Peconic Estuary Interviews
Tom Ruhle Oral History
Date of Interview: April 3, 1997
Location: Montauk, New York
Length of Interview: 01:49:59
Interviewer: NS – Nancy Solomon
Transcriber: NCC

Tom Ruhle: I'm not your typical bayman member.

Nancy Solomon: Let me introduce the tape.

TR: Hello.

NS: This is Nancy Solomon. I am talking with --

TR: Tom Ruhle.

NS: Today is April 3rd, 1997. We have agreed, and Tom, if you could say yes after I summarize our agreement, that this tape will remain restricted to the use of Long Island Traditions exclusively until such time as you designate that it can be released for the public record.

TR: Designate that it be released or until I pass away? [laughter] Until I'm deceased, it remains within your archives.

NS: That would be the archives of Long Island Traditions?

TR: Right. For the use. I mean, I'll give some scholarly research, but it's not to be generally disseminated to the public.

NS: This is Tape One, Side A. You were starting to talk about some of the technological changes in your experience.

TR: Well, I mean, just personally, I was not your typical bayman. I used to skin dive for clams. I used to skin dive for shellfish. Just to say, I'm a trained scuba diver, amongst other things. So, I've been at meetings where some old people were like, "I'm going to run you guys over," because they always thought we took all the shellfish, because we could see scallops. So, I was not your typical. We've been doing this the same way for one hundred years. I was like, "Well, hey, there's shellfish, and I have an efficient way of getting them, so I'm going to go get them."

NS: Can you describe that process in detail for me?

TR: You mean how I used to clam?

NS: Yes.

TR: Well, I've clammed about every way you can think of. But you dive down with a snorkel, and using your flippers or your hands, you move enough dirt away from the clams so you can see them. Then you flip them up with a knife into a half-bushel basket. When that's full, you cull them on a cull rack, which is an aluminum pipe separated by one-inch separator boards surrounded by CCA lumber to grate out all the little ones. So, you can fill them back so that there's something to get next time. You keep doing that until you get to the limit or when you think it's an adequate living for the day. Then you take them in and cull them. Clams generally

are sold in either little necks, cherry stones, or chowders, depending on the thickness. There are approximately five hundred little necks in a bushel, 300 cherry stones, and whatever fits from the chowder clams.

NS: Was the limit one bushel a day?

TR: No, the limit was three bushels. Well, when I started doing this stuff way back in the twilight zone, there was no limit. Then a three-bushel limit was put on in the name of conservation.

NS: When was there no limit?

TR: Oh, boy. There were no limits in the [19]70s. I know that for certainty on clams. On scallops, there's almost always been a limit, ten-bushel. Now, it's five. These are for commercial limits. These aren't recreational limits. So, what you do is, since the small clams are more valuable, you throw the big ones back.

NS: Do you know why they started to set the limits?

TR: Yes, because we run out of clams.

NS: Did you see that in your experience?

TR: Yes. I mean, there's areas where there's no clams left in now that I remember taking five, six, seven bushels out of.

NS: What were some of those areas?

TR: I've lived in Montauk virtually my entire life, albeit for four years I went away to college. I clammed in Montauk a lot, an extremely large amount. I mean, Napeague Harbor somewhat. I've clammed in 3 Mile Harbor and Accabonac, but really Lake Montauk.

NS: Are we talking about Culloden Point in that area?

TR: No. The lake itself, inside of Lake Montauk, Montauk Harbor, south of Star Island. It is a hostile environment for clamming.

NS: How come?

TR: Rocks, eelgrass, that's why there's clams there. I mean, the nice sandy spots where it's easy to clam, there's no clams because everybody's taken all the clams out. I mean, I clam in areas that are like the worse the better. I mean, rocks, barnacles, because that's where the clams are. Anywhere easy. I mean, I own a clam rake, which is one of the -- it's known as a bull rake. It's a very large rake with a very long handle. I have sets of handles. I've clammed through the ice. I had a pair of hand tongs until I broke them.

NS: The bull rake, how long are the handles?

TR: Well, it depends. If you're standing in the water, there are two six-foot handles. There's a T-handle that goes into an aluminum handle that has two clamps on them. It bolts on to the head of the clam rake. I do that in the winter now. I mean, I do this, which is -- I work for the town of [inaudible] in a civil service position. In the winter, I go with my clam rake.

NS: The bull rake, is that one?

TR: The bull rake, yes. You stand in the water and pull on the end of the T-handle, drag the rake through the ground until you pick up adequate clams. In the areas that are very sandy, people have been doing that for so long they've cleaned all the clams out. Now, they've been clamming in Lake Montauk this year out of boats in deeper water because, lo and behold, some of the baymen from up west found clams mysteriously. Well, Lake Montauk's loaded with clams from one end to the other and it's always been because it's a pain in the ass getting them out.

NS: Is it because of all the rocks?

TR: Rocks, grass, mud, deep water, all kinds of strange things. Lake Montauk's always been the exception to the rest of the bays. There's been years when there's been scallops nowhere else in Lake Montauk without scallops. Because, just like all the people, and I've lived there my entire life and can say this, like out on the fringes well, it's always like Lake Montauk and in some ways survived some of the brown tides. I remember one year the only scallops in the town of East Hampton were out there. A friend of mine and I were dredging in that bay and we got seven bushels out on opening day. Everybody else was like, "There's no scallops." Because Lake Montauk's different, which is good. West of here, a lot of sandy bottom and people have cleaned the stuff out.

