rubber?

JFS: Yeah, because – I knew all the longshoremen from Henry Street and every place else. I needed a job.

WB: This is before containers, of course. This is when all cargo was simply –

JS: In the hull.

WB: – in the hull.

JFS: They're used to [inaudible] City Lumber in Bridgeport, where the [inaudible].

JS: Cilco.

JFS: Cilco Terminal.

JS: It's called.

JFS: Cilco Terminal was a big lumber yard. They owned two freighters that just brought in lumber. The Cilco (*Lager?*) was the name of one, and I forget the other one. But a lot of ships used to come into Bridgeport. You had the tankers. Scrap metal would come in and out of Bridgeport, lots of lumber. Rubber, though, I worked that in New Haven. You put down cargo nets, and then guys that go up on the top – and rubber was in two hundred pound bales – this is raw rubber, and it wasn't black. And it was square. They laid down cargo nets. A couple of guys go up with the hooks and pull them down. But when they come down, they bounce like those crazy balls. All these going this way – and they're two hundred pound bales coming. One time, a guy got hit, broke his leg that quick because – look out because all kinds of shit goes wild. Roll it up. Roll up the net. Hoist it out. Bezak was a winchman from the *Priscilla*. Dangerous because he wouldn't look at what the – I think his eyes were going bad. But the signalman would be giving him a signal. When the [inaudible] come down or something like this, you see this [inaudible] come look out, and Bezak is working because –

JS: That's the winchman.

JFS: – it's got to be – yeah, he's running the winch. It's got a big steel ball. The slings will come down like that. Then, here, Bezak would come with the *ba-boom* and crash [inaudible].

JS: [inaudible] it wouldn't stop in time.

JFS: The only ones that were oystering then was (Hooper?), and I did a lot of it. [inaudible], too. He oystered. But then he owned the (*Jewel?*).

WB: So, when natural sets occurred, you all had work. But when there were no natural sets, there was no oystering really because it declined precipitously in the mid-'50s.

JFS: But what was good – I always sold to Bloom. That's a funny story, too. Like my friend, Bill Ciaurro, he went on to – remember I told you he was the shellfish police when there six. He taught me how. He gave me the dredge. My first dredge ever. All right. I got a dredge. What was I going to say now?

JS: You started to work for Bloom when you [inaudible] natural beds. It was a funny story.

JFS: I told you [inaudible] you know the Blooms.

WB: Hillard and Norman. They're both dead now, but back then, they were the chief marketers of oysters.

M: From New Haven West.

JFS: Lovejoy. You heard of him – did you ever meet him?

WB: No.

JFS: Lovejoy was in Norwalk. So, the first oysters I sold was to (Lewis?). Then, I think it was Chase or somebody says, "Lovejoy in Norwalk." Okay. So, I go down, and I meet Fred Lovejoy. There he is. I meet him. He was an old man then. He was sitting on [inaudible] porch. It was a screened-in porch – everything like that. And I sold him some. But I had to bring it down there and all kind of stuff. I sold them to Lovejoy and then –

JS: By truck, did you bring them [inaudible]?

JFS: Yeah, by truck. Yeah. I don't think [inaudible] and I – no, it was just me that sold to Lovejoy, but I had a truck them there. So, then, I go down there one day, and Lovejoy says he's

sitting there. He had a quilt over his thing. This is on his back porch – pair of binoculars, a telephone, and a quilt. He was old then. “Well, John,” he says, “I’m sorry, but I’m not going to buy any more oysters.” Uh-oh. This isn’t good. He says, “But I’ll tell you what you can do.” He says, “You can take them over to these guys across the river. Bloom is their name.” He says, “Then you go over here, you go over here, you go over there, and you meet them, and you see this thing there, and that’s where Bloom is.” He says, “Go talk to them.” He says, “I made a call. You’re coming over, right?” “Yes, I’m going to go.” So, he called Bloom. So, I go over and –

WB: About when was this when you went to see Norman and Hillard Bloom on Water Street in Norwalk?

