

Nancy Solomon: Danny, what is your last name?

Danny Koch: Koch.

Lenny Koch: Koch.

DK: Koch. We're brothers.

NS: Who make nets in Baldwin, Long Island. This is May 6, 1987. So, how did you get into making nets? I mean, nobody really does that anymore.

LK: Well, a lot of my relatives were fishermen. My father was a fisherman for years. My father does different things now. He works for an oil company. So, he doesn't go fishing no more. But we liked it like when we were little, so we just kept doing it. We just went—from one year, went on a little boat, and then things led from one thing to another. Now, I run yachts up and down the coast.

NS: Was your family from around here?

LK: Oh, yes. We grew up right here in Baldwin.

NS: Where were your grandparents from?

LK: My grandparents were right here from Baldwin also.

NS: And your great-grandparents, do you know? I mean, how many generations are we talking?

LK: They were here. I know my great-grandparents were here. I don't know if they were born here or not. That, I don't know. I can find out easily enough, but I never bothered asking.

NS: Do you know if you are English or Irish or...

LK: A little German, a little Irish.

NS: Do you know, Danny?

DK: What's that?

NS: What countries your family hails from.

DK: [inaudible].

NS: I am talking about your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents.

DK: Most of them are from New Jersey and around here.

LK: Our grandparents are all from here. My grandmother was raised in upstate New York.

DK: They're all farmers.

LK: They were all farmers upstate.

NS: But they used to go fishing.

LK: Well, my grandfather was a captain. He had party boats and charter boats. That was his profession ever since she had met him. He was a captain then.

DK: My grandmother was a farmer.

NS: Probably goes back about a hundred years.

LK: Yes. Well, I would say probably back at least sixty to seventy years, something like that. As you go further back, I don't really know. But I know before that, my great-grandparents and my grandmother's parents came from Ukraine. I know that. As for my father's—

NS: Were any of them net makers or...?

LK: Not that I know of.

NS: So, how did you learn how to make nets?

LK: Just working with different people. We have guys that do a lot of work for us. A lot of the nets, we get made already. We do a lot of work on them ourselves. We'll buy them semi-complete and finish them off, maybe make an extension for – make it longer, stuff like that. Like the bag in—that's what you saw me tying. See that rope that's in the middle? That's what they call a splitting strap. If you get too many fish in that bag—like the other day, we had this problem. So, this net is a whole new net for this boat. We just rigged this one out. So, it's a lot larger than what we normally use. But we found out that we do have the power to work this one efficiently, and we're increasing per tow maybe three or four hundred pounds.

NS: How do you go about making a net from scratch?

LK: We would buy this webbing, and it would come as square panels—so, maybe like ninety meshes or a hundred meshes across? It's a machine, so you could give it any length you'd like it.

NS: What's it made of?

LK: Nylon, and then it's dipped in a preservative. It makes it black like that. It's the type of stuff they call net coating. Everybody uses it along this coast. There's plastic type stuff too—

NS: What did they make nets out of before synthetics came around?

LK: Nylon, Dacron, stuff like that.

NS: But before you could buy that stuff?

LK: Oh, years ago?

NS: Yes.

LK: That's a good question. I don't really know. I know nylon has been a thing for years and years and years. Monofilament, these types of plastic—

NS: About how long?

LK: Oh, Jesus, it's got to be since 1900s, anyway.

NS: Really?

LK: Yes. Well, they used to just knit twine together, and maybe they would make their own webbing. Like the old Italians that I used to work for up until last year, they would have their wives that sit home in Italy years back, and they would all sit there and sew all winter long, making webbing for their husbands who were all fishing.

NS: Do you know how to do that?

LK: I could sew stuff—like if I had a hole, I could fix it right. But it takes so much time, and I was just getting good at it. Then I got out of this business for a couple of years, and I was doing spills, stuff on the water. So, now, me and my brother, we wound up getting all these boats from different places, from different friends of mine that retired and stuff. The boats were old, but they needed a lot of refurbishing. So, we did all the work on them and whatnot. They're all shaping up now. Now, it's time to make money. [laughter]

NS: How would you piece the different webs together?

LK: Well, like say, if you have like two-inch webbing in the front—let's say we have a tapered net. We have some nets that start out up in the front, which would be where the net is spread this way. It might spread across—

NS: Across about two feet?

LK: Widthwise, no. This whole net, when it's working, would spread about sixty feet. It's height on this particular net would be about maybe twelve or thirteen feet high from the bottom. Every net rise on the bottom.

NS: So, when you would buy the webbing in the stores, what would those squares measure?

