

Nancy Solomon: This is the second interview with Lenny Koch about bay houses on May 27th, 1987. [RECORDING PAUSED] You said that pretty much most of the people who went out to Meadow Island—you call that Smith Island?

Lenny Koch: We call where the beach was, where the monument is—like our names. But they have it on the map. I guess that's Meadow Island, I guess. I don't really know. But we always called it Scott's Beach on one side and Smith's Island on the other, right?

Danny Koch: Yes.

LK: So, that's why when you said Meadow Island, I said, "Where the hell is Meadow Island?"

DK: You got a tomb over there. You've got a tomb, Smith's tomb.

LK: Yes, I was [inaudible] the other day.

NS: So, yes there it is, called Meadow Island.

DK: I guess it's still there, yes.

LK: See, I was over here. So, this is High Meadow. That's West High Meadow. That's where my house was. Right on the point right here. So, it's West High Meadow. I thought it was High Meadow.

NS: Did we go to Meadow Island or West High?

LK: We went to Meadow.

NS: Most of the people who were out there were Freeporters?

LK: Well, from this basic vicinity. Maybe Baldwin, Freeport, Rockville Center, like that, I guess. Maybe a few from Hempstead. Years ago, it's hard to say, because these areas weren't built up as much as they are now. With everything on the waterfront now, it's just like, "Forget it." It's not like it was years ago where people had lots next to their houses and everything. There is no lot. They don't exist anymore, or very, very few.

NS: I guess with all these—

DK: What did you say? Lot?

LK: Huh?

DK: Lot? I didn't get you.

LK: Building lots. Everybody used to have—

DK: [inaudible].

LK: Years ago, everybody had lots next to their houses and whatnot around here. This all used to be lots all over there, the whole thing.

NS: Let us talk about bay houses. How would you get a bay house?

LK: Well, most people that had them built them. You'd get a lease from the Town of Hempstead. They paid—it was like a hundred dollars a year, the lease on the property. But you only owned the house. You didn't own the property. That's the whole idea of the lease. But anyway, I guess they started building them—what, I guess in the early '50s, like that?

DK: It's been a long time. It was old.

LK: I know my house was built around in '58. He used to come to my house all the time.

DK: The only ones that they don't lease are the ones on Meadow Island. In theory, they own the land over there. But that's the only place.

LK: Well, that is actually leased too. That was a hundred-year lease.

DK: That was a lease?

LK: Yes. That was through the federal government, I believe. I don't know if it was through the state or the federal government. That was a hundred-year lease or a ninety-nine-year lease. That's why those houses—they can buy them and sell them because you can leave the house standing there, you can build them. You can do anything you want with them. That's what people are starting to do with them now. But as for these other ones that you see on the marshes around here, the local houses, those were supposed to be outdated years ago. What, 1980 I think it was or something?

DK: Around there.

LK: Now, they just go from year to year. They won't give you a five-year lease or a ten-year lease. Nothing. Now, it's strictly year to year.

NS: What would be in a bay house? You know your basic [inaudible]

LK: Just half of them have bare walls. It's just like a shack, they're out on the Meadows—and you're swimming off the dock and barbecuing on. Just hanging out, nice and peaceful, relaxing.

DK: The people that have the bay houses don't leave anything of value. If they want to bring anything, they bring it out with them. They don't leave anything of value, because when they're not there, the kids break in the house and stuff. So, they can't leave anything of value in the house. They furnish it with huge furniture and stuff. They can't have anything that's any value because the kids would wreck it. There's people who would go out in the bay and then—vandals.

They break into the house, wreck—

LK: Look what they used to do to my house all the time, right?

DK: Oh, yes.

LK: I mean, any days, they'll wreck my house sometimes. It happens to everybody. The kids on holiday seasons, they put their boat in the water for a day or two out there. "There's nobody out here. Let's go see. Let's go break into this house." They think they're getting away with something. Although there's nothing there, but they'll just go in and be vandals, that's all.

NS: How many rooms are in a bay house?

LK: Well, they all range from one to three or four, five, like that. Mine was, what, five rooms? Yes, five rooms.

DK: You had a big one.

NS: What were those five rooms?

DK: One of the big ones.

LK: I had an eighteen by twenty-two screened-in porch, all nice with the furniture.

NS: You know the dimensions and everything. [laughter]

LK: Oh, yes. Well, I had quite the nice house. Mine wasn't your average bay house, right, Bob?

DK: Yes.

LK: It's all nice and paneled and everything. Nice picture windows and everything. Nice, nice house. I had a bedroom downstairs, a small bedroom.

DK: It had a big porch on it.

LK: Yes, I was just saying that. Eighteen by twenty-two. Then I had a big outdoor deck out back that was big enough to put a badminton court on. This is all lumber over the meadows. Out back further, I had the outhouse with a shower in it and everything else.

NS: With a shower?

LK: Oh, sure. I had a classy house.

NS: It was an outdoor shower?

LK: No, it was indoor.

NS: What?

LK: Regular showers, door, everything. The wintertime, we didn't have hot water because I didn't have a water heater. Although, I could've put one in. I could have put a gas hot water heater in or something like that. But we used to have about a four-hundred-gallon tank, and then I lift it up on a rack, up above it. It was just gradually fed.

NS: You just pulled a cord?

LK: No, you just turned the valve on, and water would come out like that. But you had to put water in it all the time.

NS: Is it just one big room inside the house where you?

LK: Well, I had a regular living room. Then I had a little kitchen off the side of that. Then I had a big loft bedroom upstairs. Then the loft bedroom slept about eight or nine people, right?

DK: Yes.