JFS: Let me think. This is before the service – before I went in the service.

JS: You were seventeen when you went in the service.

JFS: Yeah, so this is –

JS: When’d you graduate high school?

JFS: ’61.

JS: So, ’60?

JFS: It would have to be around ’60, in around there.

JS: [inaudible] ’60.

JFS: But Lovejoy –

WB: Lovejoy got out of the business –

JFS: Yeah. But he says, “I’m not buying any more oysters.” But he still had boats [inaudible]. So, he says – he made a phone call. He says, “The name is Bloom. Go over there and see him.” He called first to say I was coming. So, I go over there, and I meet Hillard. Hillard’s on crutches. I went back over to Lovejoy [inaudible] something like that, but it was on the other side of the river. I’m there, and that’s where Norman was. This is my first eyesight on Norman. He’s walking up the dock in a bathing suit with a pair of water skis over his shoulder – that’s Norman. I’m driving back, thinking to myself, “One guy’s a cripple; the other guy’s a playboy. I’m shit out of luck.” That’s what I thought. Bloom owns one boat – the (*Eaglet?*) was down at the –

JS: Sloop?

JFS: Yeah.

WB: Now, the two brothers had just started the business back then.

JS: They were plumbers, weren't they, besides that?

JFS: See, they were plumbers. But see, here's how that happened. They were plumbers, and they had the one boat, the (*Eaglet?*). Hillard got polio. I know this from talking to them. He got polio when they were fourteen. They had the one – no, a little older than that. But he got polio – Hillard. They were plumbers or something like that. They almost had a band, too. But Lovejoy saw – this is no shit, except Lovejoy didn't tell me this [inaudible] that Lovejoy told them that [inaudible] – no, they were selling stuff to Lovejoy.

M: The Blooms?

JFS: The Blooms were selling to Lovejoy, and he's taking it and all that. That went on for a little while. Like I say, they had the one boat. Then, they came to pay Lovejoy the money that they owed, or what was [inaudible] to his.

M: Oh, it was a share? [inaudible]

JFS: Yeah, they were working for themselves, but they owned – they got to pay Lovejoy now. So, they go over to pay Lovejoy, and Lovejoy says, "No, keep the money and put it into shells or put it into business." Norman told me that when they walked out, Norman said to Hillard, "We've got it made now because he trusts us. We're using his money. He's not going to let us make a mistake." Which turned out to be so true. Bloom got bigger and bigger and bigger. (Richie Barber?) said this – they say if you lose some part of your body – if you lose your legs, your arms get stronger. You lose the arms; the legs get stronger. (Barber?) said when Bloom got crippled, his brain got stronger. They told me they only made one mistake. They could have bought – in Milford, there – what was it? – Sealshipt?

WB: Sealshipt Oysters.

JFS: They could have bought that. Norman said, "We should have. We could have, but we didn't have the money at the time." But they said they haven't made mistakes, and I believe that. I'll tell you a funny story.

WB: That was then later the Bluepoint [Oyster] Company.

JFS: They said they could have bought that but didn't have the money. Lovejoy was really, really good to them because he saw they worked. They worked every day, but they'd take half a day of Christmas off.

WB: So, they had harvest grounds as well as natural grow grounds.

JFS: Yeah.

WB: Bloom brothers?

JFS: Yeah, but they had the – they started natural growth. Where Tallmadge Brother goes – remember Ed (Morton?)?

JS: I don't know him, but I know the name. [inaudible]

JFS: Morton was well into his, say, eighties, and he would still – he'd grow out, run the boat for him once in a while. But that was Ed (Morton?). They bought Tallmadge Brothers from Ed (Morton?). So, there was no Tallmadge that I could ever think of that was the name and Ed (Morton?) owned.

JS: Wasn't Hill's wife a Tallmadge?

JFS: No.

JS: No?

JFS: I thought she was a Tallmadge [inaudible].