LK: Well, you would have to buy the webbing by the pound. I don't know how many meshes it

would be. So, it's just thousands. Oh, God, they've got to be fifteen or twenty thousand? Each square is called a mesh. So, there's thousands and thousands.

NS: About how wide would that stretch?

LK: Well, that net right there?

NS: Yes.

LK: Lengthwise, it would be probably about seventy or eighty feet, and it's tapered from about fifty foot out in front—or sixty foot out front. And it goes—let's say fifty foot across, it would go twelve foot high or thirteen foot high. Then it all comes tapered back to a triangle like around a sock.

NS: Now, why would they taper it from the top and the bottom so that it would get caught in there, I guess?

LK: Well, because you have to have a certain—How're you doing (Harvey?)—have to have a certain amount of overhang, so the fish, when they get to it, they'll go under it. They'll funnel down and they charge into the net is what they do, because it keeps getting narrowed on them. So, they just see this big black hole, and they go running for the black hole which just winds up down in the bag.

NS: What would be an example of a net that wasn't made properly? Would it be too deep or too shallow so that that...

LK: Well, it's hard to say, because you make different sized nets. I have other nets that are made out of eight-inch, but this here is maybe an inch and three quarter or two-inch.

NS: What would determine the size?

LK: Well, the wings on this net, let's say we use five pounds of webbing. It would come out to maybe—let's say ten thousand knots. It's ten thousand individual mesh, where eight-inch webbing on the same distance would only be maybe several hundred.

NS: Would you make different kinds of nets depending upon what kind of fish you were catching?

LK: Oh, yes, of course.

NS: Can you give me an example?

LK: Okay like whiting fishing, we'll use two and a half inch, two and three-quarter inch, straight through from one end right to down to the back, because all the fish are generally small. Most of the fish are anywhere from a quarter of a pound up to maybe four pounds.

NS: Okay so you would have to have a finer mesh?

LK: Right, that's what this is like here. Now, that net there, see how much bigger that is? It's laying there.

NS: Yes. Would that be for bluefish?

LK: No. Well, these type of nets, you can get bluefish on them, but you don't use them for bluefish because they move too fast. These here, you tow on the bottom slowly, maybe two miles an hour—two and a half, three miles an hour. The faster moving fish will go three, three and a half. But realistically, you can't tow much faster than that, because you don't have the capability to do that. See, the bigger mesh, it will move through the water easier because there's not as many knots and restrictions. I've read a lot of articles through Sea Grant Extension Program, and they have a regular maritime school for net making and everything right in Rhode Island. So, you could send—

NS: But I would think that with all the boating in your family, that's where you really learned.

LK: Well, that's where I did. But you can only learn so much in your family too. Like your family hasn't been all over the coast and up and down the coast. My family only grew up and was raised here. My other brother, he doesn't really travel as much. But I just come back, and I've only been back here now for about a week and a half. I was in Florida this year the whole winter. I worked whole West Coast of Florida, which is nice. So, now, the only parts of this whole seaboard that I haven't run are from the Canadian border into Maine, right to the Maine border. From there, I've been all the way around down to Long Island Sound and all of Long Island and the whole coast south of here all the way to Fort Lauderdale.

NS: I would guess that you would know the most about this area though since—

LK: Oh, yes, I do. I know a lot about this area. But now, I'm so used to working here, and I've been working here for so long for so many years that I'm just looking for a little difference in scenery change. It's nice because you meet other people in different areas. So, now, I got friends all up and down Long Island. I just talked to a friend of mine who got back from Florida last night. He lives in the Hamptons, said "you have to come out again." I stayed out with him last summer about two and a half months tuna fishing, which was something new. So, we're going to do that this year. It's something new again. But it's all high-profit stuff. Now, we've got the capability to do these things with the larger boats. Years ago, they didn't do this kind of stuff because they didn't have the boats that could cope with the kind of weather that you get.

NS: When you would fix a net, what kinds of things did you need to learn in order to be able to mend them?

LK: Well, you have to learn which way the webbing runs because it looks square, but it's not. It's a diamond. It's hard to explain, because you have to see a hole and then try to fix it. You'll say, "Oh, now I see," because each bar—you have to come zigzagging back and forth. When you get to an end and you finish it, then you say, "Well, I have to cut this and start this one right." A

lot of times, you cut the wrong thing and you start in the wrong place and you make the hole bigger than what it is. That happens a lot. I used to do that myself all the time. Now, I just started getting good at it a long time ago, and then I get away from it for seven years. So, as I was getting good at it, then I went away. But I still know enough where little holes, I could fix those. But when I rip out a whole great big section, a couple other fishermen, friends of mine, stuff like that, they'll come over. Like I wrecked one last year. I mean, I rim-racked it. It looked like a shredded net. There wasn't much left of it. I had five of my friends come over one afternoon the day I wrecked it, and they all come over to help me. It's just so I can get back to work. So, it's pretty good like that. You all help each other out like that.