LK: It was big. I had a big house.

NS: Was it mostly men who went out there?

LK: No. Well, most people, for instance, we only used the houses during the summer. It was nice out in the summer. It was nice and cool, cool nights and stuff. It was quiet, peaceful. My house, on the other hand, we used all year long. I had lots of different friends who'd come out. [inaudible] at the house, I'd have all kinds of friends stopping over all the time because not too many people knew people who had houses. So, it's a pretty unique thing when you have a house. But my house was rather nice. They would all come out, and the next thing you know, there would be fifteen of us there. Everybody would be sitting in the sun, having cocktails and barbecuing, just having a good old time, especially on the weekend. We might go clamming right from the house. Right up in front of the house, just walk right off the dock, fishing, everything.

NS: How many houses were out there?

LK: Where mine was, right on there on West High Meadow, when it was—through over the years, I know there was at least fourteen more than what's there right now.

NS: How many are there now? About six?

LK: Now, it's down to four or five. Let's see, (Maddie's?) house, two, three, four, five houses. Yes, five houses left.

NS: Now, were these houses also kind of passed down in the family?

LK: Yes. The law states that you're not allowed to sell them outright to another person. So, what you would do is you would lease it to somebody, but it's all just hush under the table. The guy still owns the place who originally owned it. If you go to change them to somebody else's name, they'll take the house down.

NS: But pretty much, if somebody wanted to lease it to somebody else, it would be somebody they knew?

LK: Yes. It's a friend of a friend, definitely. There's so many people who would want one, but you have to know somebody to get one. It's almost impossible to get one, especially now, where there's less and less of them. Very limited, right?

NS: You said that your house is pretty nice. What would a more typical house be like?

LK: Like a regular old shack. One-room shack, two rooms, like that. A little porch, maybe, a dock. Just like a regular old shack. Nothing fancy. Just look halfway decent outside. Have a fresh water well. Usually, they have a little sink or a little kitchen in there. Just anything, whatever somebody decides to build. Depends how elaborate you wanted to build it. The one I had, a friend of mine built. But he only used to use it on weekends and whatnot. So, he was not a baymen enough. Well, he was always on the bay, but he never worked the bay or anything like that. So, this was just like a weekend place for him to go out and hide out. Him and his wife and the kids would go out, maybe would be swimming, water skiing, crabbing, clamming, fishing, like that, just all that recreational good-time stuff.

NS: Some people said that they would go duck hunting out there.

LK: Yes, we used to do that with [inaudible], remember? [inaudible] It was nothing for us to be out on the weekend and have fifteen or eighteen of us hunting. It would sound like a war. It would sound like a real live war going on around the area because you hear us all shooting.

NS: [laughter] Everyone shooting.

LK: Yes, everybody would be shooting in different areas. It was kind of funny. But we used to go shooting and stay out in the middle of the winter. We had a potbelly stove for heat. It used to get that place roasting hot.

NS: That must have been also a kind of situation where it was like only men, no women around.

LK: No. Well, (Chris?) used to come out with me all the time. My friend (Richie?), his wife, (Donnie?), used to come out. We had a lot of women come out to the house. They wouldn't go out hunting and stuff, but they would just be hanging around the house. It's like why should they sit home and be miserable when we're all out having a good time?

NS: When you would go duck hunting and come back with all this duck, what would you do with it?

LK: Cook them and eat them.

NS: How would you cook them?

LK: Roast them. There's all kinds of different ways. We'll have just the breasts, fillets and stuff. Sometimes, you make them with biscuits and gravy, stuff like that. It depends. We used to take black ducks, and then we'd cook them. We'd roast them, put a little bacon on them, and maybe a couple slices of fruit or something. Then make some wild rice, stuff like that.

NS: Were these recipes things you learned from your father?

LK: No, just all around, whatever was handy or something, we'd throw in the pot, make a big old stew.

NS: Was there somebody who was always picked to do the cooking, be better than—?

LK: No, not really. But I used to do a lot of the cooking because I went to school for four years to be a chef. So, cooking was no big thing. Plus, a lot of people just throw a whole bunch of shit together and expect to eat it. I'm like, "Forget that." [laughter]

LK: Well, you remember, right? We made some elaborate meals out of our house, right?

DK: Oh, yes.

LK: We had baked clams and fried clams. You name it, all kinds of filet fish, spaghetti and meatballs. I mean it wasn't nothing for us to roast a turkey or something, but we had a regular full-service house. [laughter] We'd make lasagnas, pizzas, you name it. Anything we wanted to make, we could make it. So, we had good freshwater and stuff. Everybody says, "Wow, I didn't know you used spring-fed water for coffee." It's all natural, ain't it?

DK: Yes.

LK: When I went there, I would go out and buy a bottle of [inaudible] and a cup of coffee.

NS: Bet you made a lot of friends having a bay house out there.

LK: Yes. You get to know everything about the bay too, because you're living right out there with nature. We had pet ducks come into the house and everything.

DK: We used to hunt in Meadow Island.

LK: Yes. We used to walk right out from the house and go hunting.

DK: During the season.

LK: Yes, it was all during the hunting season. In the springtime, we'd always have baby ducks

all around here. So then we'd be feeding them and stuff, keeping them as pets. Later on, you'd hope they'd fly away. You wouldn't know which one duck from another.

NS: Look at all these bites. [laughter]

LK: Yes, a bunch of them.

NS: When you would go out duck hunting... [inaudible] clams too?

LK: Mostly bait stations, really. Anybody that comes by and says, "Hey, I need some clams." He's got the greens, he's got the clams. [laughter]

Unknown speaker (US): [inaudible] ...

