Nancy Solomon: Mike Van Essendelft. This is February 4th, 2004. This is tape one, side one. First, Mike, where were you born?

Mike Van Essendelft: In West Sayville. That's just a mile down here. That was a Dutch community. My grandfather was the first settler in West Sayville. He came from Holland and somebody in New York put him on a train and he came to the end of the island right here in Oakdale. He had to walk from Ronkonkoma because that's where the railroad ended at that time. Somebody picked him up on the way on an oxcart and brought him here. He lived here with somebody for a little while. Then he went to West Sayville. He bought property from Sam Greene in West Sayville who had a grocery store, and that's all. So, he bought a piece of land and he built the first house in West Sayville on Atlantic Avenue. That's him right there and my grandmother.

NS: So, your grandfather was William Tucker?

MVE: That's right. The name was different in Holland, but they changed it because it sounded like a dirty work here, so they changed it to Tucker.

Helen Van Essendelft: [laughter]

Male Speaker: [I could never tell a Tucks, too?]. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] What did he do for a living? What did he do when he got here?

MVE: Everybody in West Sayville had deep gardens. They grew groceries and canned them for the winter. They went clamming and oystering in the summer,

almost everybody. When I was maybe 20 years old, there were 700 people in town. I knew every one of them, even the kids. Because we were a really small community and a lot of people only spoke Dutch. My parents never would except when we couldn't hear.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: So that's their story.

NS: Do you remember your grandparents?

MVE: I have no parents at all. Helen doesn't either.

NS: Do you remember them?

MVE: Oh, yes. My parents. I lived with my parents.

NS: What about your grandfather? Do you remember him?

MVE: No, I didn't. I only knew Van Essendelft grandfather. I was only a couple of years when he died, when I was maybe eight or ten years old, something like that.

NS: When were your parents born?

MVE: My father was born in Holland. My mother was the daughter of the Tuckers. Her name was Nell E. Tucker. Everybody in town used to say, "Aunt

not," and they knew who that was. Nell E. – Nell (Nellie) E. Tucker. My father's name was Jacobus Van Essendelft. He came from Holland much later.

NS: How did he come to West Sayville?

MVE: Because there were a lot of Dutchmen there. I'll tell you a funny story. Sam Greene had that grocery store. He financed a lot of these Dutch people because he knew their credit was good. They always paid their bill. That's one thing about a Dutchman. So, he would finance. Then when they got here, he'd sell them land. [laughter] He also had – they had to come to him for groceries. So, he was pretty smart.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: That was Samuel P. Greene, G-R-E-E-N-E. He owned about all of West Sayville. He did [all that?] because he got a grant from the Queen of England, or somebody just before him did, that revolved down to him.

NS: Where the store was, is it still standing, the building?

MVE: Who?

NS: Is the building of Sam Greene's store, is that still there?

MVE: No. That's gone. That was on the corner of Cherry Street and Montauk Highway across from the firehouse. There were very few houses in West Sayville at that time. They were usually small because Sam Greene, of course, he only

gave them so much money to start them in.

NS: You said that when newcomers landed, were they coming by boat or by train?

MVE: They came into New York by boat. Then people put them on the train and it went to Ronkonkoma. That was the end of the line. The neighbors and other relatives took them in for a while until they got houses.

NS: Who were some of the families? Who were some of your parents' friends at that time?

MVE: The Dutch names were Beebe, Van Wyen, Van Popering. In a little while I could think of more of them.

NS: Where did people live? What part of town were they living in?

MVE: Right in the center of town. As more people came, they bought lots a little further away.

NS: Were they going towards the water or away from the water?

MVE: Oh, my grandfather's house was right near the water. He had to go through Bluepoints' land through the woods to get to his boat. That's where most of them were. But as they got larger families, a lot of them didn't want to go clamming. I was one of them. Of course, I was a grandchild. But a lot of us didn't like that kind of work. Donald [Bevelander?] was a very good clammer.

NS: What kind of boat did he have?

MVE: Small boats.

NS: Like dories.

MVE: Boats you wouldn't go across the river on.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: In 1911, my father was foreman of Jake Ockers' oyster houses that were off there at LaSalle Academy.

NS: How many oyster houses were there?

MVE: I have to tell you, the newspaper a few years ago, or maybe 20 years ago, said that Jake Ockers had to move his oyster houses and the other people from here because they forgot to pay their lease.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: My mother said, "No way. Jake Ockers never forgot anything when it was about money." However, my mother said they were squatters. My father quit Jake Ockers' oyster house when they were here in 1911 or 12, or something. They moved to West Sayville. There was nothing but beach at the end of Atlantic Avenue. So, now let's see.

NS: About how many oyster houses were there?

MVE: There were about eight. If you want the names, I can give you. Rudolph, Vanderborghs or Vanderberg, as we said, Van Wyen, Beebe, and Fred Ockers. That was Jake Ockers' brother.

NS: So, they each had a building?

MVE: Yes. Each had a small building. There was a road in back of it. If you go down there, you'll see a road in the back of it. They had sheds on the other side of that road about the land you're talking about where they kept their dredges and things like that, equipment. Then came Atlantic Avenue down there. Then my mother used to swim there before Jake Ockers came. So, Jake Ockers moved and all the other ones moved. Then it was Rudolph, you had Vanderborgh, Beebe, Van Wyen, and Fred Ockers. Then across the street was Bluepoints Company, Jake Ockers. Well, there were two or three people that were oyster people too, and Jake Ockers converged them into one firm and he was the boss. Now he built Fred Ockers. Now over there, there was another Van Wyen on that side of the highway, Beebe, and…

NS: Before he brought everyone together, did each…

MVE: What does that name say there?

NS: [Bos Brewer?].

MVE: Oh, [Bos Brewer?], he had another oyster house there. They were all small.

NS: Did any of them employ somebody in the oyster house? What happened in the oyster house?

MVE: Oh, yes. In the wintertime, you clammed and did oystering. But in the winter, you couldn't. So, they came and worked for the Bluepoints Company and all these places. I worked for a couple of them.

NS: What did you do?

MVE: I started in the sales department. Then I got to be sales manager. Because the fellow that was manager, he bought a business in New York on Wall Street. That was [Bob Schotts?]. Then they gave me his job. So, I was sales manager and I went as far west as Kansas City and St. Louis and Montreal and like that, selling. [Hollywood?] sometimes.

NS: We're going to come back to that. What I wanted to start with is the oyster houses. What actually happened in the oyster houses? What was the process and the product?

MVE: People dredged clams and oysters, or tonged clams and dredged oysters and brought them in. Bluepoints owned…

NS: So, they sold to these different oyster houses?

MVE: Yes.

NS: Is that what they did? So, they were independent?

MVE: They wouldn't always sell them. Bluepoints had a lease on the whole Great South Bay. So, they had to bring oysters into them. So, we paid them for the oysters. It wasn't that they could go out there and work on their own. They had to have our permission to catch oysters. Of course, we had big oyster farms too.