NS: When you were first clamming in Lake Montauk, would you stay close to the shoreline or where in the lake would you find to be the most productive?

TR: Well, zero to six feet, because over six feet, it was difficult for me to skin dive long.

NS: Were there clams there and it was just the process you were using that prevented you or were there not clams?

TR: There were more clams around the edges. There were clearly more clams around the edges. In the old days, there were scallops in the middle and there were clams around the edges. In the [19]70s, the eelgrass really started to take over. When the eelgrass took over, it started to diminish the clam set, only to make it harder. But it was great for the scallop set. Brown tide wiped out a lot of the eelgrass, which allowed more clams to come in.

NS: You mentioned some other tools that you would use besides the skin diving and the T-rake. You mentioned the tongs. What would you use those for?

TR: Well, mostly, they're used for clamming off of boats. They have baskets on the ends with

T-rake on the ends of them. They have two very long handles made out of wood. What you can't see on the tape, I'm making a motion. It's sort of like an X with the pivot point down low, and you stand up on the top.

NS: It's like a giant scissors?

TR: Yes. Except it works in reverse.

NS: Yes, they're parallel.

TR: They're coming together, scraping on the bottom, and you lift straight up. They're good for mud. I broke mine climbing through the ice one year. What you can do in the winter, if the ice gets strong enough in the lake, is you can take an axe or a chainsaw, if you're crazy, because it will destroy your chainsaw. Cut a hole in the ice and clam right through the ice and stand on top of the ice.

NS: Wow.

TR: It's unnerving. But, I mean, if where the clams are is frozen over, you've got no choice. When your abatement and your sole subsistence is dependent on what you catch that day, you figure out a way to do the best job you can. I've been skin diving in October and January in 40-degree water and 35-degree water wearing several wetsuits. I've clammed through the ice.

NS: When you clammed through the ice, did you use an axe or a chainsaw?

TR: I used an axe. I like my chainsaw too much. I used an axe, cut a hole in the ice, cut -- just chop out a square, push it down underneath the ice, slide it down underneath, stick the clam right through the tongs through the hole, and dig a circle pattern around and throw the clams up in the ice, and pick them up, put them in bushel baskets. If it's real cold, sometimes you have to put them in water so they don't freeze to death. Because obviously, bodies of water generally don't freeze over in warm weather. So, sometimes if it's real col0d, you've got to put stuff in water to keep it from freezing. Because you're always dealing with the elements. In July, you've got to make sure the clams stay underwater sometimes. Because the way I used to do it was stay in the shade because you don't want them in the sun, 70 degrees, 80 degrees, 90 degrees. You're harvesting food somebody else is going to eat. So, you've got a responsibility to keep it as fresh as possible before you rush it off to get money for it. I mean, some people that are unscrupulous, I was not, I had a good reputation. I mean, some people don't give a crap. But you've got to remember that you're harvesting food that someone else is eating. If you're eating it yourself, you're not going to leave it out in the sun, so you keep it in the water. In the winter, the opposite, you've got to prevent it from freezing. Who wants to go and buy fresh clams and find out that things are frozen?

NS: They're frozen, right?

TR: I mean, you can use them for some things.

NS: What would happen if you put a clam in the sun? What would happen?

TR: Long enough, it'll open itself up and it'll die. Or it'll get weaker, in which case, you bring it back to life. Then you sell it to somebody and it croaks on them. The great misnomer of life is fresh clams. I mean, they'll sit in fish markets for three weeks, sometimes, but they're cool and they'll stay like that. My wife, whose bay-life experiences are minimalistic, after meeting me was amazed that I'd come home with 300 clams. She's like, "I'm just eating six at a time. This is unbelievable." She always looks at them like, "They've been in there for two weeks. They're frozen." I said, "I'll be fine." Until she met me, the idea is you have clams, you get six of them in a restaurant. Then she met me and you get until you want more, twelve, fourteen, twenty, thirty, forty. One time when I was in between jobs, amorphously known as lost, I was out of work. This was when I was not being a bayman anymore. We were like, "Well, I'll just go catch stuff and we'll eat it." We're eating oysters on the half shell. We're eating clam pie. We're eating clam chowder. We're eating all this stuff. It's sort of like we've never eaten better. But it's like, "Wow, I can't believe there's all this stuff." But that's what I did. It was great therapy, too.

NS: It is wonderful.

TR: Even though I'm not a commercial bayman right now, I mean, I still go clamming at least two, three, four times a month depending on the time of the year, mussels, clams, mussels, oysters, scallops, and soft clams, also known as piss clams or steamers or whatever. Those you dig when the tide goes out real well, which is the new moon in the winter.

NS: During the wintertime, what were typical days like? What time would you start and then finish?

TR: Well, in the winter, you're done by three factors. One is how cold it is. The second one is just the weather in general. The third is the tide. So, it's fluctuating as it related to those weather conditions. Even in the summer, if you get a hurricane, you can't go. Now, the D.C. will close down. You get enough rain, it'll close down the harvesting beds for a week. I mean, obviously, I didn't, but it's an alternative activity.