NS: You have to put new doors on too?

LK: No.

NS: No?

LK: No, we got the heavy ones on there. We did that the other day...

NS: I did that the other day too...Care to join this conversation about duck hunting and bay houses?

US: Who?

NS: You.

US: I used to go duck hunting once in a while. Yes, I used to hunt.

LK: He used to make us all the decoys.

NS: Did your dad teach you?

US: He used to go duck hunting with big waders on.

US: He used to hunt when he was young.

US: He used to go [inaudible] walk underneath [inaudible]

NS: Who did you learn how to make decoys from?

LK: (Duck Back Barn?)

US: [inaudible].

NS: Was he a duck hunter? He just made decoys.

US: He's a retired electrician. [inaudible]

NS: You pretty much use your own decoys when you go duck hunting?

US: Huh?

NS: Do you use your own decoys when you go?

US: Yes.

NS: How do you make yours?

US: Well, I make them out of wood or wood cork. You can make them out of wood or you can make them out of cork. I haven't been working. I just can't find the time to do it. If I didn't have anything to do, I would. But I guess I (got to open clams?).

NS: Was it hard to learn?

US: No, it's just a matter of work. Once you get the basics, you need all the right parts [inaudible] sandpaper and stuff. You need the time to do it. You know what I mean? I'm busy shucking clams all the time.

NS: I was talking about—I forget now. My memory is going. You said a lot of times when you would be waiting for the ducks, you would get kind of tired?

LK: Oh, yes.

NS: You said that when you got real tired, you would start telling stories about snakes instead? [laughter]

LK: Well, I guess, you'd pick up a conversation after sitting there a few hours, because we used to—who knows, you'd talk about all kinds of different things. But it's just out hanging out or whatever.

NS: I mean, were there any particular stories that somebody always told?

LK: No, just like, "I remember years ago," stuff like that. "They used to shoot lots more ducks than we did. We don't earn nothing." We're all kids and they're all old. They've been around for years and everything. But now, it's like, "Move over, Jack, because the young kids ain't the young kids anymore." The old guys are real old now, so they don't do it no more either. But I guess it's like with everything and everybody. There's younger people all the time, and they're going to come in and do it later on too. The years changed, but a lot of things still remain the same, basically.



NS: When you would go out to the bay house, is there a certain time of year when there would be like—I'm thinking farmers always have a harvest party. Is there something like that at the bay houses?

LK: No. We would have a lot of parties at different houses, but not like Fourth of July parties, stuff like that. Once in a while, we would do stuff like that. I think you were at the house when we had the Fourth of the July party.

DK: Yes.

LK: Where we set the Meadows on fire with the fireworks. [laughter] We had a couple of those big mortar bombs, and one of them just went [sound effect] and just dropped out of the pipe. It didn't shoot up in the air. It blew up all over the ground and started a whole mess. We're all just like seventy-five of us out at the house. Well it was stretched out from in the house, out on the docks, everywhere—on the boats, everywhere around the house. Everything, the ground was orange from all the fireworks.

NS: Would you have like a clam bake?

LK: Yes, all the time. We make clam fritters. Everybody brings stuff, so it used to be good. Everybody would bring us their coolers, full of different stuff. Later on, all of a sudden, people would say, "Oh, we're hungry." All of a sudden, everybody starts putting everything together. It's just like a big old thing, like one of those old country barbecues, something like that. That was always a lot of fun.

NS: Were there certain things that the men always took care of and things like that and that the women did?

LK: Yes. Well, we used to leave all the cleaning to the women, and they will do the cooking and all that kind of stuff. Us guys, because if it was the wintertime—like I was saying, we'd go out in the winter a lot. We'd go out in the daytime. We'd all go out cocktailing and whatnot. We'd take a big boat and a little boat with us. We might go down to Scott's Beach or something and look for firewood. We'd do that for maybe three or four hours, five hours like that, and we'd all be getting a buzz on as we're picking up firewood. We would pick up enough firewood for two or three months in one day. So, it was like an adventure. All of us were out and about. It was all the guys were playing with the guys, and all the girls were playing with the girls, like that. We'd always come across different things out in the meadows, like driftwood. You never know. There's always something.

NS: You said that you had put a driftwood up in your entire house?

LK: Yes, it made one of the rooms. In the bay house, had the whole porches all done with panel, wood-made panel.

NS: How did you do that?

LK: Just by overlapping one piece over another. It was all different and we just cut the ends.

NS: Did you nail them?

LK: Yes, we nailed them up. It looked just like regular paneling. It's just like how you put shingles on a house. We just overlapped the boards one over another. If the house was there, I'd take you right there and show it. It was still there last year. The hurricane took it away. So, so much for that place. Bay house always—

NS: Have you thought about building another one?

LK: You're not allowed to.

NS: They don't let you replace them?

LK: Nope, not at all. It's totally off limits now. Otherwise, I bet you there'd be condos and everything out there. It would be nice. If I could have another house, I would. I'd love to. I'd put it in the back of the bay, where you can only get there at high tide or something like that, just so you don't have the basic traffic running through it. It's nice and quiet. It'd get buggy, but that's why I had screens for every window, stuff like that.

NS: Can you go out there though, because you know pretty much the people over there?

LK: Well, I know people have houses, but I don't go to them. Now, I usually go over at beach house out on Fire Island or something like that. My little brother has a condo on Fire Island now, so I go there a lot. That's nice, because I spend the weekends down on the beach and whatnot. I'm always around the water. When I go to the Hampton Bays, I have an apartment there. So, I stay there. It's nice. I'm always around the water. I see what's going on all up in the island more or less too. So, it's different. It takes me away from here. So, you see different things.