NS: Was it always that way?

MVE: Yes. The oysters come in clumps like this. So, you have to break them apart. So, they bring them in the shop, break them apart, make singles of them, put them back out on the bay. The next summer maybe, or the next fall, you take them up and bring them in the shop and process them and sell them.

NS: What was the processing then?

MVE: Sometimes you opened them.

NS: The shuckers? Who opened them? [laughter]

MVE: That was the local people. That was a job that the local people did. You did a lot of jobs in places like that.

NS: About how many people worked just shucking the oysters or the clams?

MVE: We had some that would just shuck oysters. We had maybe twenty people that shucked oysters.

NS: Were they men? Were they women? Young?

MVE: Oh, they were all men. It's a rough job.

NS: The method, right? [laughter] I actually shucked oysters three summers.

HVE: You did?

NS: Up in Cape Cod at Wellfleet. That was one of my jobs. I worked at a restaurant and I'd go out during low tide, get the oysters, and then I had to shuck them. I was a good shucker.

HVE: Good. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

MS: Women can do this too.

HVE: Yes.

NS: So, women can do this too.

HVE: Right.

MVE: So, you have to crack.

NS: I think this is what they showed us. [laughter] This looks very familiar. Oh, this is great.

MVE: That's the one thing I saved from her. [laughter] I made copies of this. People take them away and never give them back.

NS: Next week, I'm going to come with my camera, and I'll take a picture of it.

MVE: Well, I can get copies made.

MS: I can copy anything you need.

NS: If you could copy that, that would be great.

MS: Not a problem.

NS: Thank you. There were about 20 men who were doing nothing but shucking oysters. Then what happened to the shucked oysters?

MVE: In the winter, they did nothing but shuck oysters and the other men culled oysters. That's separated them and put them in barrels and battened down covers on the barrels and we shipped them out. The shells went out on the heap on the outside of the building. We had two heaps, one larger, taller than the buildings.

HVE: [laughter] [It's not that short?].

MVE: That's tall. You had so many shells, you put some back in the bay in the

springtime to catch spat. That's young seed oysters. They float through the water and stick on. But there were so many that people bought them or took them and spread them on sand roads. Like this road here was a sand road.

NS: Like the driveways, yes.

MVE: So, you put them on it, and then the cars ran over them. There weren't many cars, but over the years, they crushed them so that they were small pieces. Now when there's small pieces, when it rains, the rain can drain through into the sand below, and you have a nice strong road. Anywhere from Babylon to Patchogue, you'll see roads that are tarred, but there's these broken shells underneath them.

NS: Underneath. [laughter]

MVE: People never kept their chickens in a chicken yard in those days. You just let them go. They went and they pecked on these broken oyster shells. That's how today you get eggs and the shells are very thin, because there are no more oyster shells. But in the old days, you had really heavy shells. So, I have oysters every day or clam – eggs every day.

NS: [laughter]

MS: That's for sure.

MVE: [laughter] It annoys me because as you're trying to put the spoon in to take them out, the shells crumble, and it isn't easy. It's not easy.

NS: So, there were 20 men who were shucking the oysters. What happened to the oysters? You told me what happened to the shells.

MVE: Oh, they were all brought to one room. They were washed in fresh water and put in cans. The cans were sold mostly to New York City. My grandfather here, when they were here, he drove a team of horses, and he brought the cans of oysters from there to the railroad here. He waved and the conductor would stop the train. They would put these barrels or cans on the train and go to New York, Fulton Market.

NS: Did any oysters stick around here? Were they sold to restaurants around here?

MVE: Were they what?

NS: Were there any restaurants here that bought the oysters?

MVE: Oh, yes. They weren't many. You just wouldn't use that many oysters. I was telling Helen today, I learned something. When I started there, we –

NS: How old were you when you started working there?

MVE: Oh, about 28, something like that.

NS: When were you born?

MVE: Because I worked in New York before that selling handmade bottles like this.

NS: Oh, nice. When were you born?

MVE: 1908. April 16th, 1908.

NS: So, this was in the 20s when you started working there?

MVE: I had a secretary that everybody in the United States loved. They wouldn't call me when they wanted a [inaudible], they'd call her.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: I was really fortunate. That was Sophie Long. She lived in Bayport. Nice girl.

NS: So, what was your first job there, at Bluepoints?

MVE: Oh, let's see. I was working as a waiter. I lost my job in New York. Well, that's a different story. I lost my job in New York, and I came out of here. Remmer of The Snapper Inn – that's a restaurant down here. Henry Remmer asked me if I wanted to work for him. So, I did. I worked nights and Saturdays. So, that was really nice. I had all week off, and I made very good money.

NS: What did you do for him?

MVE: I waited on tables.

HVE: He made good money in – not at the tables but – I'm sorry. I shouldn't have interrupted.

NS: No, no, no. Tell us.

MVE: No, go ahead.

HVE: No.

MS: Do you remember?

HVE: Yes. He went from one thing to another. He worked at Snapper Inn, and he made money doing that. But when he wasn't at Snapper Inn, he would work at Bluepoints.

MVE: Paul Mercer would come there every Saturday night with his wife. He said, "Mike, do you want to work for me?" So, I was glad to have a job during the week and weekends, both. So, I said, "Sure." So, I started that the next day on Monday, and $22 a week.

NS: Wow. [laughter]

MVE: Yes. That was big money.

MS: Big money it must be. [laughter]

NS: So, you were working at the Snapper Inn at night and at Bluepoints during the day?

MVE: That's right.

NS: At Bluepoints, what was your first job?

MVE: [laughter] I was [Bob Schotts?], that was the boss, I was, would say secretary, secondhand man. I did the work. But he wanted to be a big shot. So, he went to New York and got on Wall Street, and he died soon after that. And then they made me – Paul Mercer made me the boss and he raised me to $35. Would you look at that?

NS: What did you have to do?

HVE: [laughter]

NS: What were some of your job duties? [laughter]

MVE: Oh, about everything. I went through the plant to see that they didn't waste the oysters or were careless in opening oysters and culling them. I saw to it that they were shipped correctly and packed rightly. Then I got to be the sales manager. I went as far west as St. Louis and Kansas City. I told you Chicago, Cleveland, Louisville.

NS: How did all of that come to be? That they had all of these customers all over

the country? Who did that? [laughter]

MVE: Well, people wanted oysters all over the country. So, they went to different purveyors in every town, a fish market, for instance –

NS: So, somebody from Bluepoints went around to all the fish markets?

MVE: Yes, went around to fish markets.

NS: Do you know who that was? Do you know who was the first person to start selling?

MVE: Oh, no. That was before me.

NS: I know. But do you know who it was?

MVE: No.

NS: There was no legend? The first…

MVE: No. Oh, [Bob Schotts?] did that before me. But not very long. They built their business up awful fast when Paul Mercer took it over.