NS: How long do they close the bay and the lake off? Do they close the lake as well?

TR: Yes. Well, that's saltwater. It's called Lake Montauk because it used to be freshwater. But they dredged the harbor when they built the harbor at Montauk. Now, it's salt. So, even though it's called a lake, it's saltwater. Well, scallop season was delayed approximately a week this year because of rain. I was arranging my schedule here and calling the D.C. so I could be -- I traditionally go scalloping on the first day of scallop season always. So, I take time from here to go scalloping. It was sort of like in the D.C., "Is it going to be open tomorrow?" "Well, call back tomorrow and we'll let you know." "Is it going to be open Monday?" "Well, call back Tuesday and we'll let you know." So, it was sort of like a day-to-day basis. But now, they've gotten stricter on that when you get a lot of rain because of the coliform bacteria count going up and prevent public health problems. Those sort of things that you basically don't work if your only source of income, bay-related, is shellfish. I mean, if you can catch a fish or something

else, you go for something else.

NS: Do most baymen have had to diversify over the years?

TR: Yes. I mean, the traditional pattern used to be catch strike bass in the summer, scallop in the fall, and clam and whatever else the rest of the time. The winter used to be the big clamming time because clamming was not a high-profit venture. Some people actually derisively say it's like having a real job because you go out and you make a reasonably fixed amount of money. Fishing is more of a you go out and make nothing. You go out and make tons of money one day. All of a sudden, the fish are running and you've got a boat full of fish. You're like, "Whoa." But what's happened is with the bass closures and the limits on bass and with the scallop crop almost disappearing, a lot of people have been forced to do more clamming because at least there's clams. When there were scallops, there used to be people scalloping from the first day of scallop season until the end of scallop season. When I was in high school, the standard joke was that the first day of scallop season, the first day of hunting season, there were no males in the school because everybody was out scalloping. Just because the first two weeks, people who weren't baymen by any stretch of the imagination would be out on the water because you could make so much money in that short period of time. I remember in the old days when they used to -- people used to start hauling bags and bags of scallops in a dump because the openers couldn't open them fast enough. They were dying because so many people were catching them. Now, people would kill for scallops. A friend of mine went scalloping on the opening day of scallop season and he sure got one scallop. Not one bushel, not one bag, not one scallop. He gave it to me. I had more than one. In the old days, the amount of scallops that were around were absolutely amazing. People used to live off that.

NS: Where would you go scalloping?

TR: Lake Montauk and Napeague Harbor. They're the only two places I've ever scalloped in my life. Napeague because they get big ones up there. Lake Montauk because, I mean, that's what I -- that's me. I spent a lot of time there.

NS: Now, how would you harvest the scallops?

TR: I dredge them.

NS: Are these hand dredges or mechanical dredges? What kind of dredge?

TR: Underwater they can't be more than 36 inches wide. So, they're generally 36 inches wide. You tow them from behind a boat. You hand lift them into the boat. You cannot legally use mechanical means to hand lift them into the boat. People tow. Six is what they usually tow. Three on each side in parallel anywhere but Lake Montauk. Lake Montauk because of its grass and rocks and debris and everything else, they'll sometimes tow four on each side. You only pick the back two up really. You throw them in the boat. You comb stuff out and throw them back. I also used to dive for them. I used to dive for them a lot because you could see them. You could pick them up. You could get them out of the hard places to harvest like bogs and stuff like that. But obviously, that's a little bit harder in wet weather.

NS: Where did scallops embed themselves? Were they also close to the shoreline like the clams?

TR: Anywhere. They attach themselves to eelgrass. They're real tiny. If you skin dive like I did, you could see them with their little, tiny jaws attached by a little thread. Then they would grow up there and sort of being rearranged by hurricanes. Scallops could swim. You'll get a great look about blue-eyed scallops. Because literally if you were diving, see the blue eyes, ring the long thing as they puffed along. They lay on the bottom and lay in the grass. Sometimes hurricanes would rearrange them. But they would be all over the bottom. They're not as close to the shore and not as fixed to the shore as, say, clams are. Well, part of that may be because they're on the bottom. The birds could pick them out of shallow water easier. In the case of Lake Montauk and to a lesser degree Napeague, sometimes the middle, the real deep part was full of them. I mean literally full of them. I remember you could walk on the water without them getting in the way. There were so many scallops that were getting in the way of clamming, which to me in the summer when you couldn't take scallops was what was relevant.

NS: Are there things that come to your mind where there used to be clams and scallops that there are no longer that you can say, "Oh, that's because of this?"

TR: Well, no one ever can know why there's no scallops and clams where there are. In some places, particularly, this is going on Lake Montauk right now, there's a lot of big clams. Now, the fact that there's a lot of big clams --

NS: You're talking about the chowder clams?