NS: One of the things that intrigued me though is the fact that you knew everybody. You knew exactly whose house—

LK: Well, you do. You know a lot of people and stuff like that, but you don't really hang out with them. But you'll see them in a restaurant or a bar and say, "Hello, how are you doing?" Stuff like that. It's just like a common thing. You grow up in the neighborhood, you know everybody gets around—or anybody has anything to do with the water, anyway. You know this guy from this boat yard and this guy from that boat yard. Well, this guy keeps his boat at that guy's boat yard, stuff like that. You run into people. You just wind up meeting more people here and there.

NS: You say there is a certain loyalty among the fishermen.

LK: Yes. So, I guess that's sort of like honor among thieves. [laughter] There isn't any. If there's some kind of big thing going on with the village or something, everybody will jump in on the

bandwagon like that. But as in general, everybody does their own thing. You try to pretty much maintain yourself to your own thing, because nobody really wants to tell you what they're doing. I have good friends that will tell me what they're really doing, but only at certain times. A lot of guys won't give you the time of day also. So, you treat them just like they treat you. That's what I do. If they're nice to me, then I'm nice to them. A lot of them, I don't care about anyway. But a lot of nice people—

NS: Does that stop out at the bay houses where everyone is always there for each other?

LK: No, but guys will come down and give you a hand if you need one. With my house, a lot of my friends—I'd say, "I'm having a work weekend." You know what I mean? "Bring some hammers with you, light tools," stuff like that. "If you got any spare lumber around, bring it out." Somebody would always come by or somebody would be redecorating their house and said, "Well, I got a couch," or something like that, "Well, bring it on out. Bring it down to the dock and we'll bring it out," stuff like that. [RECORDING PAUSED]

LK: A few of them, yes. I have to ask different friends, because different friends have different pictures and stuff like that. A lot of them, the pictures that they have—I don't even know what they have. But I can ask around a little bit. I have a bunch myself somewhere.

NS: How did you get out there? I mean, the only way to get out there was by boat?

LK: Yes, strictly by boat. I had a friend of mine had one of those seaplane—ultralight planes that goes buzzing in and out. We liked to (die?). We didn't know anybody with one of them. It'd come sailing on in and sail right around the house and sail twenty foot over the dock and yelling at everybody. We were like, "Look who it is." Then it'd come splashing down in front of the house. So, that's a little extraordinary. In the summertime, everybody's got their work boats. But then again, everybody's always got little toys too. Now, a lot of people have jet skis and whatnot. Back then, I had a race boat. A friend of mine had a little race boat. He had a house on the other side of the bank. We used to run back and forth all night long from house to house. Everybody would be cocktailing at my house, and "Let's go over and visit Frankie." We'd all steam on down to his house. We'd be up there in fifteen or twenty minutes and stay there for a couple hours. "Let's go to Jimbo's house." His house is on the other side of the bay, too. Then they head to (Carson's?) who's down on one side. There's lots of people that had houses. Especially on weekends, there's a lot of people around. So, he would be going by, and everybody, "Hey, let's go see him." So, we'd just stop to dock, and all of a sudden, everybody walks right on in. You looked and a big barrage of people coming aboard.

NS: Were there ever any conflicts between families, different kinds of families?

LK: No, unless there were some personal things. But nothing that I can recall.

NS: No age-old feuds I should know about?

LK: No, not that I know. Do you know of any age-old feuds?

DK: No.

LK: I've never heard of nothing like that.

NS: Were most of the people that had bay houses—were they baymen or were they also ocean people?

LK: Some of them were, some. People were out in the boats all the time and figured well, when they were made available leases, I guess they decided to do something with them. Not everybody had them and not everybody wanted them. Everybody was like, "What, am I going to build a house out in the middle of the sticks—on sticks out in the middle of the marsh?" The weather takes a toll on stuff out there tremendously. The wood rots left and—

NS: Really?

LK: Oh, sure. We used to replace our dock all the time. Every time we were out there, we were fixing one piece or another. Or painting something. I always kept logs up pretty well. Logs always looked pretty good, right?

DK: Oh, yes.

LK: It's a big house. I mean, I had rugs and everything in my house. [laughter] But it didn't have like a full carpet. So, what I had was throw rugs all over the place.

NS: Wayne Carmen said that his house was a big fancy place. He got very upset when I called it a bay shack. I think he yelled at me.

LK: A house, a shack, it's all the same thing out there. It's just some kind of structure on top of the Meadows. My house wasn't a shack either, but it's still—a lot of people called them shanties. Everybody's got a different pronunciation, that's all. Some people just like to be a little bit—

NS: Is there ever some guy who designed a shack or a house and spent a lot of money on it, or is it all pretty much, if you want, you build your own house?

LK: Yes, everybody just did their own thing with them. You faced them different ways. A lot of guys didn't realize—if you were going to build a house, I wouldn't want a house that would have a southerly exposure for the sunlight and stuff like that. A lot of people don't realize things like that. So, you can see, back then, I don't think a lot of people realized that either. That's why it could be in the middle of the winter, and when you were sitting on my porch in my bay house, it was seventy-five, eighty degrees inside the porch. It was like a big sunroom with all the winters we had. But at night, it was very cold, too, because there was cracks in the floors and stuff like that from the boards, because they swell and contract.

NS: When people first came to New England back in the eighteenth century, they always built their houses with a southern exposure.

LK: Right, for just that reason, just for the natural heat from the sun.

NS: Were all the houses frame houses?