NS: Well, did you have to learn any particular kinds of stitches like you would for—

LK: Yes, there's only five stitches.

NS: What are they?

LK: Well, it's all the same one, but it's just a matter of twisting a knot back and forth and just tying a little different to come back left-handed and stuff like that.

NS: Do they have names for these stitches?

LK: It's more or less just like that. I don't even know, really. I don't even know—it's just the mesh. I don't really what kind of knot it is. You know, name type of knot.

NS: Is it a particular kind of knot that only fishermen would know?

LK: Not really. I don't think so.

NS: So, it could be used like a Boy Scout knot, kind of?

LK: Yes, pretty much.

DK: [inaudible] pet bird, my egret? [laughter]

LK: He eats the live bait that he catches.

NS: I was just asking what particular kinds of things you needed to learn to be able to make and fix your nets.

LK: I'll tell you; you have to be good at math because you have to figure out all your different sizes of meshes. When you taper them back, they have to be cut—

DK: You have to be able to count very good.

LK: Yes. It's like keeping track of everything when you go to cut things down and you go to sew things back together because everything is tapered and stuff, so you have to maybe cut two

meshes in, go one mesh down, or vice versa. You know what I mean? You have to do it even on both sides.

NS: So, you have to have a good sense of proportion and spacing.

LK: Right. Usually, what we'll do is we'll draw it all out and lay it out on a piece of paper. Then you count the meshes, and we'll know right where to go to. You start one—

NS: Is that the way the old-timers used to make nets? They would, you know—

LK: Yes. Oh, yes. It has to all be counted because otherwise you'll wind up with too many meshes in one spot or other, and what will happen is a lot of fish will jam in one spot and they'll trash up. It might collapse the net one side and make it work for them. So, you can't have that. If put together right, they'll work right. But if they're a little bit distorted, they won't work right at all. So, it makes a difference in catching two or three hundred pounds per tow versus twenty-five pounds, something like that.

NS: When you first began, was there somebody who you went to who had been doing this?

LK: Well, most of the guys would have that stuff, but most of them made their own stuff too. So, just by working with them—you work alongside them every day—you learn little things here and little things there.

NS: Who were some of the people who were doing that around here?

LK: Well, I guess probably pretty soon, a couple guys will start building them in Freeport, the boats like these.

NS: No, I was talking about the nets. Who were some of the people that were experienced at this?

LK: Well, gillnets, I learned how to make those from my cousin, Elwood.

NS: Is he still around?

LK: No, he died. He got killed about two years ago. He had an accident out on the bay.

NS: I'm sorry.

LK: So, he taught us a lot of stuff over the years. When we were little and stuff, I used to live out of his house out on the island and stuff like that. So, I did a lot of fishing with him from when I was maybe fourteen or fifteen. Then I was fishing with my father as well. So, I split my time up with him and back and forth, because I was out there as well as I was here. So, he just gave me more knowledge of where to work more than what I was used to working.

NS: He showed you how to do things?

LK: Yes. Well, he showed me how to make a lot of the gillnets and stuff like that, different types of bait nets—

NS: What are the different kinds of nets?

LK: There's gillnets.

NS: What is a gillnet for?

LK: A gillnet is a stationary net where you would set it. You would run it out the back of a boat and leave it set. It sits like a wall, like a fence, and the fish swim into it and hit it. You would take them out as they get caught.

NS: So, you would use that for trawling?

LK: No, no, it would sit there. The fish have to be moving in order for it to work.

NS: So, you would actually sit there and just wait until the fish would get—

LK: Right. We'd set it out and just sit there and watch it and hope something goes in it. Well, you can't see it. It's under the water. You can't see what's going on under the water.

NS: You said there are five kinds of nets.

LK: Well, no. There was five types of knots for sewing or webbing.

NS: What is another kind of net?

LK: They have a seine net. That's the kind that you would take along the beach to catch bait.

NS: What's the name of it?

LK: A seine, S-E-I-N-E.

NS: Oh, that's what that is. I've seen the word.

LK: Right, a seine net. It's a real fine mesh for catching bait. Well, they use them in the ocean and on the beach like in the Carolinas and stuff like that for catching bluefish, weakfish, bass, stuff like that.

