

Milford Lab Oral Histories
Edwin Rhodes Oral History
Date of Interview: August 20, 2015
Location: Milford, Connecticut
Length of Interview: 00:24:23
Interviewer: MS – Walter Blogoslawski
Transcriber: NCC

Edwin Rhodes: Record my gravely hoarse voice?

Walter Blogoslawski: It's better than no voice. Eddie Rhodes has been with the Fishery Service since forever. Long Island Oyster Farms, a long time. Now, he's retired, I think.

ER: No [laughter].

WB: No, he's still working for –

ER: I'm the executive director of the NFI Crab Council.

WB: Okay. Eddie, how long have you been in this business?

ER: I walked into the Milford Lab and got paid in 1959. So –

WB: So, Victor was –

ER: – when I was 41 – 56 years, I guess that would make it. Yeah, Victor, I walked in – my favorite stories, I guess, go back to Victor. I walked in as a 14-year-old, 15-year-old. Because I had been scuba diving in Long Island Sound, and a friend of mine and I had started moving a lot of rocks to build an artificial reef out by Charles Island. We actually got an oyster set on some of the rocks. Then the starfish came and ate them. We decided, when we were sophomores in high school, so age 15, to do a science project on the regeneration of starfish. We started at home. Our biology teacher said, "You know, there's a lab in Milford that does this kind of stuff." So, we marched off to the Milford lab, walked into Victor's office, and he sat there with his famous visor. "My boys, why are you here?" We said, "Well, we're here to try to get some information on starfish." He said, "Well, what do you know?" We told him everything we knew in about two minutes. He said, "Well, you don't know enough yet. You need to go to the library." So, he sent us to the Yale Library every weekend for about three months. We had the nerve, after a month of going to the Yale Library, to go back to Victor. He said, "Well, boys, now what do you know now?" We gave him a longer story of what we knew. So, he liked us, and he took us in the back and introduced us to Paul Chanley and Warren Landers. He said, "Take care of these boys." So, we came to the lab every week to get filtered sea water for our aquariums at home. We had a starfish spawning. We won the State Science Fair and all that kind of stuff.

WB: When was that?

ER: Well, two years before I was 16, so 1957. 1959, I turned 16, and I got a call from Victor. He said, "Well –" high school was on a double session. We got out every day at 12:30 p.m. He said, "I can hire you if you want to work from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day." So, we worked. We got a buck 15 an hour, while the kids stocking shelves in the grocery stores got 85 cents. So, we thought that we were wealthy. So, I was employed not by Victor, because I was 16. I was employed by Dave Wallace of the Oyster institute.

WB: Long Island.

ER: Well, no. The Oyster Institute was Chesapeake. Dave and Libby Wallace ran a big oyster operation in the Chesapeake. He founded what was called the Oyster Institute of North America that eventually became part of the NFI –

WB: National Fisheries.

ER: – Mollusk thing or whatever. So, they were the lobbying arm for the industry.

WB: Thank God for them.

ER: So, Dave Wallace and – well, I had a long story. But Victor would only keep us on, of course, if our grades were good. So, every time we got a report card, we had to bring it to Victor, show him that we weren't failing school because we were working after school. So, that was my introduction to the Milford Lab. Then I worked there summers during college. Then when I finally graduated, had a young family, couldn't go to graduate school, at that point, I got hired full-time and spent on and off, 25 or 26 years in federal service.

WB: There was a rumor that Victor used to go around to the lab and ask everyone, "What have you done for science today?"

ER: Absolutely. No, I mean, every day, while I was a younger person under Paul Chanley or Warren Landers, Bob (Normando?) were the guys that I was working for. So, he would ask them directly what they did. But he'd also come up to me, always put his hand on your shoulder and, "My boy, what breakthroughs have you had today?" The best advice I got was from Haskell Tubiash who was our microbiologist, who said, "If you ever have two breakthroughs in one day, only tell him one. Because [laughter] you always want to save one for another day."