LK: Yes, they were all basically a frame house. Then maybe they'll put a little addition on one side of it next to it, and a couple years later, they might add another room to that. A lot of them did stuff like that. They'd build a deck and then put a structure on top of it.

NS: I would imagine that was also the first time that, when you were growing up, you saw an outhouse, because the houses around here all had bathrooms.

LK: Yes, that's true. Every bay house had an outhouse. More or less, it was just a toilet seat with a bucket under it or something. [laughter]

NS: Was it somebody's job to get rid of that stuff?

LK: Well, we used to say anybody who used it unloaded it.

NS: This is pretty disgusting, I know.

LK: Oh, yes. It gets to be like that sometimes. But everybody has to do a little bit to help too. So, all hands have to help.

NS: Another more personal thing. Was this kind of the place when you were growing up where you bring your girlfriend?

LK: Oh, yes. We used to do that stuff all the time. [laughter] We'd be out there with a couple of six packs or something like that. Now, see, my parents didn't own this house then. It was a friend of mine's that I used to go to school with it. His parents had it, and he had a bad accident. He never used it during the winter. But even when he had his accident, he wasn't as agile as he had used to be. He had screwed up his legs and everything. So, you got to be pretty agile out there if you get stuck in the mud or something like that and run aground. You need to get out and push—

NS: Really? You would get stuck in the mud out there?

LK: Sure. How many times did we—

DK: Oh, it happens all the time

LK: —go to cross the creek and sink right up to your waist in mud or something? I've had to throw my gun on the bank and crawl through the mud to get out because you would sink. You would sink right up to here. I lost my boots in the mud, all kinds of stuff.

NS: Ever lost a boat in the mud?

LK: No. Well, it won't sink. A boat won't sink in the mud. But I've had like my motor get stuck

in the mud. I come out in the morning, and I see my boat had sunk because the motor's stuck in the mud and the water just came right in and held the back of it under. Remember my little green boat, right?

DK: Yes.

LK: My little green race boat I had; this one was fast. It's like a part-time pirate boat for clamming and whatnot—clamming illegally like at night and stuff. [laughter] We used to do all kinds of stuff. This was all years ago. I mean, it's still done today, but not like it was.

NS: Were these soft clams you would go after?

LK: No, we got hard clams, little necks and cherries and chowders, everything.

NS: It's different than on one of these boats.

LK: Oh, yes. Well, this is just like a [inaudible] garvey or something. Mine was just more or less for a chase boat or something like that. If Conservation would come, I'd just be sitting there waiting while everybody was clamming. I would take off and draw the attention away from everybody else, and they would all cut away a different one. That's really all I managed to do.

NS: You had to figure out ways not to draw attention to you.

LK: Now, they would say, "You didn't have your lights on" and this and that. I'd say, "Oh, yes. Well, I have them. I just didn't have them on." You go to court and say, "Well, I forgot to put them on." So, they couldn't give you one for inoperable equipment or anything like that. You just play their little games.

NS: I did not know you used to go digging for clams. I thought you just used your boat. How did you learn to do that kind of stuff?

LK: I just grew up around it. You wanted to make a couple dollars, that's what you had to do. You had to work to make a buck, you know?

NS: Is it very hard to learn?

LK: No, rather easy. It's just a matter of time. Just putting time in. You can't be afraid to get wet and dirty. That's all. That's how this whole business is. Everything is wet and dirty. [laughter] If you don't want to be wet and dirty, forget it. No matter how much you don't want to, even though you can wear all kinds of equipment, rain gear and stuff, you're still going to get dirty. Not as much, but it helps keep a little stain off.

NS: Had you ever thought about like working inside in an office?

LK: I did. I worked for a book company for a long time. I did that for about a year. I said, "Man, I'm just not happy here. I can't do this." My mind wasn't into it. My heart wasn't into it, nothing.

So, I was just like, “I’m out of here.” I had a good job, too. I was a chauffeur for a book company, for their owner. I did rather well working for him, but I just didn’t like it. It wasn’t me. I had to be outside. I tried all kinds of different jobs over the years, but I wind up always coming back to this. Other things will pay good money for a while, and all of a sudden, they peter out, too.

NS: It seems like there are also some real special things about working out here.

LK: Yes, you’re your own person. It’s not like you’re going to sit there and punch a time clock. I just get up in the morning, and whatever time I want to go, I go. If I don’t want to go, I don’t go. It’s like somebody says, “Oh, I’m going to take the day off.” Yes, you don’t have to punch the clock today, huh? “Oh, but they’re going to give me a hard time if I take off. I can’t take an off day.” I don’t know. I couldn’t hack that. I tried it and it didn’t like it, so you live and learn.

NS: Would you say that there are some things that you have to really love in order to be in this business?

LK: You got to love the water. You got to have a good respect for it—very good respect for it. I like being around wildlife and stuff like that, too. That’s a big part of it. There’s not a day you can’t go out in a boat and not see something different. We got some real nice wildlife here. You have different birds and ducks. Bob will tell you, we used to go out in duck boats and sit out there with duck stools—I don’t even know if it wasn’t hunting season—and shoot them with a camera. [laughter] People would think would we were nuts.

NS: Really?

LK: Yes. People would think we were nuts. We got photographs like you couldn’t believe. You got to like the nature part of it. If you like nature, you’d love it. It’s just like being in the mountains. A guy grows up on a farm, and he goes to the city and doesn’t like it. “This isn’t the farm.”

NS: What do you think is probably the biggest problems you face in terms of this is what you love to do?