TR: Chowder clams. Those are older clams. That means that in the old days, there were a lot of clams living there. But for some reason, they're not reproducing in any way that they were. Why is that? Science will tell you it's brown tide. It's the predators. But it's undoubtedly a combination of everything, not the least of which is pollution. It's certainly not, in that case, over-harvesting, because if you're over-harvesting, you're taking all the big stuff out, too. There's got to be something. If you've got an inordinately large amount of one-size clams, like large clams, that means you're not recruiting juvenile classes to replace what's there. That's always been a problem in Lake Montauk. There always seems to be big clams there. Now, the reverse of that is I've been at this for over twenty years. You can't possibly always have big clams because you have small clams at some point in time. In some of the areas where they've been seeding, there are smaller clams. In some of the areas where there's been a lot of harvesting, there's a lot of little clams because all the big ones have been taken out. The bottom is stimulated. When you stimulate the bottom you get a better set, which is what breeding is called. But there are areas where there's a lot of big clams. That's been going on. In fact, the town changed the law this year to allow them to take clammers that are clamming Lake Montauk now to take two additional bushels of clams if they were chowders. Because they're running into so many chowders, they can't get the clams that are worth anything. A bushel of necks is 500. You're allowed three bushels. You can get 1,500 clams, you get a bushel of necks. You may only have 125 chowders in the bag, so you're getting 300 clams. Now, if you're trying to live on that, they're probably selling for $8, $10, $12 a bag maybe. So, you're making $36, as opposed

to with the smaller clams, a couple hundred dollars. So, the economics are in small clams, but what they're picking up is a lot of big clams. In their argument, and I've not been in that particular spot, is that the small stuff being crowded out by the bigger clams, which is possible.

NS: Has there always been domination between one kind of clam over another kind of clam in the harvesting? Have you always caught more littlenecks or more chowders?

TR: Well, they're all the same clam.

NS: Yes, I know. There are different stages. Have you found more of one kind than another?

TR: Well, there was one area, which was off of an area called Osbourne's Island in Montauk, which is also Squaw's Cove, the area near what's Stepping Stone Point, which year after year, the entire rocky shoreline around Osbourne's Island. Year after year after year after year, people would clam there. I used to clam there constantly from about May until October or November, and just over and over. Every year, there were small clams, and that was the only thing there was. Now, what undoubtedly was happening was, as long as we were all not being pirates, and we left all the little stuff from the year before, because we were churning the ground up there, and there were all these big clams everywhere else, including deep water, every year, this would be a good set. It would set into the rocks. We'd be able to go in there year after year and pound away. I mean, there used to be times when there would be four or five of us out there diving. Because the only way you could get them out of there was diving. You couldn't rake them out. So, that was always small stuff. I mean, I remember I never used to sell the chowders I'd get in there, because I didn't get enough of them. So, we'd just eat them, eight, ten, twelve. There are other places in the lake where I've gotten two bushels, three bushels of chowders. This is in the [19]70s. I mean, get seven bushels of clams, and have three of them of good chowders. The rest would be cherries. A bushel and a half of them being necks. You're sort of hauling around tons and tons of shell. So, it depends on where you are. Maybe it's because we were working the area that those little ones were setting there, or maybe it was because it was such a great area to work. We were working and we'd already taken out all the big stuff. But some of the areas that I had worked and cleaned out there, not much came back behind it. It wasn't like, "Well, I worked hard." I worked real hard in two areas and took all the stuff out. Then there was nothing, no little stuff came behind it. So, that's indicating that there was poor of improvement there.

NS: When did you start to see that pattern where you were taking -- where there was nothing but larger clams and not the --

TR: Well, there's always been that. But there's a lot of big stuff in the [19]70s. In some areas, there was no -- in the [19]80s, the recruitment was real big. That's where it was the brown tide.

NS: What were the real productive areas in the [19]70s?

TR: Well, Lake Montauk, I mean, I went from one end to the other.

NS: The entire lake was equally strong over there?

TR: It's never been productive as far as I can remember. Now, stories, people who -- like my father, who was with clams in the [19]60s, in between doing other things, they used to get tons of clams out of the South End. But the South End is sandy. There's not a lot in there. As much as it's been seeded, there doesn't seem to be a lot in there. But legendarily, there were a lot of clams in there at one time. Now, where they're getting a lot of them right now is off of what's known as -- it used to be known as (Wazey's?). It's now the Captain's Cove Marina on East Lake Drive, Captain's Marina. They're off there. That's near the South End. But they're in deeper water. There's a lot of clams in there and a lot of big stuff. Right now, I personally clam off Little Reed Pond, the drain at Little Reed Pond, when I go. There's a lot of little stuff in there. There's some bigger stuff. That's a good spread. The town seeded that heavily. So, that may be one of the reasons why there's clams there. That's where I go when I'm generally speaking during the winter months in terms of breaking and stuff. There's also salt clams there. I grew up on the west side of the lake. So, I used to clam the west side of the lake too, up towards the whole West Lake Drive area. There were a lot of beds of eelgrass in there. There used to be clams in there.

NS: Do you remember seeing oysters at all?

TR: Finding an oyster when I was growing up was like Valhalla, the holy grail of shellfishing. My mother loved them. I love them also. Now, they're more commonplace than they used to be. Now, that may be a result of seeding, transplants from oyster ponds, or a change in the salinity dynamics of the water.

NS: When did you start seeing oysters coming back? Do you remember when it first made an impression?

TR: Very, very late [19]80s, into the [19]90s. Now, oystering's not all that irrational. In fact, I got more oysters than scalloping. I got a number of oysters almost around -- one of my scalloping trips this year was a successful oystering trip. Because those you can see, they stick out too. So, I'm like, "There's not that many scallops, so I'll get some oysters."

NS: Were they also underwater in the banks?