WB: Yes. Those were the days

ER: Those were – yes. It was fun. I was never directly – well, I guess everybody in that lab was directly under Victor in one sense or another. I feel a little sorry, I think, for some of the scientists who probably could have done something else more independently, but Victor was calling the research program very much. Harry Davis was the right-hand guy. Harry was more than the technician. He was the guy that could come up with really good data, with some statistical [laughter] verification for victim's ideas. But Victor's ideas, he was pretty on most of the time.

WB: Then you worked for Long Island Oyster Farms for a period of time, a real commercial operation.

ER: Well, I was working at the lab when we got our 30 – everyone got our 30-day closure notices. When Ozzie Norris came down from headquarters – not headquarters at that time, came down from Gloucester, and we all sat up in whatever the conference room was. He announced that the lab was closing. I can remember Arlene Longwell, for example, saying, "Well, geez, we have genetic programs. What should we do?" Someone else asked, "What do we do with our

research?" He said, "Burn it. Throw it away, basically. We don't want you anymore." So, I had two young kids who had applied to graduate school which was going to start four months later or something like that. I found a job or applied for a job with –

WB: Phil Campbell.

ER: No, no. It was a company that was a subsidiary of Monsanto.

WB: You're kidding. I worked for Monsanto in College Point, New York. I can't believe this.

ER: Yeah. What was it called? Geez, the subsidiary was called –

WB: Again, we're back interviewing Ed Rhodes, who has been an employee of the Fishery Service in Milford for a gazillion years. We're getting his overview of the fisheries as the Voice of the Fisheries continue.

ER: Thanks. Oh, so the company that hired me – actually, it was really funny, because I had grown a beard for the Milford 325th, which was 1964. I'd grown a beard because I was a volunteer fireman in town, and they had this thing called the "Brothers of The Brush." So, anyway, the lab's going to close. I needed a job. I saw an ad, and I had to go to – and Inmont sold paint to General Motors. But anyway, the bottom line is I shaved off my beard, went to New York, got the job. My job was growing algae for shrimp pompano and spiny lobster culture in the Florida Keys. So, I moved to Marathon.

WB: Wow. Damn. You know the Keys then.

ER: Yeah. So, I was in Marathon in 1964 or [19]65, whatever it was. Inmont had this experimental lab, basically. They wanted to see if anybody could make any money growing shrimp, trying to grow pompano, spiny lobsters. Spiny lobsters have a terribly long larval cycle. It was impossible. We did pretty good with pompano and quite well with shrimp. But –

WB: Well, this wasn't Penaeus.

ER: Yeah.

WB: It was Penaeus.

ER: Well, no, the pink shrimp, duorarum. We actually were quite successful. Nobody had closed the lifecycle yet. It was only a couple of years later in Tahiti that they actually figured out how to get them to reproduce in captivity. So, we were just getting shrimp, grabbing females from fishing boats, and hatching them and growing them and so on. Our concept then, because nobody in the United States knew the rest of the world existed, it was to grow them in ponds in Louisiana. Nobody had discovered Ecuador yet or places where you actually should grow shrimp. [laughter] So, anyway, it was working out reasonably well in terms of a research project, I guess. But then Inmont, General Motors went on strike, wasn't buying any paint, and Inmont decided they couldn't float the bill anymore. But they also owned Long Island Oyster

Farms.

WB: That's the connection.

WB: So, they moved me. Basically, everyone else got terminated, and they moved me to Long Island to the Long Island Lighting Company facility up there, Northport. I worked with Phil Campbell, and George Vandenberg was the owner, basically. That was certainly the largest hatchery in the world at the time. A hundred-and-thirty-five conical tanks we changed every day and all kinds of stuff. Still remember with fondness, I used to bring my kids in on weekends to help change 135 conicals. They had a hell of a good time with all those warm seawater hoses, filling tanks, and stuff like that. So, anyway, that was that. Then 1970, when NOAA was formed, the lab was going to do aquaculture again. So, I went back to Milford. I was there until I left for Chile in 1989.