NS: Now, would you trawl with that?

LK: No, you would use it on a boat, and you would set it along a beach and then pull it back to the beach and pull it ashore. You would just drag it straight up—everything that was inside of it would come up with you. That's what a seine is. These are what they call a trawler—drag nets—



because you drag them. You drag them behind the boat. Those doors go down, and they spread open, and they hold that net open. It keeps it a constant a—

NS: Okay. Because I've seen those doors on a couple of people's lawns. They use them for decoration. Is that where they would get them, from a boat?

LK: Yes, probably old ones that are bad or something. When they lose the steel—

NS: Is there any particular name for those doors?

LK: No, those are just regular wooden trawl doors. I don't know if those are (corkwood?) still over—

NS: What are they made of?

LK: Heavy oak wood and steel, all different types of steel welded—you can see on these ones, these are the same ones. But these are a lighter set. We had these on the boat, and we had to put the bigger net on and we had to put bigger doors on.

NS: So, would you have one at the base to keep it straight?

LK: Well, what we would do is that these brackets here would stand out like this, both of them, and you would have them clasped together into two tops. You'd have the two of them, and they spread apart. They both drive in different directions. We'll have cable and chain between the top of the net and the bottom of the net and the top and the bottom of the door.

NS: Okay, that's what I thought.

LK: Then that'll make the net ride like this, where the top of the net would float, so it'll stay up high, and all that chain that you see will hold it to the bottom as well. That makes a big opening. Then these are dragged through the water. You see on the bottom where the heavy steel is, that's what rides on the bottom, that part right down there. That's why all that extra steel is there. These are pretty heavy too. Well, these ones are light ones, but they're about three hundred pounds each. So, you'll need a winch and stuff to lift this thing as it comes up.

NS: Yes, I see. Oh okay, that's a big winch.

LK: Yes. It's pretty heavy duty. Well, it's like our other boat over there. That one's got a net reel and everything else on it, so we don't have to hang a net like this. This is an older style rig. That's more modernized. That one's getting refurbished next.

NS: So, we have got gillnets, trawl nets, seine nets.

LK: Seine, yes.

NS: Seine nets.

LK: What other kind of net? There's a pound net where they put stakes in the ground and have a webbing that they hang on that. They run large webbing through it and ropes and stuff. The fish run to it and get scared, and they run along it like a fence. There's a big pond made out of webbing, and they'll go in—it's like a maze and they get stuck in the middle of it. They just come out and take that out—

NS: Okay, I've seen those when I've been out.

LK: Sunrise Fish Company has one out in Islip, but they have it outside of Robert Moses Park. It's on the ocean there. You can see from the beach there. Matter of fact, a lot of early mornings, if you get down there real early, you can see the boat down there emptying it right at the end of the parkway there.

NS: Okay, I'll have to go over there. But what time do they usually do that?

LK: Usually fairly early in the morning.

NS: Like six, seven?

LK: Yes, six, seven, eight, like that. They got to be there until ten, eleven in the morning.

NS: Oh okay, so they're there for—

LK: There's a big, long, gray boat with this little itty-bitty cabin on the front. It's a really weird-looking boat. It's just for emptying that thing, though. I know they had a lot of trouble setting them. I don't think they're in operation there yet, but they'll be setting it up. They're probably even working on it now, on the nice days when it's not too rough in the ocean. All the work that you do is all limited to the weather that you get. So, you're pretty limited. I guess you're limited to a hundred and fifty to two hundred days, maybe, out of the whole year. When you figure out what the fishing seasons are, that eliminates it more. So, you got the odds against you, pretty much. They're pretty well stacked.

NS: It's like farmers in the Midwest these days.

LK: Yes. Actually, we're the same thing. We're farmers, but we're just farmers of the sea. That's all. The fish have tails. They move. So, you can't say, "Well, they should be here." It doesn't mean that they're going to stay here.

NS: Well, the one good thing about fishing is too much rain doesn't matter. Not enough rain doesn't really matter.

LK: Well, I guess too much rain does matter. It changes the salinity in the water, right?

NS: How does that affect the fish then?

LK: Well, it creates a lot of growth, kills a lot of stuff when it's hot in the summer. The algae grows in it. It needs cleanup. You can see here how these canals are clear right now. But you come back here in two months' time, and the canal will turn like a brownish because the water's getting warmer or you have more boat traffic. The water the rest of the year, nine months out of the year, it's crystal clear down here. We can see four or five foot in the water, and this is without the sun in the water.

NS: So, all the chemicals and stuff would change it. Would fish actually leave the area?