NS: Who founded Bluepoints? Whose idea was it?

MVE: Jake Ockers. Actually, I lived up here in the hill.

NS: Did you ever meet him?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: What was he like? [laughter]

MVE: That's another funny story. He died in 1918. I was ten, I think, then. I heard about, "Jake Ockers, the oyster king." I wanted to see the oyster king. So, when he died, they had his funeral in the Methodist Church in Sayville. My mother took me. I went up and I sneaked a look in the coffin because I wanted to see that guy with a crown, the oyster king. Of course, it wasn't there. [laughter] But that's how unsmart we were in those days.

NS: [laughter] Did you hear any stories about him?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: What're some of those stories that you heard?

MVE: I'll tell you a very funny one. Jake lived here, and that was a time when people got cars for the first time. In the '15, '20, like that, only a couple of people had them. So, he drove from here to West Sayville every morning. The way things were then we had a big shop on that north side of the property. He and a couple of men would open the doors and he'd come down Atlantic Avenue with his car. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

MS: I've heard this one. [laughter]

MVE: They would open the car doors. So, Jake drives in. Before that, he always had horses. So, he says, "Halt." The car didn't halt, it went right on through the back.

NS: Oh, no. [laughter]

MVE: Yes. They left it that way for many years. I saw the – He had a hole in there across the cottage.

NS: [laughter] That's funny. What other stories did you hear about him?

MVE: There were so many.

NS: Did you ever hear any stories about him going out on the bay?

MVE: Oh, no. He was a boss. He owned the place.

NS: So, he was never a bayman?

MVE: No. He went out on that car, that's as far as he got.

NS: [laughter]

HVE: We knew his daughter who was very delightful. Lovely person.

MVE: Yes. So, I learned something. We washed the oysters and put them in cans. I'd get – my secretary, Sophie, would get messages from people. They would call and they would say how nice our oysters were, how delightful they looked. So, I went downstairs to find out. Well, we had one man who was [Andrew Stile?]. He was my age. I noticed that he swept the oysters into the can and was ready to put a cap on. He always picked one or two perfect oysters and put them on the top. So, when you open the can, here's a beautiful oyster and the rest are all a jumble.

NS: Right. [laughter]

MVE: So, after that, the rest of the time I was in business, I saw that our man that packed them always did that. Always. It paid off. They weren't different oysters or anything. They just looked better because of those nice oysters here on top on the can. So, then I was with them about four or five years. We got married and he said, "Tomorrow, you're going to Rhode Island, East Providence. We have a plant there."

NS: How many plants did Bluepoints have? How many plants were there?

MVE: About four.

NS: Where were they?

MVE: One was in East Providence. Our oysters were between two islands in a river, Patience and Prudence. Because there were a lot of people in New England

that talked that way. Patience and Prudence.

NS: What river was it on? Do you remember?

MVE: We just had the oysters there. We left them there until they were ready to market.

NS: So, there wasn't a plant there?

MVE: No. The tide would run through there very sharp, very strong. So, it made the oysters very fat. So, we were there maybe two years, was it, poochie?

HVE: What? In Cambridge?

MVE: No.

NS: East Providence?

MVE: In East Providence.

HVE: Oh, East Providence, yes.

MVE: Then [Lois Brooks?] was the secretary [there?]. Sophie came to New England to be with us.

HVE: She'd visit us.

MVE: So, they went up into New Hampshire and like that and on the way back. Then we came down here for a vacation. As I walked in the office, the boss says, "Come in here." It was Paul Mercer. So, he says, "Today, you're on your way to Cambridge, Maryland." I said, "What?" "Yes." So, we had this house and everything. We rented it. So, we went down to Cambridge, Maryland and stayed there until the end of the war. Then the next year, or year or two, they sent us to Millville, New Jersey. That's near Port Norris.

NS: Yes, I know Millville actually.

MVE: Oh, you do?

NS: Yes. The glassworks that was there.

MVE: Well, that's the company I worked for, for eight years. So, I have a lot of little bottles that people want. [laughter]

NS: I bet. [laughter]

MVE: Can you see the bottom of this?

NS: So, there were the four places –

MVE: This was handblown. They had to break that off from the rod. This is seamless. As a man blew it, they turned it and there's no seam on here. So, I have quite a few things like that.

NS: We'll talk about that later.

MVE: [laughter]

NS: So, there were the four places. There was the one in Cambridge, Maryland. The one here in West Sayville, the one in East Providence.

MVE: Millville.

NS: The one in Millville.

MVE: If you were in Millville, you knew the Wheaton people?

NS: Yes, sure.

MVE: Well, I worked for them.

NS: I thought you were working for Bluepoints.

MVE: No, it had nothing to do with Bluepoints.

NS: But what were you doing in Millville? I thought you were working for Bluepoints.

MVE: Frank Wheaton's son wanted to be in the business. He was annoying to them down there. You know the business. So, they sent him to New York. They had enough salesman. They had the president's brother, [Ed Hugathee?]. Then I

was down in Maryland with some friends, and Frank Wheaton told me to come into the office. So, we sat there and he says, "Mike, I'd like you to sell more. Here's a nice order we just got yesterday." So, he says, "Look." I said, "Yes, that's mine." He said, "[Ed Hugathee's?] name on it." Well, [Ed Hugathee?] was the boss. He insisted that he check over the orders to make sure there was no error, and he put his own name on the orders that I sold. I told Frank the man I sold, and his wife and where their office was and where they lived and everything. Frank didn't like it. So, he figured it was going to be maybe trouble with [Ed Hugathee?] because he was a big boy. So, the next year, his son wanted a job, so they put him in my job in New York, and I was out of a job. So, that's when I came here and worked for Snapper Inn.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: That's the way it went.

NS: So, did you ever go back to working for Bluepoints or not?

MVE: No. I just worked for Bluepoints for…

NS: How long did you end up working there for?

MVE: I think it was, I don't know, gee, 12 or 15 years. Why can't I remember?

MS: You've gotten old. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

HVE: [laughter]

MS: You've got to forget something.

NS: You mentioned that one of the things they did in the operations was to cull the oysters. How were they separating? What were they looking for? Big ones, small ones, the different kind?

MVE: No. It was all one size. Whether they were large or small, they were all washed together and just swept into gallon cans, half gallon cans and some we froze. That was Birds Eye.

NS: What do you mean?

MVE: The name Birds Eye doesn't mean anything to you?

NS: Yes, it does. But I don't know what you are getting at.

MVE: Well, we froze oysters for Birds Eye because General Foods by that time bought the business from my boss, Paul Mercer.

NS: What did Birds Eye and General Foods do with them? Did they have all the same operations?

MVE: Yes. Birds Eye was a Kraft's name for it.

HVE: [inaudible] didn't like it.

NS: But did they keep everything pretty much the same?

MVE: Yes. We froze some, we canned some, and we sold oysters in the shell and mostly in New York. But I had trucks that would sometimes take oysters to Buffalo and south.