WB: What did you do in Chile, Ed?

ER: Well, I had been doing some bay scallops research in – quite a bit of it actually – in Milford. I guess that was the Reagan years, and they weren't going to fund aquaculture anymore. Even though I think I was relatively good at doing enhancement kind of science or something, it didn't appeal to me as much as the private aquaculture side of things. Fortuitously, a student that I'd had or a coworker or whatever at Milford, a guy named Jim Davis, had moved on and was a big boat captain for a mega yacht owner in Newport Beach, California. So, Jim Davis and the owner of this boat, off the coast of Costa Rica one day, and looking out over this beautiful water. The owner of the boat said to Jim, "What could we do with this water? It's so wonderful." Jim said, "Well, we could try to do aquaculture." The boss said, "Well, what's that? What do we do?" So, he said, "Well, I used to work with this guy, Ed Rhodes. Why don't we get him to come out here?" So, when they got back to Newport Beach, they called me and sent me a plane ticket. I went out and went diving on Catalina Island for a weekend, drank a couple cases of Petrus [laughter]. He basically said, "Leave Milford. Let's find an aquaculture project." Well, he said, "Costa Rica." I was 40 years old. I said, "I'm too old [laughter] to just have one location. If you want me to find the best aquaculture project in the world for you, give me some money, and I'll find it for you." He finally agreed. So, I teamed up with John Manzi. We combed the globe looking for stuff, ended up thinking that scallops in either Peru or Chile would be a good bet.

WB: Now, John Manzi had quite a checkered past in the aquaculture business.

ER: Well, [laughter] and he's made all his recent money in real estate, so –

[laughter]

John went the other route. John, exactly the same circumstances I had, but he stuck with the graduate school program. Went to William & Mary, got a PhD eventually, and then moved into the South Carolina Marine Resources Division System. Did some bivalve work and some shrimp work and so on. But John became president of the World Aquaculture Society, went that route. Then we came back together again with the scallop [inaudible]. We had found that location, but

he wasn't willing to move.

WB: I don't want to take too much of your time.

ER: Being a relatively free spirit, I was willing to move. So, I became basically the head of the Chilean project. About a year later, the same company sponsored John to leave his position in South Carolina with the state and start a clam farm. Of course, much to our dismay, I guess, in one sense, John determined that his backyard was the best place in the world to grow clams. It turned out in the long run that didn't turn out so well. Whereas Chile turned out quite well for scallops. The company grew. We were marketing 20 tons of scallop every three days and all going to plan.

WB: That's an amazing amount.

ER: Yeah. We were doing 20-ton frozen IQF containers, one every three days, from our project in Chile. We were quite cash positive. So, our Newport investors decided to bundle what was our Cultivos Marinos in Chile.

WB: This is Newport California.

ER: Yeah. It was at that point – so, we became a company called SeaPerfect. We combined the Chilean operation and the clam operation in South Carolina, went public on the London Stock Exchange under the name SeaPerfect. On day one or two of the stock trading, the company was worth about \$100 million.

WB: Those were the days.

ER: I owned 3 percent at that point, which would've been 3 million or something like that. But I was also restricted from selling any stock for a year because I was a principal and all that kind of stuff. By the time a year went by, the clam farm had failed to the point where it needed more money. Lots of convoluted things happened, and SeaPerfect became a brewery or something. We never saw any money from it. But it was a heck of a ride. Kathy, my wife and I, were in Chile for seven years. Started the plant by digging the first shovel full of dirt and ended up employing 900 people, worked in two bays, had more boats than the Chilean Navy. The whole thing was quite good.

WB: Yeah. No, a lot of history there. Mariculture has never been the same.