LK: I don't know about that. I don't believe so. There's always going to be fish here, to a point. But I mean, as for stuff like—now, you have a lot more bulkhead and stuff in here. You have a lot less vegetation than what you had fifteen years ago. This canal, everything here, we'd see all meadows this whole side of the canal, you know like fourteen, fifteen years ago. Now, you can see it's condos, houses. Look, you have one empty lot. I think that's probably about the only empty lot on the canal, and they want something like one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for that. Half of it washed away. Somebody will buy it. They always do. If somebody built one here, there's a whole lot—there used to be an old boat house there. This guy put this big house on it.

NS: The red building, that's an old oyster house, (George?) was telling me?

LK: No, that brown one down there. [inaudible] The boatyard now, that used to be an old oyster house.

NS: Oh, but what was the red one?

LK: This was always a restaurant and an inn, stuff like that.

NS: Oh okay. That brown one would be the saltbox.

LK: Right. Oyster (boats?) used to land there.

NS: Well, I just took a picture of the wrong building then.

LK: That building is still pretty much the same as it used to be. It has the overhang over the canal, and the boats would pull in. They had a big back door, and they would bring everything in. I think the historical site probably has pictures of that place years ago. Actually, you can see a lot of the old stuff. Even there's old pictures here where they used to have the old net reels and stuff like that.

NS: Really? Oh, those things are incredible.

LK: Right. This particular property here has been used commercial fishing for over a hundred years. These shacks in here these are still—this shack here is just about—

NS: This is the oyster shack and that was the clam shack?

LK: Well, they used to use that one mostly for bait. But they just kept a lot of equipment in them, and whatever they needed at the time—your shack turns into whatever you need it for at the time. You got to be diversified with everything nowadays—even back then though. Back then, they just made a living. I don't think I would want to live the way that they lived all those years and stuff like that. They didn't even really have anything. That's why I do a lot of different things. I go to a lot of different places. I see a lot of different things. So, I can say, "Well, these guys make a lot more money than we make," and stuff like that. Also, we incorporate different things to what we see at different places. Some of them work, some of them don't. But we do okay.

NS: What do you find that works best?

LK: Just hard work and perseverance. It's just a matter of being there, putting the time in out there in the ocean. You have to be out there to catch anything. You just look around long enough, you'll find something.

NS: What kinds of qualities do you think you need to be a good fisherman?

LK: You're going to have to want to work hard and long hours. Sometimes little pay or none. I've done that. I've gone for a month, really, without making any real money. I make twenty-five dollars or thirty dollars a day, that's not making any money. I'm not even interested in going commercial fishing unless I can make better than a hundred dollars a day. Last year, the guy I was working with, there's a lot of days where he was making made three or four hundred dollars a day. But this is specialized fishing, like what we're doing now with this dragnet. So, you got to really know your stuff. The guys that I worked with last year, they're the ones who showed us a lot of different stuff. The one guy is building us a new net. He's been showing us how to build this. So, these guys are going to be retiring, and their market that they used up is going to come available. We might be in the right spot to pick a lot of this business up.

NS: Who is making you the net?

LK: A guy named (Charlie Connor?).

NS: Is he around here?

LK: He has a boat in Freeport, but I wouldn't know how to get in touch with him or anything. He just comes down. We have an old guy, (Willie?), from Freeport also. I guess you've seen him—

NS: Black guy?

LK: Yes.

NS: He is one of the people I've got to talk to.

LK: He does a lot of work for us. He's one of our best buddies. He's an old guy, you know—old, retired guy, but he's good people. He's been around. He could tell us what we're doing right and

wrong and stuff. So, it's nice having somebody old like that that's got so much experience. He'll tell you, "Well, these guys do this, and these guys do that. But this is how you do it." He's been around for fifty, sixty, seventy years or something.

NS: So, you know to listen to him.

LK: Yes. So, you don't say nothing. You just listen to him. You always give it a try. You set up the way he tells you. If it don't work, go from there. Try making different adjustments on stuff, and you wind up catching it. But ninety-five percent of the time, he's right. I do use different stuff nowadays, but he keeps up on stuff too. So, it's pretty good. It works out good for us, keeps us working. We ripped up a lot of stuff and couldn't fix it.

NS: Do you ever catch anything in your net that really scared you?

LK: I had a bombshell once.

NS: What happened?

LK: Yes, a big bombshell. Nothing. It was just old and crusty.

NS: An exploded one, I hope.