NS: How many people worked harvesting the oysters in the water at the different places?

MVE: Oh, that's hard to answer.

NS: What about, if you had to take a guess?

MVE: That's hard to tell, because they worked for all these other companies, a lot of them. Rudolph, Vanderborghs, Van Wyen, Beebe, oh, I'd say, and some in Bay Shore. There was an outfit in Bay Shore. I'd say maybe 1,000, maybe more than that.

NS: Wow. That's a lot of people. That was just right here on Long Island?

MVE: Yes. That was right in the bay here. From here to the beach.

NS: What about the other plants up around Connecticut and down in Maryland? About how many harvesters?

MVE: Oh, they were all…

HVE: Different companies.

MVE: Yes. But they were separate people and they caught clams and oysters, mostly oysters, and brought them to us. There were a couple other oyster houses there that did nothing but open oysters, and they sold them to me. I think we only added ten cents a gallon to it. It was five cents a gallon for a can and the operation and everything. It was a very tight job.

NS: Yes. When did they start getting into the clamming? When did Bluepoints start to do that?

MVE: Their clammers brought them in and there was so much a bushel or so much.

NS: Was that always part of the operations, that there were clammers and they were processing that?

MVE: Yes. There've always been clammers since my grandfather worked as a clammer.

NS: So, Bluepoints has always sold clams as well?

MVE: Yes, clams and oysters.

NS: I wasn't sure if it's changed.

MVE: It was mostly oysters. When I got into it, we got in the clam business more.

NS: How come?

MVE: Well, it's just because I liked clams more than the other guys.

HVE: [laughter]

MVE: I don't know. I think the other guys before me, they thought it was a smarter way to say oysters [laughter] than clams. Clams seems kind of common. But there was good money in them.

NS: So, was there more planting? Were they planting clams in the bay or were they just harvesting whatever was there?

MVE: On the bay, there's a lot of shallow water that's sandy. There's lots of places that's mud. You can't put them where there's mud, because an oyster can't move to get out of the mud. So, it would smother and die. Clams have a little foot on them and they can wiggle their way out somehow.

NS: Yes, they can actually push.

MVE: But anytime we had a surplus of them and we couldn't sell at a certain time, we'd put them out there on the oyster lots or clam lots. You'd see in the bay, stakes here and there about a couple hundred yards apart in the corners. That's where we had the clams planted. So, we could send a boat out there with a dredge

and dredge them up quickly and bring them in when we needed them. But that was a private business. But we bought a lot of clams from other people. We let them use our property, but they had to bring the clams into us. They couldn't sell them to anybody else.

NS: About how many men were doing the clams? If you had to guess.

MVE: Oh, maybe 100 boats. They're small boats with clam tongs and they would bring them in every afternoon. Then we'd pay them, I think, once a week, if I remember right, for what they brought in.

NS: Roughly what time period are we talking about? About what year are we talking about?

MVE: When did we get married? '39, isn't it?

HVE: Yes. [laughter]

MS: I guess. [laughter]

NS: So, this could have been in the 40s?

MVE: Yes. I was still with them in the 50s. Because I remember the war ended, I think, it was in '51. We were in Cambridge, Maryland, and they had a parade there on Main Street. That's another thing that bothers me yet to this day, I tell you. We were walking down Main Street one day, Helen and I, when we first got there. A very old, colored man, barely could walk, was coming towards us. When

he got to us, he stepped off in the gutter and walked in the gutter. I couldn't stand that.

NS: Because of Jim Crow and the segregation. I know.

MVE: That's the way it was. There was another fool I did business with who had trucks that would take stuff all over the countryside. This was after I had quit Bluepoints. We went there for a visit. I was in his office and I saw George Washington Lewis, and he used to work for me cleaning these clams and packing them. So, I got out of his office, walked across the street, and shook hands with George. That guy never talked to me again because I talked to a colored man.

NS: Oh, boy. Things were terrible.

MVE: Well, that's the way it was. Maryland was halfway between. Some people looked on colored people all right and others didn't. To this day, it bothers me.

NS: Did any women ever work at Bluepoints that you remember?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: Besides the secretaries?

MVE: No, we had – One time Helen didn't have anything to do to, so she worked there for a while.

HVE: Yes, I did. [laughter]

MVE: They put shucked oysters in packages and froze them for Birds Eye. We had a freezer right there. They froze them right there. So, Helen worked for a little while.

HVE: Yes, for Birds Eye, really.

NS: What did you do? What was your job?

MVE: You just picked the oysters and put them in a square package or [inaudible] package.

HVE: I really don't remember that much. [laughter]

MS: You packaged for a while.

HVE: Right.

MS: After the war.

HVE: No.

NS: How many people were working packing the oysters and the clams and the boxes or in the cans?

MVE: For me, maybe 20 women at the most.

NS: So, it was a woman's job to pack everything?

MVE: Yes, the women did that.

NS: Were they the wives of some of the men that were catching and harvesting?

MVE: Yes. They were clammers' wives and sisters and local girls. They were all very nice.

NS: Who reported to you? Who were the other salesmen?

MVE: I was the boss. There wasn't anybody else.

NS: That was it?

MVE: Yes.

NS: So, that was your job?

MVE: Everywhere we went, I was the boss, and I took care of everything.

NS: Did you have to drive the truck?

MVE: No. I had a fellow there, Lee.

NS: Who did all the deliveries?

MVE: Lee [Sintclair?]. Remember, Lee?

HVE: Lee [Sinclair?]. [laughter] His name was [Sinclair?].

MVE: His name was [Sinclair?]. But when they got in, it was [Sintclair?]. For a long time, I called him Lee [Sintclair?] I didn't know until I had to spell his name for the payroll.

NS: I'm going to flip the tape. This is the end of side one.

MVE: Five.

HVE: We had around five.

MVE: Here were the first people.

NS: This is tape one, side two.

MVE: The first people who lived in Oakdale. They had a house only four houses away.

NS: Can we get back to talking about Bluepoints?

HVE: Right.

MVE: Okay.

NS: So, your job was to go to all of the restaurants and the fish markets and stuff to talk to the people?

MVE: Well, not restaurants. Only fish markets. But I stayed in the office mostly.

NS: Keep an eye on everything.

MVE: Once or twice a year, I would take a trip because my boss didn't like to spend money on trips.

NS: [laughter]

MS: Like all bosses.

NS: I have some pictures we just took of Bluepoints. One of the things I am trying to figure out is what happened in each of these buildings. [laughter] So, do you think you could tell me in that first picture on the page?

MVE: Yes. The office is up here and the workshop down here. This is where they opened the oysters. The boats came up here and put off the oysters and clams here. I can't see very well. But on the second floor was the boss's office and my office. General Foods owned it. They had a man, every once in a while, they had no job for him. They sent him out there and we had to find work for them.