LK: The biggest problems that we face right now is pollution. Everybody says, “Yes, we’ll do this. We’ll do that about it.” Nobody really does enough. Then they tell us we can’t catch stuff because everybody else polluted it. Alright, we polluted a little bit too, I guess, to a degree. I mean, it’s everybody’s fault. Everybody’s doing it and everybody has to help clean it up. Every year, they close more area for you to work on. So, it limits you more and more. Jeez, by the way they’re going around here, I don’t doubt—by the year 2000, I don’t think there’ll probably be any commercial fishermen left. They’re dying off, and they’re chasing them out.

NS: How many are here in Baldwin? Are you guys it?

LK: No, we’re not the only ones. There’s a couple guys over the next creek and a lot of independents, little guys. But I guess in Baldwin, there’s probably twenty, twenty-five people,

something like that. Freeport's got probably, what, thirty or forty, I guess?

DK: Quite a few.

LK: There's a lot of people. You don't see them around. They don't make it known that they're around, but there's quite a few.

DK: A lot of small boats, gillnetters. Gillnetters, they don't need as much of an investment.

NS: They just have to buy that one net.

LK: Well, it all depends what you're going to go for, the seasons, and if you can use that one all year. It's a lot of different things like that. There's all kinds of different factors in this business. It's so susceptible to change, and you have to be able to change with the times and the seasons and everything else. So, that's a big part of it. It's how to get the heaviest haul, if you're getting all the equipment, and have everything there ready to go. We'll come out with this boat, and we'll change all the gear right over. Tomorrow, we'll go fish for something totally different. It's another few hours' work, but that's what you have to do sometimes. We've changed everything over in this thing about three times in three weeks, and we go for stuff every—we just get this thing shaken down and set up. So, it's a matter of trial and error with a lot of different things. A lot of things aren't working our way. Different things would break.

NS: I guess, for you, being away, you've got to relearn.

LK: Well, no. It's not about relearning or anything like that, but things change. There might be a few new wrecks, there might not be. Somebody might have hit a wreck, broke a piece of it off, and dropped it somewhere. I've done that myself. It happens to everybody somewhere along the line.

NS: What about these sportsmen fishermen? Are they hurting—

LK: Well, there's certain times when there's a lot of fishing, and they sell a lot of fish to the markets and restaurants, and it cuts the prices down on us. They're just making gas money. They can afford a five or six hundred-thousand-dollar boat, and they're worried about the thirty dollars for gas to run them...

NS: When I started, what were you pretty much catching? Just flounders?

LK: Some flounders and some whiting. Had a few squid. There's a lot of different things. You get a bunch of crabs and junk stuff, just crabs we caught.

NS: You ever catch an anchor?

LK: Oh, yes. One of the monster anchors, you mean?

NS: Yes.



LK: I've never caught any of the big ones. But I've caught little ones from small boats and stuff like that. A couple guys have caught them. I just haven't been so lucky yet. [laughter] I wouldn't want one anyway.

NS: Reason I asked is because some of the fishermen's houses...

LK: You see big anchors on the wall?

NS: Yes, and you ask them the story—

LK: I'd love to have one for my front lawn, but I hate to—there's so much trouble to get them. You have to just lay on them and try to pull them up without wrapping the boat and everything. They're big anchors. You got to usually lay on them and stuff like that.

NS: What other kinds of things would you put around your house, let people know you're a fisherman?

LK: Well, I don't know. I have a few sitting around my backyard—my whole decked-out yard where the pool is. I've got a bunch of lobster pots and lobster pot buoys. Well, I had lobster pot. I don't know where it went. I have an old channel marker.

NS: Is that pretty much most fishermen have something around the house?

LK: No, it's just decor. That's all we use it for. You find a buoy floating or something like that. My one friend (slops?) the boat out east one day. I said, "Wow, look at all these buoys." I said, "I need some of these." He's looking at me like, "For what?" For decoration in my backyard. He liked to die. He says, "All the stuff you got, and you need mine?" I said, "Yes. Well, these ones look crummy. They're all broken and worn out and stuff like that." That's why I need that look. Then I got signs, different signs that you happen to acquire here or there. I always pick up signs.

NS: Could I see your place sometime? I would like a picture of it.

LK: Well, see, I had a clam right there. I have some of the buoys hanging on the fence. Plus, I have like hanging pots all over the fences and stuff. It's not all set up right now, so we'll wait a while. I got to start putting flowers in this week and everything. So, then it looks good, because then you can see it all comes together nice. I have little pieces of net hanging around and stuff like that. Just decor.

NS: It seems like every fisherman I've talked to has something.

LK: Yes. It sort of grows on you, I guess.

NS: It's like a way of saying when you're on land of saying, "Well, this is my life."

LK: I have like a lot of natural sponges that I've caught down south. So, those will be in my yard

this year.

NS: Do you have a particular way you like to arrange things?

LK: No, just accumulate it. Be it where it may. I space things out, but you wind up with a lot of different things. I used to have some different shells. This one comes over and that one comes over. “Oh, I like this. Can I have this?” Sure, I can get another one. It happens all the time. There’s one coin that I found, I wanted to make a chain out of it—a neck chain or something like that. It was a big coin. It was like that, so it’s a little too big for a ring or an earring or something. [laughter] But it’s a coin from 1826.

NS: Wow.

LK: Silver coin, yes. Twenty-gram silver coin.

NS: Where did you get it?

LK: I found that in the ocean. I found a bomb shell.

NS: It came in with one of the nets?

LK: I found it in a clam shell. Bob found some too, right?

US: I found one.

LK: What year was yours?

US: I think it was 1880, I think.

LK: Yes, because mine’s 1826.

US: Really, ‘26?

LK: Yes. Supposedly, there was four years of coins.