LK: No, no, it was a shot one. It was already shot out of its shell. But the head of this thing was nineteen or twenty inches, like that, and it was all brass. I chipped it off with a hammer. I didn't even know what I had. I was working on a boat that was all steel at the time, a clam boat. It was funny, I was smashing it on the deck trying to break all the stuff off. I'm beating on it with a hammer. And like an hour I'm doing this, and I find this brass cone on the top of it that had numbers on it. So, I said, "Wow, this is getting more interesting." I'm chipping away and chipping away. All day, I work on it. I find out it's a bomb's head. It's the head of a bomb. It was a little funny at first, but then—

NS: Did you ever catch a whale or anything or a shark?

LK: No, I see whales all the time. Sharks are no big thing. I go tournament fishing for sharks all the time. There's tuna fishing and stuff like that. We do this all the time. So, wrestling with a big fish isn't that much. But it's just a matter of keeping an eye on them and just keeping an eye on them teeth.

NS: What's the scariest thing that ever happened to you?

LK: On the water, you mean?

NS: Yes.

LK: When we were surf fishing, striped bass fishing with the gillnets and stuff, we have to get right in the wash of the surf with the boats. You have to run them in. A lot of times, if something

would happen, you only can stay there for—you got a split second and everything, you got to be timed just right with the waves. Then you got to back in and set the net and take off, setting the net, right on out through the breakers. So, you have to watch and wait and count your waves and know which ones to go through, because they'll be the smallest. A couple of times, if something would happen, all of a sudden, you had one break right on the boat and fill the boat up with water. It would just scare the hell out of you, because you don't realize the power behind these little waves. God forbid a big one should ever hit you. I get hit twice in about two weeks. The one time I actually got knocked out. It knocked me out for about forty seconds or so until I was flopping in the water in the boat. For that, I wear what they call a float coat, which is a life-preserve coat. So, if I ever do get knocked out, I don't have to worry about it. I was expecting it. You know what I mean? So, you get prepared. You don't just go into these things, you know.

NS: In a pair of shorts and T-shirt, no.

LK: Yes, especially when the water's chilly like that. Even though you're in the surf, you can swim right on the beach because you're at the beach. A lot of times, I would be setting, and I would hit bottom. So, that's how low it would be. Then you take off for deeper water. You take off back off the beach. So, it is tricky. Danny got washed up once. He got washed up down here, and I went down to help him out. I was too late. There was nothing I could do. So, like I have a four-wheel drive truck, and we have a trailer and stuff. We just go right on down and pick up the boat like it's nothing. For most guys, they wouldn't know how to get the boat off the beach and stuff like that. We get prepared for this.

NS: Did you ever get caught in any real scary storms?

LK: Oh, yes. I've laid offshore—a hundred miles offshore on an eighty-footer, and it was blowing seventy-five, eighty miles an hour. It was the most scared I've ever been in my life—all these thirty, thirty-five-foot seas and stuff. You're looking up at the moon and there's waves up there. You're like, "Oh, my God. I don't think I'm going to survive this." You couldn't cook anything in the boat. It was just so rough; you couldn't stand up. You couldn't sleep because you couldn't lay flat on—

NS: How long would you go out for?

LK: I would've went out for a four-day trip. We were out like a day and a half, and it got real nasty. Everybody else split for home, and it's like eleven, twelve hours to get home. So, rather than us just getting going and getting home, we just figured, well, we'll lay there, and this will blow over. It'd be a thirty, thirty-five mile an hour storm. Well, it increased so bad. We were like, "Wow, we don't believe this." It was quite the wild storm. It was like that for two and a half days. Of course, we couldn't move anywhere. It was too rough to try to go against it. I think we drifted just the first night—we drifted about twenty-two miles or something just because of the storm.

NS: Would you drift so that at least the wind would just kind of blow you back and forth instead of—

LK: Yes. Well, what we did was we just turned the boat and headed downsea and just drifted with the boat like that. It was a little bit comfortable, but not really a whole hell of a lot. You couldn't sleep. When you got in, you felt like you got beaten up. You were black and blue all over from running into things. You try to walk across the floor and you're slipping and sliding and grabbing onto stuff. I went to open the refrigerator door—this great big stand-up refrigerator door that's bolted to the wall. I opened up the door, and the whole thing just toppled down on top of me. There's two guys that were standing behind me. I was lucky that they were there. I would have gotten flattened by this big refrigerator. There's all kinds of little different things like that.

NS: What are some of the things, if you're in a bad storm, that you should do or not do?

LK: Don't panic. That gets you in the biggest trouble.

NS: That's easy.