TR: Oysters tend to be all over the place, but they tend to like rocks. They tend to cling to things. One of the methods of encouraging oysters is to throw shells in the water so that the Oysters can set on the shells and stay out of the mud or stay on the rocks. So, one of the methods for doing that is to throw stuff in the water and have it cling to it. For a period of time, [19]70s into [19]80s, oysters were like -- and if you go into deep water in Lake Montauk and take a clam rig, and drag it through the water, you'll find a lot of big oyster shells. So, whether it was the mystery disease from the marine transplants or what, but something wiped the oysters out and they're making a comeback. Whether genetically, they're altered or something has died out in the bays that was killing them, I don't know. But for a while, you couldn't find an oyster. I've never gotten enough oysters to sell them personally. Eat them, yes.

NS: What have been some of the manmade changes around the lake?

TR: Well, we have multiple problems. The first one, in the effort to stem the mosquito

population, they ditched the entire surrounding area to drain the water out of the land.

ND: How big are those ditches?

TR: Well, these suckers are big. I mean, these are wide enough that I -- my little hobby when I was a kid was just to fill them up with dirt to see if I could back them up. Put ponds behind them. I've succeeded, but they've ditched Lake Montauk to the degree that the water used to hit the ground perfectly.

NS: This is Nancy Solomon and Tom Ruhle. Tape One, Side Two.

TR: So, they vector-controlled in an effort to stop mosquitoes, ditched around the lake and drained all the water into the lake, which changed the rate with which freshwater was interfacing with saltwater. It also brought a lot of stuff --

NS: Was there more fresh water or more salt water?

TR: More fresh water.

NS: So, more fresh water started coming in?

TR: Right. Now, this isn't something I've seen, but this is what's carrying all the pollution. A lot of the pollution is into the lake, which is known wonderfully in the vernacular as non-point source.

NS: Yes, I know all that.

TR: But it's basically what it is, drainage ditches. Dog scrap next to drainage ditches, and the kids throw. Oil falls out of the bottom of cars and oil washes into the drainage ditches. Lacking what might be effectively described as good sumps, we've used, in the case of Lake Montauk and other harbors, as sumps. We take everything that lands on the land that we want to get rid of and we run it in there. Well, what happens is some of this stuff, if you've ever -- people have made this point at public hearings. But if you ever read some of the stuff that we have roundup, which fills weeds and stuff, you look under the sink. Do not drink this. Do not get this on your car. We're pouring that down our drains and we're throwing it around the road. I mean, in the old days -- and when I say old days, I'm not that old. I'm thirty-nine. They used to pour the old motor oil at the dock stop, helping the dirt to keep the dust down. That wasn't thought of as a creative way of solving a problem, which was dust, and a creative way of getting rid of motor oil. But all that stuff started leaching toward the water. So, you're really talking about maybe a month or two a year when the clams all spawn. They're microscopic and all the other shellfish. It's floating around in late June or early July. We're now draining for our own purposes everything into that water. We're wondering why it's having an adverse impact.

NS: Did you start to see a direct relationship between the non-point source pollution and the clamming and the scalloping that you were doing?

TR: Well, there's two kinds of direct impacts. One is, there's the intellectual way of looking at it and the practical way of looking at it. The practical way is those morons in the state won't let me dig clams out of there anymore because now it's polluted. Every year when I was clamming, I would live under the threat of, "Are they going to close this to shellfishing now because it's too polluted?" It was sort of one of those legitimate fears because I was less worried about my ability to harvest stuff because I was mobile. I'd go find something to harvest. Until the brown tide came, that really hurt. That hurt enormously. But would they close it to shellfishing? Because the states are driving around taking water samples. So, every time you look out and you see some gold crap on the road, you think, "Well, if that washes in the water, it goes in the ditch, it goes in Lake Montauk." I figure D.C. is going to pick it up on a water test, close it down. Now, I'm going to be committing a felony if I'm out there clamming. So, you sort of live under the constant threat of -- it's easy to get mad at the state, and Lord knows they're sometimes worthy of it. But the truth is they're trying to protect the public health. So, when they're closing down more and more areas to shellfishing, they're protecting the public health. They're only reacting to what's falling into the water. So, that's the sort of visceral effect. The more subtle one is that these things aren't reproducing. They're not reproducing for a reason.

NS: Have you seen more natural predators in these areas?

TR: Well, no. Actually, the weird part is the natural predators -- a lot of the natural predators died out probably in the [19]70s. When I was a kid, I mean, really small, one of my hobbies used to be picking starfish up, thousands and thousands of starfish. I thought it was great. They're predators. There aren't that many starfish out there now. Well, you're killing off everything. I mean, we all focus on, "Hi, if I can find it, I can sell it." So, part of the focus has always been the scallops and the clams and the oysters and the fish. Well, there's also a whole other biosystem down there that also died. I mean, from snorkeling around, which is when you're skin diving, you see everything. The brown tide and some of the other things, you can see the actual impact on the totality of the bottom. In particular, you can't view a farm field as a wonderful ecosystem because its sole purpose is to grow whatever crops on it. So, you can't really focus on underwater in the sense of, "Well, how many clams are there? How many oysters are there? How many scallops are there?" What really causes everything to live properly is a natural balance.

NS: What did you see changing in that underwater environment in your experience?