JS: She was Ms. Connecticut once. Hill's wife. But that's how Tallmadge came out with – they bought it from Ed (Morton?) – Tallmadge Brothers. Then, he ran a boat for them for a while. Bloom sent him up with us the time we were all going to court in New Haven over the dredge thing. (Morton?) was an old man. He's sitting in the diner, and he's going to Andy, my brother-in-law, "Well, they can't wait to get you up there in prison." "Shut up, Ed. We got to get [inaudible]." Bloom got bigger and bigger due to Lovejoy.

WB: The Bloom brothers bought up every company in the area.

JFS: That came later, though.

JS: Not every company.

JFS: No, no.

JS: A good amount.

JFS: That came – like I say, I used to work for them, sold them stuff. They'd put me to work. In the summertime, we shut down –

JS: [inaudible]

JFS: [inaudible] Excuse me for a minute. If that was your main source of income, there was only – what? – six of us in the whole state that was actually true oystermen without [inaudible].

WB: I'm going to stop for a second here. [recording paused]

JFS: I worked for Bloom, and I'm not stupid. I learned what I learned. I tell Gary that the best boat he's got is that (*Cultivator?*). I say put the one mast [inaudible]. I told him after you use that boat, you will not put another dime. You got these boats; you're going to have to use them because you'll never again get a boat with a forward cabin, and everything good is behind you, and you can't see shit. The (*Cultivator?*) you hear – just like the oyster boats used to be – everything is in front of you.

JS: See all your crew –

JFS: You can see everything.

JS: – and what's going on.

JFS: Everything that's going on is in front of you.

JS: That's the thing, that one mast, two booms. I worked on the (*Louis R*) [which] I thought was the greatest. You learned the dredges [inaudible]. Of course, a captain that knows what the hell he's doing helps. The dredge come up, pull the pin – *boom* – everything's good. That one goes back down, and this one's coming up.

M: Two dredges. One on each side. Port and starboard dredge.

JFS: Yeah, that's it.

JS: For oysters.

JFS: For oysters. The guy that knows what he's doing is catching the [inaudible] that's coming up – *boom, boom, boom* – one after another.

WB: No mud in the dredge?

JFS: No mud. No. Everything is clean. These boats today – [inaudible] the same way. You can't rinse that dredge. I worked with – in my opinion – I've said it a million times – Fred [inaudible], and I knew him all those years, and we worked together. I called him up. He was up in Waterbury, living with his son. I said, "Fred, I heard you had a birthday." "Yeah, that's right." "How old are you?" "I forget." He knew damn well he was ninety-four then, or ninety-six. But he knew what he was doing. I paid attention to him. Anyway, to go to the Blooms, when they really got good – Lovejoy's kids – one was a bank president. The other was a doctor. They didn't want the company. Lovejoy saw that these guys are young. They certainly have the ambition.

JS: He helped. He mentored.

JFS: He helped them because they were ambitious. They could work, and they did it. When they had the one boat, it was Hill that told Norman if you could run the boat, I can sit on a milk carton and pick them up. That was that. They had that much ambition.

WB: Then Fred Lovejoy sold his company basically to the Bloom brothers.

JFS: Yes.

WB: The Bloom brothers –

JFS: Built it up.

WB: Built it up.

JFS: They bought the boats and things, and now they're – in East Norwalk, that's where that restaurant is, that was Lovejoy's operation. Where Norman is now, that was Lovejoy's.

JS: Sono.

JFS: No, that's over on the other side. That's [inaudible]. Sono restaurant –

JS: That's different.

JFS: Yeah. But Lovejoy was here, and that's where Norman Bloom is now. What is it?

WB: South Water Street.

JFS: [inaudible] No, that's [inaudible].

JS: This is across the river.

JFS: Across the river. See, Norman Bloom had three kids. All boys. Norman, Bobby, and Steve. Three boys. Hillard, the cripple guy, has Hillard Jr. and then two daughters, [Leslie] and Penny.

M: Leslie and Penny.