LK: What happens is a lot of people say, "Oh, God, we're going to sink. We're going to do this and that." They wouldn't stop and say, "Wow, what should I do?" and not worry about sinking. "What should I do here to keep afloat?" If they just kept a level head. So, let's just say, for thirty seconds, stop and pause for thirty seconds. If it's going to happen within thirty seconds, there ain't nothing you're going to do to prevent it anyway. So, you just stop for thirty seconds and say, "Well, what's my best option here? We can let the boat sink and get out and swim or we can try to fix the leak. We'll find out where the source of the leak is, evaluate things real quick." You have to. It's like when you're outside and you're going for a couple of days. You might be working down south or something, and then the motor breaks down. What do you do? You've got to go through the whole system and find out what happened and hope you can get it going again. We did that the other day with this one. We had a sprocket break. We couldn't lift the doors and had nothing. We couldn't get anything back to the boat. Danny went down to the engine room, and two hours later, he wound up getting the thing working. He just got lucky. He was able to clean [RECORDING PAUSED] ...fishing spots. You have to do that by working with different people and keeping an eye on what they're doing or how they're getting stuff. You got to be pretty perceptive. When I was in Florida this winter, I got this guy to take us out on a shrimp boat.

NS: I am just going to—this dock isn't—now, that one is moving. This one is stable, but I thought—

LK: Yes. Really, when I was down in Florida, I didn't know nothing about the shrimp business at all, but it was the same basic technology that we used in this stuff. It's just that it's itty-bitty webbing. It's like three-quarter-inch and one-inch webbing. So, I said, "All right. I won't be able to pull them as fast. It'd be harder to pull and work with and stuff like that, but I know what to expect, anyway." So, we got this little shrimp net. We went out with this guy first before we went and bought a net. Well, when I'd seen what they did, I was like, "God, this is a piece of cake. This is just what I'm used to." The first night, we went. We didn't catch anything the first night because we didn't know where to go. So, we went to this different place the second night, and we did just as good as the old guys that have been doing it for ten years. They were all like, "Who are these guys," because we're from out of town.

NS: Do you think this area is one of the harder areas to fish in?

LK: No, I don't think so.

NS: Different?

LK: I don't believe there are any harder areas than others. The only thing that makes it harder is really you and your outlook of the situation, really. Everything that you do on the water, more less, is hard. It's all hard work, a lot of time. You can't figure out what you make an hour or anything like that.

NS: Oh, that's your boat creaking. I thought something was wrong with my tape recorder.

LK: Yes, it does. When it's rubbing against a bump it's...

NS: Is this pretty much the standard boat you would use?

LK: Well, we used my dad's—his little killie boat, the little black boat there. He catches live bait, killies, and sells them to bait stations, to fluke fishermen.

NS: Do you ever go lobster fishing?

LK: My father used to do that. That's really back-breaking.

NS: Did he make his own lobster pots?

LK: Yes.

NS: Do you have any of them around?

LK: There used to be one or two around here. Good question, if there is anything—

NS: Once we're done talking, could we take a look?

LK: Yes, we could take a look around. I don't even know if there is any. I might have taken one home or something. I thought I had one home and I think we gave it away. I took it home for decoration around the side of the pool and stuff. I have old lobster buoys on my fence, all kinds of different stuff.

NS: Really?

LK: Yes.

NS: Do you find that other fishermen do that a lot?



LK: No, I just do it for decor. [laughter]

NS: Have you ever been to Al Grover's house?

LK: Yes.

NS: He's got that huge anchor in front of his house.

LK: He's got all kinds of neat stuff. Matter of fact, he's gotten a lot of stuff from us over the years, like the Verity skiffs that he built himself. As a matter of fact, the last one he got, this big one that he hasn't produced yet, was my boat that I got from my father. The other boat that he produced, a twenty-eight-footer—

NS: Was this an original wooden one?

LK: Yes.

NS: He's got it?

LK: Sure. The twenty-eight-footer that he used for his fiberglass boat that he just copyrighted and everything was my father's boat years ago, this old Verity skiff.

NS: Do you have that? Any more Verity skiffs somewhere?

LK: No, we don't have any. Well, now, we have these big boats. These are three or four times the size of those.

NS: I am looking to see a real Verity skiff. I did not know he actually had one. I know he has got tons of fiberglass skiffs.

LK: At home, I probably have some pictures of them. I wouldn't know where to look—

NS: Well, I am going to ask him to see if he has got them stashed somewhere.