TR: There are areas during my skin diving that look barren, almost sterile.

NS: Had they always looked like that?

TR: No. At some point, there was a phase when you almost felt like, and this was the [19]70s into the [19]80s, where you almost felt like there was too much underwater vegetation. There were areas where it was dying and rotting.

NS: What were some of those areas?

TR: Well, Lake Montauk being a big one.

NS: Was it throughout Lake Montauk or specific areas?

TR: Eelgrass and other types of grass were right up on the edges. But in deeper water, literally, the bottom was anaerobic because there was so much rotting vegetation on the bottom that there were areas where it reeked. You knew that it was anaerobic, that it was without oxygen. The shellfish weren't going to live there. Now, you say, aren't plants natural? Well, yes, plants are natural, but if you put enough fertilizer in the water, you'll get an adverse bloom on the plants. Now, couple that with a couple of years of no hurricanes.

NS: What did the hurricanes do?

TR: Well, there's sort of like a cleansing effect to a hurricane. It's a catharsis. I mean, as much as everybody hates them because, oh God, look at all the damage they did, they do sort of -- in one bizarre sense, it's like, and I use this analogy once, when you walk on the ocean beach and you find all the crap that was, it's sort of like the ocean puking. It's like upchucking all this stuff back at us. Well, when you get hurricanes in there, it rips the bottom up. It's like a natural washing machine effect. It cleans a lot of this junk off the bottom because we almost have a eutrophication effect. If you're pumping enough fertilizer into the ground that's washing into the bays and you're causing all this bloom of the stuff, you may be doing wonderfully with the scallop crop. You're cramping out everything else.

NS: Why would it be good for the scallops?

TR: Because they like to set on stuff. So, they can set on top of.

NS: Of all the yield grass and the vegetation, whether it's alive or dead?

TR: Right. In the [19]70s, I used to, in my fertile little mind, conjure up ways of getting rid of yield grass because there was so much of it, it was driving me crazy. Waving and you'd have to go in there and hack it out to get at the clams. Then comes the brown tide, which is nature's kind of cosmic reaction to all this excess of plants. It kills everything off. A friend of mine who works for the town's job is planting yield grass under a probably grant program suit. Same thing that's funding this stuff. We're trying to plant this stuff now. I'm back in the old days thinking, I haven't figured out a way to rip it all off. Because there was so much of it that it was strangling the bottom. I'm like, "Goddamn yield grass." Now, people would kill for it, and transplanting it, in some cases, out of Montauk. Part of the reason, I got to believe, is the fertilizer load. I'm not a scientist, I don't have a degree in science, I don't know this. But there was an awful lot of stuff growing down here. When that water got warm and it came up, there was an awful lot of vegetation growing. When it dies, it falls down and lands on the bottom and rots. As much as something gets it out of there, it just sits there and adds eutrophication, even in the tidal system you were getting at. Then you get hurricanes and brown tides, you die the vegetation off. That's one of the reasons why I think shellfishing right now is better than it was in the [19]80s.

NS: Because you have more storms and --

TR: Because the brown tide, in one perverse sense, killed off so much vegetation, that it's back to where it should be. But it's sort of like solving one problem with another one. It's sort of like solving kudzu run away with a volcano. Kudzu's gone, but -- and this doesn't really happen because kudzu's only in Georgia. But there's a non-native species that's run amok. It's sort of like getting rid of that by burning down half the South. There's been a lot of traumatic between the brown tides and what I consider an overbloom of vegetation that was around in the [19]70s. But there is somewhat of a self-correcting mechanism in nature. Something we may have gone too far to shield the air.

NS: Do you think it was the lack of storms and hurricanes that helped the eelgrass to become --

TR: Well, I think there's too much phosphorus around, nitrogen and phosphorus.

NS: It's in the fertilizers.

TR: All that kind of stuff. Of course, just blooming. Things just grew. We had a calm period from about [19]65 until that [inaudible] of no real major storms that could have cleaned things out. In the winter, we had some ice overs. When we get freeze overs, then nothing gets churned up from the bottom. Which is an interesting perspective, because when your skin dive, you see it all. You see it in the winter. You see it in the summer.

NS: Did you ever go treading for clams?

TR: Yes.

NS: Under what circumstances would you go treading?

TR: If it was the most efficient way to get the clams at the time. I used to tread commercially. I mean, I did everything. Neoprene boots, but shred those. So, at some point, I used to walk around limping. Particularly when I was in college, somebody would cut all over my feet from clamshells and stuff. I'd go out, I'd shred them up, and I'd bring them in and keep repeating it.

NS: Did the other commercial fishermen go treading?

TR: Probably not. When I was clamming commercially in the [19]70s, which was really when I was in college, I was almost sometimes the only guy out there, because there was bass all over the place. Mostly baymen were catching bass, and they were catching them in boatloads. There were a lot of people who were working their way through college clamming. I was one of them. There were a couple of other people, too. Because you can make a lot of money in a short period of time and be outside all the time. But I'd tread because there was so much eelgrass in some places. The only way to get the clams out was treading them. You couldn't buy them out because you couldn't see through the eelgrass. You couldn't rake them out because you couldn't get the rakes under the eelgrass. So, you'd run around with your feet, you'd feel clammy, you'd drop down, pick it up, throw it in the basket, pop up. I've gotten three bushels doing that. I mean, I've gotten three bushels a day, consistently, picking them up that way.