NS: There is a building in between this big building and the back here. What happened in that building? Can you see where I am pointing about? It is like a one-story [flat] building that connects the two other buildings.

MVE: It was just a building. In there, we packed oysters in barrels. Then on the other side, we took them out to the railroad station. But along here, we shell oysters. In here, we opened oysters.

NS: So, you shuck the oysters in this building over here?

MVE: Yes.

NS: This is where you just put the other oysters. Were there other buildings that were part of these ones?

MVE: No.

NS: That was it? The main operations were right there?

MVE: That was the big operation, yes.

NS: Did the company have its own boats?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: What kind of boats did they use?

MVE: Oyster boats. They're big heavy boats where you had to go through ice and everything. The bottoms were all copper, heavy copper on them so that you could go through the ice and break the ice. Then dredge the clams or dredge the oysters

in the winter. It was the [*Alarm*?] the *Van Wyen*, the *Van Popering*. We had about four or five of them. I just don't remember names anymore.

NS: How big were they?

MVE: [laughter] I can't…

NS: If you had to take a guess.

HVE: About 50 feet long?

MVE: Yes, about 50 feet, 50 feet or less. But they were heavy, solid boats, and a very heavy bow. Most of the bows were curved this way. So, you could ride up on the ice and crack the ice. If you had a straight one, you'd smash your boat.

HVE: They were quite wide.

MVE: Yes. Because you'd go in this way and you'd smash the prow. But if you had it tapered, you just rode up like that, and the weight of it would crack the ice. Then the men on the boat would shove the ice underneath the hole you made.

NS: What were the boats made of?

MVE: Wood.

NS: They were wooden boats?

MVE: Yes. Very heavy wood.

NS: Who built them?

MVE: The local people. Some they bought from other places. They would buy a place from, let's say, Connecticut and they had their own boats or Rhode Island or Northport.

NS: Who were some of the local builders? Who built them locally?

MVE: Well just your local carpenters who really weren't carpenters.

HVE: They weren't.

MVE: They just worked wood all their lives that way.

NS: Do you remember any of their names?

MVE: Not now, no.

NS: No. Back then when you were in charge of the company.

MVE: You see, they've been out of business so long. Well, they were Van Wyens, [Van Wheels?]. They're all Dutch people. [Van Poperings?] and that fellow there I had you read his name.

NS: Wester?

MVE: Yes. Most everybody were just local people that grew up there working, helping their father. Then they got to be boat builders. They weren't really boat builders, but they knew how to make them good and solid and strong.

NS: Were they sailboats?

HVE: No.

NS: They were powered by motor?

MVE: No. They were all power boats and they had very little power. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

MVE: I remember one of them only had six horsepower motors. You could barely get it through the water.

MS: [laughter] Not much at all.

MVE: You just can't get motors any lower than six horse. Because people didn't have much money. They had to go through.

NS: Do you remember who made some of the rakes? The oyster rakes, the clam rakes, the tools?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: Who were some of those people?

MVE: People that raked oysters and tonged oysters, they either had a neighbor make them who did that, or maybe made some themselves. Because the clam tong was this way and it would catch the oysters and the clams that way. But oysters were mostly dredging.

NS: So, it was the big metal boxes?

MVE: A big metal thing with an iron bag behind it. You dragged it through the water and then hoisted it on deck.

NS: Where were they harvesting? How far out? Was it all right close to shore or was it further out in the bay?

MVE: No. You had anywhere where the water was not muddy. You had to have sand. Bluepoints leased the land all the way from Blue Point almost to Patchogu, all the way to Babylon. The whole bay, except for I think it was 1,000 feet of shore, all around you could not build by. The town made that ruling. You wouldn't want to have oysters there anyway. So, it didn't make that much difference.

NS: What time would a bayman go out and come back?

MVE: Decent weather, he would be out there 5:00 o'clock, 6:00 o'clock, 7:00 o'clock, and they'd mostly be back in shore by 3:00 o'clock, maybe 4:00 at the

most.

NS: What was considered a good catch in those days?

MVE: Oh, two or three bushels of clams. Well, nobody caught oysters much because that was all private. Bluepoints company owned that.

NS: I'm talking about the people who worked for Bluepoints. What was considered a good catch for a day?

MS: Did they always come back with a boat full?

NS: The men who worked for Bluepoints?

MVE: Yes. You had two or three men on a boat. They would get maybe 50 bushels a day or something like that.

NS: Wow. That's a lot of oysters. [laughter]

MVE: That's not much. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] These days even a bushel would be a lot.

MS: Oh, my God.

MVE: When the hurricane came…

NS: The ’38 hurricane?

MVE: Yes. We had a million bushels of oysters ready for market, and we lost most of them.

MS: Oh, boy.

NS: There are people who say that after this hurricane…

MVE: Mud was washed over all of them, and they just smothered.

NS: Some people say that after the ’38 hurricane, there were no more oysters.

MVE: Well, you could say compared to what it was before.

NS: What do you think happened?

MVE: Oh, mud went over them and they smothered and died. You couldn't get your boats out for a couple of days anyway. We lived here at that time. The boats couldn't go out and catch them. When they did that, most of them would die because of the mud, they couldn't get air.

NS: So, it really churned everything up.

MVE: Yes.

NS: You were living in this house?

MVE: Yes.

NS: What happened to you?

MVE: They kept us on just the same.

HVE: Are you thinking of the storm?

MS: Yes.

NS: Yes. What happened to you during the storm?

MS: Did you have any damage to the house or anything?

MVE: Yes. There was a lot of damage around here. From here to West Sayville, you couldn't drive.

MS: What happened to the house?

MVE: Helen lived in East Islip. To see her, I had to go north to Bohemia and take that road to Bohemia to where it meets East Islip Road and go down there. That's how bad it was.

NS: Wow.

MS: So, even a hurricane didn’t stop you?

HVE: No. [laughter]

MS: [laughter]

NS: But this house was okay. What about the buildings of Bluepoints, were they damaged?

MVE: They weren't damaged at all – much. There was a little damage. I remember –

NS: Do you remember seeing the hurricane come across the bay?

MVE: No. It came just like any storm. I thought nothing of it. I was sitting at my desk and the skylight, there were light that sits on the top of the roof, that blew off. So, I knew there was something wrong.

NS: [laughter]

MS: You better get out of here. [laughter]

HVE: What happened next?

MVE: Well, the boss sent us all home, which was a surprise. [laughter] He never sent people home for much. But he was a nice guy.

NS: What happened to the boats? The boats must have been damaged.

MVE: Well, they were good, strong boats and they were tied up in the basin right there. We had good posts in the ground. Because they were West Sayville guys that put these posts down and they were strong and they would hold anything.

NS: So, they anchored them with piles? Is that what they did?

MVE: Yes. The piles were part of the dock and they tied them up.

NS: So, they just tied them up really good?

MVE: Yes.

NS: Did anybody have to have to watch them?

MVE: No. There was nothing you could do.