US: It’s either 1830 or 1880. But most of them are 1880. That’s probably what it is.

LK: I might have one of the earlier ones.

US: I can’t be sure if it’s a thirty or an eighty.

LK: Probably a thirty. There’s four years. I have twenty-six, so it probably would be thirty. Supposedly they run for four consecutive years from twenty-six to thirty. At least that’s the history I got on them so far. But nobody really knows anything about this stuff—

US: I looked at it and I said, “Well, maybe it’s a thirty.” But then I couldn’t be sure.

LK: —it's just one piece. You don't know if it was the coin maybe that some sailor had in his pocket or if it was a shipwreck that might be full of change. You don't know unless you really go down and look. I don't know.

NS: Do you ever get any modern-day pirates asking if you found any wrecks?

LK: Oh, yes. We get people asking us for wreck numbers and stuff. I don't give them nothing. One of these days, maybe I'll go out there and look around. I'm not going to volunteer or [inaudible]. My luck, somebody will give them a wreck, and they'd go out there and find ten million in treasure. They'd be like, "Oh, yeah, we remember you, you jerk," something like that. I'll help people to a point, but I'm not giving them nothing. Nothing was ever given to me. I worked for what I got.

NS: You just get a lot of people who are just trying to get a free ride.

LK: Yes, we got lots of people like that. A guy buys a boat and thinks he bought the property that it sits on. They figure, "All right. You got wreck numbers. Why don't you give me a bunch?" I caught these things in a net. It cost me thousands of dollars over the years with stuff getting damaged and stuff like that. From hitting these things, that's how I found them. You got to go find them yourself too. You go buy some of these trucks and stuff.

NS: You ever get people, when you come in with your fish and stuff, asking if they can buy it, or do pretty much sell it?

LK: Well, we sell it to a lot of wholesalers, but we—

NS: Sell your fish to your set places.

LK: Well, we have a lot of customers, and we're always trying to find a few new ones. We can always deal with (Fulton Market?). That's been a place for years. But we try to move stuff around ourselves if we can, try to keep things going on in the neighborhood. But you don't realize how much of the economy you really do help, because not only are we making money off this product, but the guy in the restaurant's making money off the product. He's paying the guys that he buys different things off of. So, there's all little things running on down the line. It's one of those things where the economy does work. It's not that it's a big great amount of money into the area or anything like that, but this has been a regular old thing for years. We're not setting the world afire or anything like that, but we're existing. Some of us exist a little bit better than others at times. You have your up days and downs. You want to make more, you got to work a little more. That's all. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: The maritime traditions of Nassau County's South Shore stretches back to the 1600s, when Hempstead was first settled by English and Dutch groups. The Carman, Raynor, Ellison, and Gildersleeve families came to Seaford, Freeport, and Baldwin and other towns because there were abundant fish and other kinds of wildlife in the bays and ocean. Like all fishermen, they built boats, decoys, fishing rods, and other necessary tools. They also built houses on the bay. As

time passed on, parents taught their children valuable lessons on how to work the bay, how to handle any natural threat such as storms and hurricanes, and how to make the proper bayman's tools. These lessons have survived to the present day despite numerous changes in technology, settlement, and the environment. While the South Shore today is a densely populated suburb, the fishermen continue to practice various traditions of a time-honored profession. Garveys and gunning boats were the two most common traditional boat types built on the South Shore. While the garvey was in fact imported to Long Island from New Jersey, it was well suited to the shallow bay waters like other traditional boats. The garvey is used by fishermen, eel trappers, killie trappers, and other baymen. The gunning boat is only used in duck hunting. Occasionally, these boats were also used for recreation. The last traditional boat type on the South Shore is the Seaford or Verity skiff. Today, Al Grover of Freeport makes skiffs modeled after the Verity skiffs. Al Grover became famous by crossing the Atlantic Ocean in 1985 in one of his boats. The boat survived a major hurricane with hundred mile per hour winds. Grover broke the Guinness World Record for a transatlantic trip on the smallest outboard motorboat. In recent years, sport motorboats have overwhelmed the South Shore region. In Freeport Bay, there are over forty thousand boats docked. Miraculously, the garvey, gunning boat, and skiffs have survived. Yet boats are just one part of the maritime traditions. The bay house was and continues to play a major part of the fisherman's existence. The bay house was also a place where men could freely talk about the world situation, their business or their personal lives. The baymen also prepared lavish feasts. The bay has changed greatly since the 1700s when the first bay houses were built. Yet, there are still eel trappers, bait catchers, and duck hunters. While they are rare today, they continue to practice the traditions of past generations. Surprisingly, most of them are in their thirties and fifties. Here, we will examine three individuals from the Freeport Baldwin communities where the earliest fishermen settled. Like most baymen, Corey Weyant started fishing and working on the boats at an early age. After the eels are caught, they have to be cleaned and gutted just like fish. They are then soaked in brine—a combination of brown sugar, salt, and water. Aromatic fruitwoods and hardwoods are used to smoke eels and other fish. Unlike most conventional business owners, Corey sells mostly to friends and acquaintances. Corey is one of a group which prefers to fish, clam, or duck hunt for their living, because his family taught him and because he enjoys it so long as it pays him. Like most baymen, Corey knows how to do a variety of related activities so that he can work year-round. A more seasoned bayman is "Wink" Carman whose family roots stretch back to the 1700s in Baldwin. Today, Wink carves decoys which he uses for duck hunting. Wink also makes show decoys which he sells to stores or gives to friends. The Koch family in Baldwin, like the Carman family, has lived off the bay for several generations. Danny and Lenny Koch currently run the family business, the last commercial fishing boat in Baldwin Harbor. Danny, like most baymen, catches various things later used for bait—horseshoe crabs, killifish, and green crabs are used to catch eels, bigger fish, or more kinds of bait. Danny catches killies which are sold in bait stores to catch larger fish. While humor plays a part in many fishermen's lives, danger is by far the strongest common element which baymen and ocean men alike have to deal with. Storms and hurricanes have claimed many lives. Elwood Verity of Baldwin, Danny and Lenny Koch's uncle, was one such person. As fierce as the bay can get, the ocean is a far more dangerous place, especially for the men who work on the small draggers—boats which pull nets along the ocean floor. Sudden storms and mechanical failures can mean death for a captain and his crew. On small draggers only two or three people go out. Tony Sougstad, captain of the *E.T.*, was once on the *David Bryant* when it sprung a leak at George's Banks in Rhode Island. A severe storm then hit the