NS: What was considered a good day?

TR: Well, it depends.

NS: Well, what was a good catch for you?

TR: Life's full of perspective. I mean, I used to love making $50. You could starve to death making that now.

NS: Tell me about the quantity of what you would catch.

TR: Seven bushels the most I ever got in one day. But 2,500 clams is about the most I ever got in a day. Now, those are two different numbers, because the day I got 2,500 clams, they were all necks. I was very happy, because I made -- well, I made about $275 a day is about the most I ever made clamming. The worst I ever made was like 20 bucks, but that's sort of skewed in the other way. I would always like to have gotten at least a bushel of necks a day. So, that's been anywhere from $35 when they were 7 cents a clam. I used to count the clam here. To when they were nearly 20 cents a clam.

NS: Is that a good number for some of the old-timers who were shellfishing?

TR: Well, it's a misleading statement, because I always wanted to get a bushel of necks. Then everything else that went with it are cherries and chowders. I don't know. I mean, the way I used to figure it -- it depends. It depends on what your perspective was. If you were clamming when there was nothing else to do, anything would be worthwhile. If you could make $100, you're probably making $100 a day now, which is a tremendous amount of money. Although this is now becoming the spring, so people are probably getting ready for spring fishing. On the other hand, there were same crews that could make $20,000 a night. Six, seven-man crew when the bass were running. So, clamming was sort of like, meh.

NS: It was always the secondary.

TR: I always did it because I was different. I had low overhead because I was diving. I was very happy with that. I wasn't too insane and stuff like that. But a lot of people clammed as a last resort, especially if you're not diving. If you're not diving, it's really --

NS: Were there other methods for harvesting scallops?

TR: Diving and dredging. Dredging is the traditional method. Almost anybody who's ever done a commercial does dredging because you can't in January do it any other way legitimately. Diving is second. Dip netting with a glass box and a little net over the side to pick them up. That's the recreational way of doing it. I've done that, too. But dredging is about the way everybody used to do it.

NS: Were the dredges standard in terms of the tradition or were there different ways of making those dredges?

TR: There were about 36 inches wide.

NS: You mentioned that, but I'm just wondering if there was a set number of vertical bars.

TR: Well, they don't have teeth. The front dredge's role in life was to clear the way. Get all the crap out of the way so that the back dredges could pick the scallops up. In harbors like Northwest and Napeague on opening day, you could have towed a shopping cart behind the boat and gotten scallops. It didn't take much skill. Any idiot could have done it. The commercial guys go out at 8:00 in the morning and be home at 9:30 a.m. They'd have 20 bushel between two guys. It was sort of like a greed-a-thon. How much can I grab in one? But when you got later into the season, it got tougher. So, people would start toying around. Probably because it was that time of the year when the sun was getting longer, with little experiments like towing chains, lashing sash weights to the front of the dredges, putting plywood along the front of the dredges and walls to try to figure out better ways to get more grass out of the way, but yet keep those scallops. Because the front dredges, not the back ones, was simply to pick those scallops up off the bottom. The front ones had to clear the way. So, people had Lake Montauk theories, deep water theories, weight the dredges down.

NS: What were some of those theories?

TR: Well, sash weights to get the dredges heavy. Some people would shorten up the bags in the back so they'd fill up less and you could rotate them quicker. You didn't have to lift them up. Other people in the front dredges would make big, long bags so they'd fill up and they'd be real heavy. Angles on the blades in the front where you'd sharpen them. How much of the bar comes up in front? People used to put plywood vertically across the front of it at a 90 degree to the bar. So, that would push and you'd elevate that slightly so that there'd be a couple inches under that front bar. So, the scallops would go under that as you were pushing the grass and dead grass and everything else out of the way. So, people used to try all kinds of things. Part of it was just the tinkerer's mentality. I'm not doing very well today. I'm not doing as well as I'd like to so I'm going to play around with the dredges.

NS: You mentioned that there were different approaches to different areas, the lake, and Napeague Harbor. What were some of those different approaches?

TR: Well, the theory that everybody used to operate on it. Northwest opened up first because of the state waters that always opened up growth. So, people would go pound on Northwest. Then you get into town waters. Almost everything outside of Montauk was sandy or bottomed. It was easy dredging. So, that took no skill. I mean, it took skill. Everything takes skill. But it took less skill. Then traditionally, scallops season opened October 1st. Now, that's all been changed. Late September would open the state waters. People would run up to Northwest to clean those scallops out, hit the town waters in October. Then when both are of the town waters, the fleet would move to Montauk and hope that a lot of the grass that Montauk had died out by the time the cold water came around. So, they'd be out there in November, and you could go through Lake Montauk all winter because it was much harder to clean out. The western harbors were easier because the bottoms were sandy. There were scallops laying all over them. I mean, it'd be

literally -- scallop season opened at sunrise on October 1st. At sunrise on October 1st, generally speaking, you could count 200 boats. I've been out there and seen 200 boats all scalloping the same harbor. They'd be back there the next day. In two weeks, there'd be no scallops left. That was the great greed of ton. Then the guys that really made a living off of this, not the weekend warriors and everybody, would be out there grinding, as the term was known, out a living all year. I've seen guys scalloping in snowstorms. I one day looked out the window of my parents' house and saw people scalloping in Lake Montauk on Thanksgiving morning. That people would do year-round. You'd see the ice started moving. They'd be along the edge of the ice. Then March 31st would come. Well, most of it was gone by then, but March 31st was the end of scallop season. So, it was very along that way. Sometimes people would go in December, there'd be no more scallops, and they'd start eeling or clamming or something like that to hold them over until March and April and start getting the pound traps ready for the summer. So, it was sort of the seasons and everything was all focused around this. Then the double whammy of not being able to catch bass in the summer, and then the scallops all died during the brown tide sort of killed --