HVE: Nobody was aware that it was what it was.

NS: That it was going to be a hurricane?

HVE: Right.

MVE: There was nothing you could do anyway. So, you might just well sit tight and wait.

MS: Outside of being told like that.

NS: So, nothing was damaged or destroyed or lost?

MVE: Oh, yes, there were a lot of little boats that were destroyed and sunk. Of course, we were concerned mostly about our oysters and clams. But the clams, most of them, were able to work their way out of the mud. But oysters, no. It never recovered, the oyster business never recovered. But we had businesses in Connecticut and Rhode Island. In two or three places, we had oyster lots. So, they didn't have that trouble. So, we had oysters to work on, to sell. But it was mostly here on Long Island.

NS: So, how many people worked for the company after the hurricane? Did you have to catch back on who worked there?

MVE: I don't remember. We were losing many. They found some kind of work. Because here they had the clam business, and they put them to work in clam business or cleaning up this or that. It was a little tough, but we managed.

NS: This is not something I've understood before. I know Dave Relyea from Flowers and Sons.

MVE: Who?

NS: Dave Relyea from Flowers and Sons up in Oyster Bay.

MVE: Yes.

NS: There was a relationship between what they did and what Bluepoints did.

MVE: Yes.

NS: Can you explain that to me?

MVE: It wasn't only a relation. We were both in the oyster business and sometimes we'd buy oysters for them or…

NS: Were they grown oysters? What were they that they would buy?

MVE: Oh, yes. They were all grown oysters. They were a different kind of company. They were a small company.

NS: So, you would buy oysters from them to sell at other places?

MVE: Not very often, but we'd meet them mostly at conventions. [laughter]

NS: Okay. Wasn't there also a project where there were these seed oysters that were grown that you then bought and planted? Something like that?

MVE: Yes. We tried to raise seed oysters, but there you have to have those empty oyster shells, I told you. You spread them on sandlots out there in the bay. In the spring, usually May and June, the spawn or spat, float through the water. They got to stick and they'd stick to an oyster. That's why you have five or six oysters in one clump sometimes. Because they stick on there and then they grow.

NS: When did that start happening? When was that started?

MVE: When what?

NS: When did they start doing that, planting the seed oysters and all of that?

MVE: You didn't plant the seed. The regular oysters just had seeds. What was out there, they spat them out and it floated through the water until they hit a shell or stone.

NS: Was that always part of the operation, though? I thought it started later.

MS: Did they always do that, Mike, or is that something that happened after?

MVE: No, it always happened ever since the oyster business was in West Sayville.

MS: So, they always did that with the –

MVE: Yes. But they didn't start the oyster business until, I'll just say, 1890, to take a figure. Somewhere along there.

NS: Because I thought that was much more recent.

MVE: Yes, because my father, I tell you, was a foreman when they had it here and he quit them in 1911 or '12. They never paid much money. So, my father with another guy, bought a small boat, and they went out in the ocean. I tell you, you wouldn't go out in [on a river?] in these boats. He'd go out there and they'd go

catch flounders and fish and all that.

NS: So, he was using a net? Is that what he was doing?

MVE: Yes.

NS: I'm going to ask you one more question and then we will call it a day. Were most of the people who worked at Bluepoints Dutch? Or were there other kinds of people who worked for Bluepoints?

MVE: No. They were all people that handled oysters there and only four or five girls. There weren't that many. Three girls in the office and three or four men, that's all.

NS: But were they Dutch? Do you know?

HVE: Some were.

MVE: Some were.

NS: But not everybody.

HVE: Yes.

MVE: Well, Lois wasn't, Sophie wasn't. [inaudible]. No, in the office I guess I was the only Dutchman.

NS: [laughter]

MS: What about when the guys that went on the boat?

NS: What about your baymen and the shuckers? Were they mostly Dutch?

MVE: Yes, they were most all Dutch.

NS: The shuckers, were they all Dutch?

MVE: Ockers were all Dutch.

NS: No, the shuckers?

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: That's what I am trying to figure out here. Did most everybody live around here? Did everyone know each other?

MVE: Yes. They all lived in West Sayville. As I told you, Greene financed them, gave them a couple hundred dollars to come from Holland here. They lived where they could until they – they were very thrifty, so they managed. You gave your kids Christmas presents, but that's all. All these other holidays, that was just another day. The Christmas gifts were really small too. They had to be. They had gardens in the back, and they canned. My mother had a cellar –

MS: Vegetables?

MVE: Of canned vegetables and stuff for the winter because you needed them. You didn't have money to buy them and the stores were expensive.

MS: Well, you did great, Mike and Helen.

NS: This is the end of tape one, side two for February 4th, 2004. Today, first, is February 5th, 2004. This is tape one, side two. This is Nancy Solomon talking with Mike and Helen Essendelft. So, growing up, what were some of your childhood things that you did? Before you were old enough to actually work and go clamming and oystering, what were some of the things that you did as a child?

MVE: I don't understand that. I can't understand a word you're saying. Let Helen.

HVE: She wants to know what you did as a child.

MVE: The usual things, just nothing. [laughter]

HVE: Just nothing. [laughter]

MVE: I went to school and that was all there was to do.

NS: So, what did you do during the summer?

MVE: Nothing at all until I got up to be about 14, and then I worked in my uncle's grocery store.

NS: Before you were fourteen, did you play games? Did you go swimming? Did you go down to the bay?

MVE: Occasionally, but not often.

HVE: It wasn't very exciting then.

MVE: Our youth was pretty mild. [laughter] We didn't have things like you do today. We didn't even have a basketball. We couldn't afford it.

NS: I know, but that is what I am wondering. Going down to the bay, were there things that you could do on the –

MVE: No. My mother wasn't one to let me roam around much or anybody. You stayed home, played with the kids next door or something. We never did much playing because there wasn't anything to do. I really don't remember doing anything [laughter] except growing up.

NS: How about you, Helen? What did you do when you were growing up?

HVE: Well, of course we moved around a lot.

MVE: Yes. They lived in Toronto.

HVE: Yes, I lived in Toronto.

MVE: Bay Shore, East Islip.

HVE: It was like living in the city when you lived in Toronto.

NS: What about in East Islip? What was it like over there?

HVE: Oh, well, East Islip was – we had a lot of young people there, and we did a lot of things together. Just playing.

NS: What kinds of things did you do?

HVE: Going around.

MVE: There were a lot of Bohemian kids there, because a lot of people from Bohemia, Europe lived in East Islip and around and Helen knew a lot of them.

NS: Did you go down to the border much?

HVE: Yes. But it wasn't – my folks would not allow me to go very much. They had to be there to see that I was doing what they wanted me to do. [laughter] It wasn't as though I did a lot of exciting things. No.

NS: What did you do down there?

HVE: Nothing in particular. We just picked up the –

MVE: She had girlfriends around. The [Fischer?] people had a gas station there, [Tullie Fischer?] and she had another sister too.