JFS: Leslie and Penny. They pretty much stayed together. And then Norman – they kind of went different ways when the Blooms died.

M: Brothers died.

JFS: When the brothers died.

M: Seniors.

JFS: Yeah. I went to Norman's wake or something. I'm talking to Norman, Jr. I said, "I don't know anybody here." He said, "Neither do I." [laughter] But the traffic line was like two blocks [inaudible]. Neither do I. I wish I could get the hell out of here.

M: But the father did.

JFS: Here's a funny thing. When they had lots of clams – in Norwalk, they had lots of clams. They were polluted. Who cares? Whatever the difference was. In Bloom's office, I loved the photograph – the sheriff used to come out and give him a stop work order every day onto the boat. Framed in the office was a picture of Norman running the boat, leaning out to take the stop work order from the sheriff. That was framed and on the wall. It's a stop work order, but the lawyers told them, "Don't stop until the court date." So, they're catching all these clams and everything. I was down there –

WB: They switched from oysters to clamming, then?

JFS: They were doing both. When they originally had the one boat on one side – Norman [would] run the boat; Hillard [would] be in the office. Hillard [would] get a phone call – so many orders of clams. He'd call up Norman. Norman put over the clam dredge to fill the order. And then, oysters, okay. Hillard just answered the phone, and that was that. What the hell was I going to say now? Shit, I forgot.

M: About the amount of clams they were –?

M: The stop order.

JFS: Oh, catching the clams. That was it – stop work order. But the lawyer told him, “Don't stop until the court date and get it straightened out with the court.” I'm down there on Water Street. The boat was – holy Christ – loaded.

JS: With clams.

JFS: With clams.

JS: Big high pile.

JFS: A big, high pile on a good-sized boat. This is like ten o'clock in the morning. Hillard's standing there on the boat. He's looking, and I'm looking. I said to him, “Like I say, it's ten o'clock in the morning.” I said, “Jesus Christ, if this is the best you can do, why bother going out?” The deck looked like this at ten o'clock in the morning. I said, “Is this the best you can do ...”.

WB: Why wouldn't he offload the clams?

JS: No, no.

JFS: Listen to the story now. I said, “If this is the best you can do, why bother going out?” “Well, I'll tell you, John. He says, “This is the first boat with the first load.” He says, “There's two more boats out there now. This one will make two more trips.” “I guess it's worth going out.” [laughter] But don't stop until the court date. That was that.

JS: That was [inaudible] clams?

JFS: Yeah. They were [inaudible].

WB: They were [inaudible].

JFS: Yeah, had a ninety percent for you – for us rather.

JS: It was share. It was share.

JFS: It was a share, but it was legal, except where they were catching [inaudible]. You know how that case turned out, was they said, "Well, come on down to the dock." The judge says I'm not going anyplace. No, bring it here. They brought the blade off the clam dredge. They didn't bring the dredge. Just the blade. The next thing, everything is forgotten; go on home and forget everything.

WB: They took plans from a relay area, a closed area –

JFS: Oh, no, they never did. They never did anything illegal. I mean, other than – you know what I mean. Nothing [inaudible]

JS: The [inaudible] of the dredge was power –

WB: Oh, that's the issue.

JFS: Yeah.

WB: You didn't explain that to me.

JFS: No, no. That was the issue that they're breaking the law by using the power dredge here.

JS: With a power boat, power dredge with hydraulics with water pressure.

JFS: That was the issue. They never ever – this is as long as I've known them, and they never would jeopardize anybody's health. The guy up in the health department once said it to me. He says it was shifting clams. More or less, they said – here's what the guy said. This is up in Hartford. He says, "Well, what the hell?" He says, "If you break the law, what do we do?" He says, "We confiscate your boat. We've got [inaudible]. So what [inaudible]? If Bloom does something wrong, we get his boat." I said, "You're insinuating, or you're saying that Bloom is more honest than me." "Oh, no," I said, "I'm afraid that we're going to be in court over this." [inaudible] Then they said this is a gray area. [inaudible] said, "Well, that's the reason we're here is to clean up the gray area." I ended up getting [inaudible]. That's funny, too. I got arrested usually every place I work – oyster. It was always for some bullshit that I never really did