ER: Yeah. It's hard to find those opportunities. The other thing I always feel partly responsible for, of course, was I think that the verification has been that the scallops that the Milford Lab sent to China became the beginning of probably what is a billion-dollar scallop industry in China. That was through a Ken Chew kind of thing. There's always been some controversy about whether it was the Milford Lab or Mike Castagna's group in Virginia that sent the first scallops that made it. I never could find the correspondence. I remember getting correspondence back from the Chinese when we sent the first shipment directly. They said, "Well, only one of the fifty lived." Of course, the bay scallops are hermaphrodite. So, we said,

"Well, what's the problem? It's (water?)." But later on, Ken Chew took another fifty or a hundred from the lab, and he hand carried them to Washington and over-watered them and then got on a plane and went to China. I think that's actually the original stock. Then a couple years later, I was involved in— whether it was the UJNR, the joint Japanese-United States thing. Very formally, they requested more bay scallops to enhance the genetic diversity of what they had. So, I was really tickled when — I'm sure it was stop-and-shop brand of frozen Chinese bay scallops one time actually had the Long Island Sound story on it. That these scallops originated from Long Island Sound. So, that was a second verification that I think the Milford Lab is responsible for.

WB: Well, I've made you go on and on and on and on. But I just wanted to, at this point, thank Ed Rhodes for having done this Voice of Fisheries. Ed, what is your present position?

ER: Well, I'm the executive director of the National Fisheries Institute Crab Council. So, we're a group of 20 U.S. importers of crab from Asia. My job is basically to take the investment that these companies make every year, which is now about \$3 million, and try to improve the crab fisheries in Asia to eventually make them sustainable. green. In fact, we're going through the whole Marine Stewardship Council process in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka right now. So —

WB: There are so many stewardship councils, Monterey Bay. Every week there seems like there's some new approval.

ER: I'm on the phone about every week with Monterey Bay. Because they won't give anything but a red light, if you would, and avoid label to a fishery that hasn't made progress yet. So, they say out of one side of their mouth, "We support fisheries improvement plans." But they won't really support it with any kind of a label other than red or stoplight system red ranking, until that fishery actually has on-the-ground improvements.

WB: That will never happen.

ER: Well, we've worked hard enough now, so there's national rules and regulations for crab in both the Philippines and in Indonesia. They're not being enforced yet. The crab comes from members because we control about 85 percent of the supply chain. I'm working on some methods to use that supply chain to help enforce it. So, we're instituting a whole traceability chain that goes all the way from the fishermen all the way to the United States. If there's any sub-sized crab or any crabs with eggs in that chain, then that supplier gets kicked out of the system. So, we think that'll actually work to enforce some of those rules. I guess, the last thing I would say is I did spend, I guess, five years in headquarters as the first, what was called back then, the aquaculture coordinator. It evolved into the position that Mike Rubino has now. My time in Washington, it's always kind of heady to be there, I guess. You occasionally get called to go to a congressman, or it's fun to get in a train and come out and actually go into a meeting or hearing or whatever else. But the bottom line is my fight was to try to get more money into aquaculture. The political timing, the Office of Management and Budget were not going to budge at that time. I finally decided that I had enough years in federal service that obviously, selfishly, I guess, reset my eye free for something different. So, I retired from NOAA. I've had

some positions since then, most notably with Phillips Seafood. I worked with Philips for –

WB: This is in the Baltimore area.

ER: Yeah. Phillips is a large seafood importer, lots of products, not just crab, but they're known for their crab. I was hired and eventually became the vice president for Sustainability and Aquaculture Development. We started a fish farm in Bali for – I want to say cobia, but it wasn't cobia.

WB: I can't help you.

ER: Never mind.

[laughter]

For barramundi. That farm's actually doing quite well, and all that product goes to Australia where the barramundi is kind of a national fish.

WB: They like that there. Fosters beer and barramundi.

ER: Yeah. My bent into the sustainability stuff and the reason for the crab has really come through the Phillips connection. Thanks, Wal.

WB: Thank you, Ed, very much. I hope I didn't take too much from you.

ER: It's all right.

[end of transcript]