HVE: Yes, we had a lot of friends that we played with. I mean, they had things that they did that were – It's hard to explain.

NS: Did you go swimming?

HVE: Yes.

NS: Where did you go swimming?

HVE: Not a whole lot – in the bay. In the Great South Bay.

NS: What beach? Was there a beach or did you just have to just jump in the water?

MVE: On the end of her street, there was a beach down there.

NS: This was East Islip?

MVE: Yes.

HVE: In East Islip, right.

NS: What street was this?

HVE: I'm trying to remember what street I lived on.

MVE: Field Avenue? No.

HVE: I don't know.

MVE: It was right here.

NS: It is fine.

HVE: It's funny. It may come to me.

NS: Did you ever try clamming?

HVE: No, not I.

NS: How about you? Did you ever try clamming when you were a kid?

MVE: No. Well, once or twice.

NS: Yes? Do you remember it?

MVE: It was hard work.

NS: I know.

MVE: I had no muscle. I was soft. If you knew the clammers, they got muscle so strong from here. Well, I didn't have that. After ten minutes, I was gone. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

HVE: [laughter]

MVE: The few times I was out, one time a storm came up and we were talking to a boat maybe a hundred feet apart. We were talking across each other and the storm came right in between us. We were in the sun. They were in the storm. I couldn't hear a word they said.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: It was a funny thing. The bay was funny that way. The Great River there – you know the Great River?

NS: Yes.

MVE: That went into the bay and that was all clear water, fresh water. It went into the bay and mixed with the salt water.

NS: With the salt water.

MVE: That was great for clams and oysters.

NS: Yes, I was going to say.

MVE: We had oyster lots and mostly clam lots there. They were marked out with

posts here on the corners. I guess if you went there, you might see some of those posts.

NS: Still?

MVE: They were like an ordinary small tree, young tree. They cut it off with axe and stubbed it in the ground. I don't know.

NS: When you were growing up, did you go swimming?

MVE: Oh, yes. Down Atlantic Avenue in West Sayville. There was a shore there right next to Bluepoints. There was an open beach there about maybe 100 feet wide. Everybody went swimming there.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: It was very shallow. So, we couldn't get in trouble.

NS: Did you ever go to the ocean?

MVE: Well, once in a great while. My father had a boat and we'd sail there maybe once or twice a year and go over. But I never cared for the ocean. There were big high waves and stuff.

NS: Yes. It's pretty scary.

MVE: Because it can be pretty rough.

NS: Yes. Plus, sailing over. Did you learn to sail?

HVE: Did you know how to sail?

MVE: No.

HVE: No, that wasn't his…

NS: But could you sail if you had to?

HVE: Oh, sure.

MVE: I guess so. Yes. I knew how to operate it, but we never had a boat so I never did.

NS: Did most people have boats?

MVE: No. I would say about half of them – they were clam boats.

HVE: Work boats, yes.

MVE: They were too heavy to go sailing or anything. Only a few people had pleasure boats. Snapper Inn, they had one called *Happy Days*. Well, that wasn't a sailboat really. It had a mast and everything, but they always used power.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: Yes. That was much easier.

NS: Was there any rum-running going on around here?

MVE: Yes, there was a lot of rum-running.

NS: Where did they bring it in, do you know?

MVE: In West Sayville, right at the dock. Where everybody could see it.

NS: Did you know any of the rumrunners?

MVE: No. They were all from New York or somewhere else.

NS: But what about the local baymen? Did any of them help get the booze to shore?

MVE: No. They would go out in the ocean and meet the big steamers there.

NS: But who would go out there?

MVE: Clammers like that?

NS: Did you know any of them?

MVE: Oh, yes. I knew all of them.

NS: Yes?

MVE: Yes. Maybe there was a half a dozen of them that did this as a side job. Sailed out there and got booze and came in here and delivered it down here in Great River or to West Sayville. [inaudible]. Trucks would go right there and take the booze in cartons and put them on a truck. Nobody bothered. We didn't have a cop in town.

NS: [laughter] That made life easy.

MVE: [laughter] So, it was easy enough and nobody bothered.

NS: Do you remember who some of those people were, who were rumrunners? Their names?

MVE: No, I don't really. It was just clammers and oystermen.

HVE: He wouldn't have known them probably.

NS: Yes, I know. I was going to say, that was a long, long time ago.

MVE: They usually did that at night.

NS: So, you were asleep.

MVE: So, you never really got a chance to know them. But we heard of them.

Somebody would tell you that, "This guy runs rum on the side." But we never saw it really except a few times when the trucks came.

NS: Interesting.

MVE: It was a big business for a while. Of course, the clammers were glad they had extra money.

NS: Sure.

MVE: But they were all church people. So, they didn't tell about that because it might be mentioned in church.

NS: Sure. It's good to keep a secret.

HVE: Right. [laughter]

MVE: Yes, because there was nothing else to do on Sunday except go to church. If you didn't, you were doing something wicked, if you did something else other than go to church. Like baseball, you couldn't play baseball on Sunday. Even the kids' game, that was wicked. You were enjoying yourself. Anytime you enjoyed yourself, it was wicked.

NS: Interesting.

MVE: So, we had a really dull life.

NS: Were there any bay houses around here? Do you know what bay houses are?

HVE: No.

NS: On some of the little islands near, were there ever any bay houses on those islands that you remember?

MVE: Yes. A lot of them had small, like, summer homes. They had maybe two houses on an island here off Bay Shore towards the beach.

NS: Towards Captree, right around there. Was there anything like that around here?

MVE: No, we didn't have any islands here.

NS: That's what I was wondering.

MVE: They were all near Fire Island Inlet.

NS: I asked you before, I know that you weren't a hunter. But were there other people who did go duck hunting around here?

HVE: Not too many.

MVE: There were so few that I just don't remember. The seagulls…

NS: Scared the ducks away?

MVE: [So, the seagull, you might have?] Then there were two or three people that weren't strictly religious and they might go on Sunday or [something?]. But there never was much duck hunting or any kind of hunting in West Sayville. There was lots of woods around. Rabbits, you had them in your backyard at times. Well, it was on a Sunday, there wasn't any reason to go out and shoot them.

HVE: You could go play with them. [laughter]

MVE: We had a very dull life as kids because you couldn't do anything on Sunday. Saturdays, you had to go to church on Saturdays as well as Sunday. So, what time was there to play or do anything? There weren't many roads at that time. I think it was 1912 before this Sunrise – Montauk Highway was paved. It was just a sand road before that. Just two tire tracks. There weren't many cars. That was the beginning of cars around that time.

NS: Did you know any people that took people from the trains to where they were staying? Like the summer people who came out here?