anything [inaudible]. But they arrested me in Westport. Then, I had to go up to Hartford. They say, "Well, we're not going to give you a license." I said, "I can work everywhere, and I have another boat down there now. Give me the license, and I can go to work this afternoon." "We can't do that." "You better do it because," I said, "I have a wife and two kids. You're depriving me of making a living. I want the license." I said, "I am not any more guilty of anything than any one of you people." "But you've been arrested in Westport." "So what? Westport, Stratford, and I think Norwalk, too." But I said, "I'm not guilty." So, I go to court. I never was guilty of anything. But I'd get arrested.

JS: People don't want you working in the area.

JFS: Yeah. (Richie Barber?) was in the Saugatuck River, but he's gone right in somebody's backyard. The woman calls the police.

JS: [inaudible] space off the water. You have a house on the water.

JFS: The police come. What is it? They call him ashore. (Richie's?) got this – boat registration, everything that he needed.

M: In order.

JFS: Yeah, everything is in order. But the woman is saying, "But I want him arrested." "He didn't do anything wrong." "I don't care. I want him arrested." The woman, jumping up and down –

WB: He's making noise early in the morning.

JFS: Yeah, but not early. Same thing I went in [inaudible] –

JS: They don't want this ugly-looking boat. As far as they were concerned, it was [inaudible]

JFS: Yeah, going in their backyard.

JS: When they look out, they want to see a beautiful yacht instead of an oyster [inaudible].

JFS: They stopped me in Southport Harbor once on Sunday morning early. I'm going to go to work. I know that there's oysters there, and I'm going to get them. The Fairfield Police come down and all this kind of shit. Then the shellfish [inaudible] you can't work? Why not? I can work. Then you didn't need twenty-seven permits. You had a license. That's it. Go to work.

JS: They had town permit and state permit. You didn't need a state permit to work a town bed way back. That didn't change until – what? – '72 when Baker came in.

JFS: Yeah, when Baker – but anyway, the cop says, “Well, I'm not in favor of it, but if you want to be the reason that we call the selectmen for the town of Fairfield at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning.” I said, “I don't care who you call. Call them if you want to. Call whoever the hell you want, but I'm going to work.” And I did go to work, and I was a hundred percent right. I had a hundred-and-something bushels of oysters, and I'm pulling out of there. Who the hell is there but Stanley. Stanley's looking down. I got a hundred bushels caught before noon time.

JS: Southport Harbor.

JFS: Southport Harbor. And Stanley, a friend of ours, a lobsterman, he looks down, and he says, “John, right under my nose.”

JS: He lived in Fairfield.

JFS: He lived there, and he tied a boat there, too. He never knew they were there. But the Blooms were good to me. Like I said, I went to work for Radel. We leave Norwalk on Monday morning, go to Oyster Bay, stay there until Thursday, come back, and that's with that Fred. So, that was [inaudible] –

WB: Radel also had grounds in Oyster Bay.

JFS: Yes.

JS: Yeah.

WB: So, it wasn't until later that the Flower Company bought out Radel.

JFS: I don't know who did it.

WB: Yeah, they did.

JFS: They did?

WB: They told me that.

JFS: Flower brought Radel?

WB: Yeah, Butler Flower.

JS: Butler [inaudible] grown in Black Rock Harbor because (Kay Williams?) [inaudible] –

WB: Franchise grounds.

JS: Yeah, franchised.

JFS: How I knew that this stuff was in Black Rock, but that was (Lewis?) because they saw the [inaudible] shelling in there.

JS: Yeah, before –

JFS: What Flower's is now, which [inaudible]. But that was (Lewis?) at one time.