area, as Tony tells the story. Working on a dragger requires a wide variety of mechanical skills such as engine repair, installing equipment, and mending the nets. Most dragger fishermen learn these skills from older, experienced captains such as Frank Cona, whose family ran draggers in Italy. They must also learn where the good fishing spots are—a never-ending and ever-changing process. Just as baymen learn to build their traps and boats, draggers learn to splice cables, operate winches which pull in the nets, and install and lower trawl doors. They must also sort out the fish caught from all the other types of fish which are returned to the ocean. Because dragger fishermen must learn the same lessons, there is a common bond among them. Yet, each must earn the respect of the others. As we have seen, there are many kinds of maritime traditions. From building garveys and skiffs, to clamming and eeling, to dealing with nature's threats, the maritime traditions are ever present on the South Shore area. Whether one is a bayman or a dragger, the traditions of past generations are passed down to today's small commercial fishermen. What unites all fishermen, however, is the love of nature and adventure. Yet, larger issues threaten the maritime traditions on the South Shore. As development increases along waterfront communities and new residents buy high-speed motorboats, the bays have become extremely dangerous. As sports fishermen sell their catch to the markets, the price of fish drops for the commercial fishermen, thus decreasing their yearly income. Finally, the number of fish is declining so that what used to be caught in an hour now takes a morning or an afternoon. All of these factors jeopardize the traditional baymen and draggers' way of life. Despite these problems, they continue to work the bay and the ocean. [RECORDING PAUSED] After the eels are caught, they have to be cleaned and gutted, just like fish. They are then soaked in brine—a combination of brown sugar, salt, and water. Aromatic fruitwoods and hardwoods are used to smoke eels and other fish. Yet larger issues threaten the maritime traditions on the South Shore. As development increases along waterfront communities and new residents buy high-speed motorboats, the bays have become extremely dangerous. As sports fishermen sell their catch to the markets, the price of fish drops for the commercial fishermen, thus decreasing their yearly income. Finally, the number of fish is declining so that what used to be caught in an hour now takes a morning or an afternoon. All of these factors jeopardize the traditional baymen and draggers' way of life. Despite these problems, they continue to work the bay and the ocean. [RECORDING PAUSED]

US: The skiffs were things you had to respect as a kid, because people [inaudible]. [RECORDING PAUSED] You had to respect the boat because it was capable. To fish with no radios, no electronics, with no depth finders [inaudible] they always managed to come home and [inaudible]. It's sort of a way of life. It still exists some places, but not too much. It was an independent way of making a living. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: How many traps do you put out?

US: I put out about twenty-four to thirty every time I would set up. I can set them up three times in a day.

NS: Do you make your own traps?

US: Yes [inaudible]

NS: The way you make them, is that pretty much the way your grandfather made them?

US: [inaudible]

NS: What other kinds of things do you catch in the bay?

US: [inaudible] clams. I catch crabs. [inaudible] Probably some crabs, eels.

NS: Are these blue crabs?

US: There's a lot of eels.

US: These crabs are blue crab [inaudible] [RECORDING PAUSED] in the bay business and ocean fishing business. There are a few generations [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: Where do you get your horseshoe crabs from?

US: I catch them on my dragger. I just pick them up out in the bay [inaudible] making them fall out.

NS: How many traps do you put out?

US: I put out about twenty-four to thirty every time I would set up. I can set them up three times in a day.

NS: Do you make your own traps?

US: Yes. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: The way you make them, is that pretty much the way your grandfather made them?

US: Yes. [inaudible] all the commercial guys [inaudible] I don't. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: Did you build that boat that we were on?

US: Yes, I built a bunch of them.

NS: How old were you when you first made your own boat?

US: I was only about sixteen or seventeen. There was a bunch of them around here, looked just like that. That one that we passed, see that black one going in there? I made that one there. The other one down the creek was (Joey Heard?), I made that one. Another one over on Freeport that looks like (Mark's?) with a little higher bow—I mean, I built about a half a dozen of them.

NS: Wow, that's a lot of boats.

US: Not really.

NS: Are they all garveys?

US: Yes, all twenty-footers, sixteen-footers, seventeen-footers, and nineteen-footers, one every size. This is a little sixteen-footer.

NS: I mean, it seems like everyone I've met has built a garvey.

US: Yes, you can build garveys, and then you can build nice garveys.

NS: What's the difference?

US: Well, the lines on them, the way drive and they ride.

NS: Is it pretty much if there's just a little curve, is that considered a good garvey?

US: It's a lot of curves, more than anything.

NS: How come?

US: Because they ride higher. They ride drier. They carry more clams. They're not wet. They don't bounce when they go across the water. They can drive nice and straight.

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

Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 06/26/2024