MVE: No. Most of those stayed in Sayville. They had a lot of summer homes there that they rented out. West Sayville didn't have any that I can recall. But they got off of a Sayville train. There weren't taxis much then. They would take them to these places and they would stay two weeks, go back to the city. Then another two people would come out for a couple of weeks. That was mostly on Foster Avenue on the way to the bay. From the village, that was about a mile. Other than that, there wasn't much. But that was the summer home all around Sayville.

NS: What part of Sayville were there the summer homes? What streets?

HVE: Foster Avenue.

MVE: Yes. Do you know where Foster Avenue is?

NS: Yes.

MVE: Down south Foster, all the way down. Then there was Greene Avenue and a couple other ones that people – they lived in the house and rented rooms to people for a week or something like that. People could barely afford it. They had Handsome Avenue. They had a hotel at the end there. It had a little beach and they didn't stop people from swimming, local people, if they wanted to.

NS: They could use the beach. That was nice. Do you remember the family?

MVE: All of South Sayville from Main Street south to the water, every street had somebody that took in summer people.

NS: Did you know any of those people?

MVE: No. Oh, maybe one or two, but it was only then that you might meet them that summer.

NS: No, I meant the people who rented rooms. Did you know some of those folks?

MVE: I knew some of them, but they're all gone now. I couldn't even remember then.

NS: I was just wondering which homes may have been known for that.

MVE: So, we had to stay right in our own hometown. Our parents wouldn't let us go out anywhere.

NS: Some fishermen, if they had some extra clams or lobsters, did they sell them out of their homes?

MVE: No. Everyone sold them to those five or six companies I told you.

NS: So, nobody sold them on their own?

MVE: Rudolph, Vanderborgh, Beebe, Van Wyen, Van Popering, Bluepoints Company. Of course, if they caught them in the bay, they had to sell them to Bluepoints.

NS: To Bluepoints.

MVE: Because we had leased the land, the whole bay from Hanshaw Park all the way to Blue Point.

NS: I am just trying to imagine this, though, that there might have been somebody who was just going to get clams who wasn't connected with Bluepoints. Did there ever become disagreements over whose clams they were?

MVE: Vanderborgh, they weren't part of Bluepoints. They had clammers that would get clams off Bay Shore. That's west of where our property was. They would bring them in there and maybe they'd bring a bushel in and they'd get four or five dollars. That was only sporadic. Just whenever they had time or oystering wasn't so good. Of course, you couldn't oyster in the summer anyway. That was illegal.

NS: Yes. I know.

MVE: Any month without an R.

NS: Without an R. Yes, I know. [laughter]

MVE: You know that?

NS: Oh, yes.

MVE: So, it was pretty good.

NS: I was an oyster shucker, I learned these things. [laughter]

MVE: That's right.

NS: But I'm trying to imagine though that if you were just your own person, you were going to go clamming or you were going to get oysters. Who was watching you to make sure you didn't go in Bluepoints' waters? Was there somebody out

there watching for this?

MVE: We had watchmen. [Tony Walker?] and his brother had a boat, and they would sail around at night so that they wouldn't steal oysters or clams at night. Then – Come on in, [Wayne?].

NS: We're talking about the oyster watchmen.

HVE: Come in.

MVE: Then in the daytime, we had another set.

NS: Of watchmen who just kept an eye on everything?

MVE: They just sailed around.

NS: Thank you.

MVE: They just sailed around. Thank you, [Ollie?].

MS: You're welcome.

MVE: So, that people didn't go on Bluepoints' lots.

NS: I can imagine there must have been some arguments.

MVE: No, not many.

NS: No? Did anybody ever get hurt?

MVE: Bluepoints was pretty strong because most of these people had to find work in the winter. They came and worked in the oyster shop. So, the oystermen work at Bluepoints, and they're not going to hire somebody that's stealing from them.

NS: That's stealing from them, right.

MVE: So, it kept them honest that way.

NS: But on the other hand, what if they weren't there when the person was – you can't see everything.

MVE: Once in a while, somebody. [But we had those fellas?]. Those watchmen were allowed to go clamming on the side. So, they would bring clams in and we would pay them for clams they got too.

NS: [laughter]

MVE: They'd bring maybe a bushel or something like that. There wasn't very many.

NS: Interesting. I can imagine that when cars and trucks were first invented, that it changed a lot of things around here.

MVE: Oh, yes.

NS: How did it change things in your life, in the business?

MVE: My uncle had a truck that would take oysters from Atlantic Avenue Arsenal Place and take them to the railroad station on Cherry Avenue. First you had to stop the train. The conductor would stop and you'd put the oysters on. They'd take it to Fulton Market in New York.

MS: That's how you stopped the train? You got out in front of the train to stop them?

NS: Was it your own train?

HVE: Did you do this?

NS: Did you have your own train?

MVE: It was a local train and it only went as far as Sayville. I have a picture of it here somewhere. It's a single track.

NS: It went into the city once a day?

MVE: Yes, once or twice a day, yes. Because there were commuters and into Wall Street.

NS: So, you had a car that was just for the oysters?

MVE: A truck. Just any old truck you happened to have. A lot of [the?] automobiles with the cab cut off on the back or the side.

NS: Right. Was there a time when you began to just drive the truck all the way into the city when they built the highways and stuff?

MVE: Yes. Maybe in the 30s, my uncle used to drive all the way into the city because it was just a little cheaper. He went right to Fulton Market. He didn't have to take oysters to Penn Station or Jamaica and then put it all on another truck. This way, it was faster for fresh oysters and clams. Fulton Street was on the south end of New York City.

NS: Did other things change because of the cars and the highways in the business?

MVE: There were changes all the time. There was building and then they built the Sunrise Highway. That was I think in the 40s or maybe 50s. Then they began to get a lot of traffic and people came out to here to live.

NS: So, there was more people.

MVE: They bought land and built little houses and some size bigger.

NS: Did the oystermen still have their homes? Were they able to stay here?

MVE: They all lived around West Sayville, Islip, or Bay Shore.

NS: But did they have to move?

HVE: No.

NS: It did not get too expensive? So, they were able to stay around?

HVE: Oh, no. I don't imagine so.

MVE: We were all poor people. You might put it that way.

NS: Nowadays, a lot of the baymen can't afford to live on Long Island.

HVE: Well, that's true.

NS: Because they cannot make a living.

HVE: A lot of people can't afford to live on Long Island anyway.

NS: So, that's what I was wondering.

MVE: The bay has been over-clammed and oysters are practically…

HVE: That's a good word, over-clammed. [laughter]

NS: Yes, overfished. [laughter]

MVE: And oysters. Only a business like Bluepoints could survive with the oysters because people stole them. As I told you, the hurricane, we had a million

bushels and lost almost all of them. We couldn't catch them up fast enough to put them on different dry ground so they could live. So, the oyster business never recovered. That's why we got into the canned clamming and clam [chowder?] business until that was bought out by, I was going to say Fruit of the Loom. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

HVE: [laughter]

NS: Oh, boy. I'm actually at the end.

MVE: They were every year. Then the boss got older and older.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador on 7/22/2024.