JS: Yeah. It's changed hands several times. It goes back over a hundred years those franchise –

JFS: I'm in grammar school. I was taking a Sunday ride with my parents at the church, and I see them both there – couldn't have been Sunday. They were shelling or something. They were right there in Black Rock down by that big piece near the lighthouse up –

JS: [inaudible]

JFS: I'm looking at that, and I'm thinking, "Hmm, oyster grounds." Now, years later, I went in there, and that's Bill Ciaurro again. I knew the stuff was there. I went, and I looked. Yes, this is good, and this is this stuff. My brother-in-law and I were in one boat [inaudible] the other two we used to work with. We come in, and I went like this to him – "This is the stuff, right here." We looked, and it's there. But now, we need a place to tie up, so we went up and looked – Fairfield Dock and Dredge was up there. I called up [inaudible] and said, "Can I tie the boat there for a couple of days?" "No problem." "Good." We come out, and we're working. Then the police come. I forget what they – and I had the truck. We were bagging them and putting them in at Seaside Park up into the truck. So, first comes one police. We're loading the truck. Look at this. Then, I go to show him the maps and my license and all that. He says, "I don't know." He says, "Somebody else is coming." Another police car comes. I go to – "No, hold up. Somebody else is coming." Okay, good. Here comes a Bridgeport cap with brass and everything like that. I figure, "Well, he's the guy." I go to show him. "No, somebody else is coming." What the hell is this? People are loading the truck. Okay. Nobody knows. Somebody's coming. Then, the Bridgeport police didn't even own a boat. It was one cop that owned a boat with a sign in the window. They showed up. Okay, these guys got to know something. Somebody's coming. Oh, [inaudible]. Who's coming? The harbor master. Bill

Ciaurro was the harbor master. He pulls up. We were all having a conversation. I said, “Look, Bill, I got this map. See this where it says, ‘natural growth?’” “Yeah.” Natural growth. So, then one cop says to the other one, “How close was he to shore?” “Oh, very close.” But now, the cop is here. The next shore is Long Island. So, [inaudible] very close, right? So, the wop says, “I’m the harbor master, and I don’t have a map like this. I don’t doubt it. Where’d you get your map, John?” “Superior court three days ago. See the date – 1873.” “John, can I borrow your map?” “Yes, go ahead. Make a copy.” He tells the cop, “These guys are legal, so that was all right.” The next day, here comes the cops again. The third day, the cops again. It was weather they weren’t dressed for. They’re leaving the police station, and they’re wearing light jackets.

JS: It was real cold weather?

JFS: Yeah. But the cop says, “Listen, will you do us a favor?” “What’s that?” “Will you take the weekend off?” He says, “We’re going to talk to Bloom and see if we can’t get this straightened out.” But on the map, there is natural growth. Might only be that wide, but I am a very good boat operator. I could stay in that line. It was funny, but we made a lot of money in Black Rock.

JS: Since then, they filled a lot of that.

JFS: Yes. They filled in.

JS: Unfortunately, they kept – like they do in the river –

JFS: [inaudible]

JS: – in Bridgeport, they keep dumping and dumping fill and dumping fill. You lose a good part of that natural bed that was there along the high tide mark – high to low tide mark because it’s not there anymore.

JFS: When I was actively oystering, I was one of the few people that would move around. Most people stay in Bridgeport. The other guys from the river stayed in the river. I was the one that would start moving.

WB: So, when you fished down the grounds, you would find another ground to fish?

JFS: Yeah. But see, I used to say if I spent three days looking for someplace, I’d pull up in the harbor, I’d go here, I’d go there, I’d go to a creek. If I wasted three days, I could make that back

in half a day. Because what I found is three days lost – that's gone. But I would find stuff. Where I really, really, really made out good, and it's state ground, too –

JS: A lot of oysters – good deal of oysters.

JFS: It's state ground, too. But I'm dealing with – yeah, I know you're in the [inaudible] I'll cut this quick. But up in Branford, you go up Branford Harbor, all the way up, and you go further, and then you go underneath the bridge. Then there's another road up here, but this is [inaudible], and the Malleable Iron Works was a big, active factory at one time up in that area. We get up there. Throw the dredge, and the water was only this deep. Drove in the [inaudible] pull it up. Holy Christ.