LK: Well, you ask him. You ask Al or his wife of pictures of the skiff that he used that was my father's. He's got to have pictures of the old (Perguina?) and stuff like that. I'm pretty sure that's the one he had. He had bought the other one that, as kids, the guy who used to own this place had, which is the twenty-six-footer he managed, old guy Myron. So, he knows a lot about the history of this area too because he's been around here for years.

NS: I was talking with him yesterday.

LK: Right. Matter of fact, he knows a lot more of the boat builders and that kind of stuff because he has really made it a quest going back to the old days, especially with the going-ons with his boats and stuff like that.

NS: Do you know anybody who makes rope?

LK: No. [laughter]

NS: Do you buy it from one of your supplier?

LK: We'd just buy from a—

NS: Island?

LK: Island Fish Net, or one of those places. We try not to deal with that because it's so expensive. We order a lot of stuff, different catalog places like out in Tennessee. There's places in Florida—

NS: Always amazed me that a lot of these inland places who don't do any fishing make these things.

LK: Well, you'd be surprised. Down in the south, there's a lot of catfish farming. People say, "What? Catfish farming?" I was checking into all that stuff.

NS: Well, they have a little lake where they raise them and fish hatcheries.

LK: Yes, it's the same basic thing. Well, this is freshwater, and they raise catfish in pens. There's nothing big about it. Catfish will live in any kind of freshwater. Catfish, they clean the pond. They would survive on only algae and stuff like that. So, these guys got a pretty good racket going. These farm-raised catfish is getting them pretty decent business now.

NS: Is there a bug crawling on me? I just thought there was an ant about to crawl in my eye. [laughter]

LK: No. You get used to the bugs down here. It's not even bad yet.

NS: Yes. I know. I grew up in Mamaroneck and on the sound. So, it's pretty much the same story, I guess.

LK: You don't get as much wind out in summer. We get the nice breezes.

NS: Oh, it's terrible for sailing.

LK: Yes, it's like the desert. [laughter]

NS: When you get the wind, it's always blowing from the northwest. So, you go south real fast and then spend the rest of the day tacking back. [laughter]

LK: We used to do a lot of dragging up there in the sound, like on Smithtown Bay. Way up in that way, and east of there, up to Mattituck, as far up in there, New London, all through there in

the sound. It used to get hot up there. We used to call that the desert because there was never no wind up there. All day long, you'd be hot as hell. You are guaranteed to be burnt.

NS: When you would go out, did you ever sing any songs or do any of that stuff that fishermen is supposed to do? [laughter]

LK: It depends. Sometimes, you start catching fish real good, everybody gets in a crazy mood because they're like, "Wow, look at this." Things are just going astronomically. You're like, "Wow, it doesn't happen like this all the time." So, you're appreciating a good moment out of it like that. Sometimes, you get a little jolly. You start carrying on doing stupid things. It's just funny.

NS: Like what?

LK: Oh, I don't know, just stupid things. Whatever comes to mind once in a while, getting your crazies.

NS: Climb the mast pole or something like that?

LK: No, nothing like that. Well, once in a while, swinging around on one of the ropes or something, stuff like that. Sit there and antagonize everybody or something.

NS: [laughter]

LK: "I got the big one," something like that, and then you get the biggest fish out of there.

NS: What's the biggest fish you ever caught?

LK: Well, Danny has the biggest codfish that was caught in New York. It was like ninety-six pounds. That was big. Him and Al Grover caught that. Matter of fact, Al's probably got some good pictures of that. That was caught with the old set lines. You bait each hook on them, and they're tied on a big main line. I believe he still does that.

NS: How about yours, the biggest fish you ever caught?

LK: The biggest ones I've had were about sixty-five pounds. I had a big one, but it got broke loose. I don't know how big it actually was. But it was the biggest fish that I ever had, but I couldn't estimate how big he was. But it was enormous.

NS: I was once bluefish fishing and caught one that was so big it broke the rod. [laughter]

LK: Tuna fishing and stuff like that, I catch a lot of fish that are a hundred, hundred and ten pounds. They'll walk you around on the boat. It's not like walking a dog. They beat you up. I caught three fish and they had me beat. I couldn't catch no more. Then I went to bigger reels and stuff like that, and it wasn't as bad.

NS: Do you have any of the old fishing rods, the bamboo ones?

LK: No, I never used anything like that. They don't really use that kind of stuff around here. Really old-time stuff is still pretty much the way stuff was—as it is now, it was then. But it's just that they have marketed different types of stuff a little bit. But everything is pretty much the same. It's just different equipment types and stuff, that fancy-looking stuff. Everybody's got to have high-finished things now. It's got to be ultra glossy and stuff.

NS: I think that's about it.

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

Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 06/26/2024