JS: Loaded with oysters.

JFS: Solid, one hundred percent oysters. They were three years old, and they were only that big.

WB: No algae.

JFS: It was way up in the freshwater [inaudible]. But okay, shake this [inaudible] – my God, we go in the middle. My eyes are like – look, there's not one dead. They're this big. But you could see they're three years old. What the hell is this? We go further up. We go here. We go there. Oh, look at this. My, my, my. But then the guy from the shellfish commission, the Board of Health – we got stopped a couple of times. But we were a hundred percent right. Even from an old oyster [inaudible] that I had, it gave the ranges and gave Malleable Iron Works on so-and-so's northeast corner of his chimney on this house. I know we're a hundred percent right. The mayor went to see him twice. The third time, he gets a call from [inaudible] lawyer and says, "The guys [inaudible]." Because we were asking permission from the mayor to go work there, although we were right. The major was funny – an old man. Sliney was his name. He's sitting at his desk.

JS: What was his name?

JFS: Sliney. John Sliney.

JS: Oh, Sliney.

JFS: He's sitting there in his desk in the mayor's office, and he says, "Well, now, let's see." He says, "I would love ...". First, he said, "I'd love to see you guys go to work. Everything like that. But not one of you people live in Branford, and you don't vote in Branford. You got a complaint from (Jordano?)" – something like that. He says, "His wife works in the police

station.” He says, “I’m going to lose some boats. But I want to see you guys go to work.” The lawyer said, “Sign it.” “I’m going to sign it, but ...”. “But what?” “But we might all end up in jail tonight.” [laughter] And he signed it and said, “Go to work.”

WB: Well, that’s a good place to end this, I think.

JFS: Yeah, he was a nice guy. But we made a lot of money there in Branford.

JS: Those oysters – when Bloom planted them, he said –

JFS: You know what Bloom did. He looked at it. They were so light; they were like cornflakes. And a stone wall like this [inaudible] backyard. I could damn near pick them up in the boat and throw them up into the back of the truck. I was stronger and in better shape. It was like a bag of cornflakes. Bloom saw them and looked at them, and he was smart. He put them on a separate lot. We were bringing lots of stuff. Bringing like four hundred bushels every couple of days. He put them on a separate lot. Then I saw Dave [inaudible] a little while later. I said, “Dave, did you ever look at that [inaudible]?” Yes, I did. I said, “Well, are you going to tell me what happened? What happened?” “John, when they got spread out in the saltwater,” he says, “they grew like mad.” He says, “Everything was fine.”

WB: So, they didn’t catch dermo or any –?

JFS: There was no dermo in those days. Hell no. Everything was fine. But they were a perfect – and they were singles. A perfect oyster like that, but three years old. And Bloom was smart enough to separate them in case anything was wrong. There was absolutely nothing wrong. They grew out like mad when they got down in a better environment than –

WB: Right. With food.

JFS: Yeah.

WB: They had food.

JS: Dave [inaudible] might be a person to talk to, too.

JFS: Yeah. Dave is an –

JS: Very knowledgeable.

JFS: – interesting guy.

JS: Because he worked with the Blooms from when he was in high school.

JFS: In high school, yeah.

WB: Well, anyway, John, I want to thank you. I want to thank you, too, Jim, for giving me all this time about the early history of the oystering.

JFS: [inaudible] what I knew.

WB: I really appreciate it. Again, today is August 25, 2015. I'm speaking with –

JFS: John Sherwin.

WB: – and –

JS: Jim Salce.

WB: – of Nutmeg Shellfish in Fairfield. Is that your company?

JFS: [inaudible]

JS: Yeah, and Stratford. Stratford [inaudible].

WB: And Stratford. I want to thank both gentlemen for their time and for giving me a good picture of the early business.

JS: You're very welcome.

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

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