NS: Did most of the East Hampton baymen work on, you mentioned, Northwest Harbor, 3 Mile Harbor, Napeague Harbor, and the Lake Montauk? Was that considered the territory?

TR: That and Accabonac Creek. Also known as Accabonac Creek.

NS: Over towards Sammy's Beach, is that --

TR: That last point --

NS: I know that.

TR: -- Drawer Drive. That harbor in there has got a lot of clams in it. It's had scallops in it in the past. The [inaudible] was the posy. Springs was the bonnakers. East Hampton was the bubbies.

NS: So, everybody stayed in their neighborhood?

TR: No, but people tended to have their favorite harbor as their favorite area. Northwest Harbor was loaded with scallops. Most everybody in East Hampton went there. There was even Napeague, 3 Mile Harbor. But people would -- you get bored enough in the winter, and you don't like scallops, and you go look for scallops. Then people would head out to Montauk for the last resort. Those of us, the few that lived out at Montauk, sort of viewed Montauk as if there wasn't something there, then we'd go scrounge it up somewhere else.

NS: The Northwest Harbor, were there baymen from other parts of the estuary that came there?

TR: Yes. Well, if you sit in the middle of Northwest Harbor, you can see Shelter Island. It's virtually there. I mean, it's on Northwest Harbor. South Hole's not that far by boat, and South Hampton's right up at the other end. Northwest Harbor and the surrounding area were really a resource for the entire area because it's the state. The Town of East Hampton hasn't in the past

claimed it as its own.

NS: So, only town residents can --

TR: Yes. But the state controls it. So, for all intents and purposes, it's state waters. So, the Northwest Harbor really was a resource for everybody. It's big. There were scallops all over the place. People used to clam out there too, commercially from Sand Creek Harbor and that area. But really, that was a scallop. I remember one year they took 20,000 bushels of scallops out of there in the first few weeks. Based on the number of boats that were working on the number of days getting their limits every day and just go out there and just pound and pound, it's unbelievable. That body of water is arguably the most fertile scallop grounds that little brown tide went to.

NS: There's been a lot of not shellfish dredging navigational dredging over the years in different parts of the shoreline. Can you think of any specific dredging projects that you later reflected on and say that may have done something?

TR: Not particularly. I mean, Lake Montauk would not have been what it is today without dredging. It would have been what it used to be. I don't think dredging in and of itself has adversely impacted that much. The problem with dredging is logical transparency follows. Or in the case of not dredging in some places, like fresh pond, is basically filling in. I couldn't even get my kayak in there one day. If you can't get a kayak somewhere, you're really at the deep end. But if you're going to do a massive dredging, you're going to change salinity. Because if you've got something that's very freshwatery now and you plow out a channel, you may --

NS: Can you think of an example of that happening? Remember, none of this has been written down, really.

TR: Well, we don't have that many massive dredging projects because -- I mean, on a tangent, which is not answering the question, but answering another question. I graduated from college. I'm contemplating going to law school. I'm scalloping, clamming on my own. I read about this effort to build a large fish processing plant on the north end of East Lake Drive in Montauk. Someone I know is somewhat involved in fighting it. I get involved in fighting it, because I'm like, this thing's going to destroy Lake Montauk, in my humble opinion. Because I was fighting that, I got involved in a land preservation battle involving Hither Woods in Montauk, which got me appointed to the East Hampton Town Planning Board in 1984. Being on the planning board got people thinking I should run for public office in 1988. So, I wound up running for public office and got elected to public office. Being in public office got me elected to -- got me -- no, renominated for various reasons, which no one will be bored with. But during that period of time, I was doing a civil service test. So, how I wound up being assistant director of Housing and Community Development for the Town of East Hampton, was because at one point in my life, I said, "Oh, my god, I'm not going to be able to clam anymore in Lake Montauk for a living if they build this crazy fish factory on the end of East Lake Drive and destroy the body of water that I love so much." So, that's how come I'm now a civil servant. Now, that makes absolutely no sense, except it's what happened. But I got involved because I was like, "Hey, I like clamming. This is going to wreck what I'm doing." We've been pretty good in East Hampton

about not having anything destroyed totally. It's not a point source that's killed.

NS: What about other parts of the estuary? Can you think of actions that happened?

TR: Well, the problem with clams is they grow great in the worst places. Well, one of the best places for clams is at the discharge pipes at sewage plants. Now, I reckon that's at Bay Rhode Island. You just have all kinds of trouble with people poaching them out of there. There are clams all over Jamaica Bay. You can't eat them. The biology of those bottoms, I wouldn't want to go near in a million years. In terms of have we done anything out here in terms of dredging projects? Not that I know of. I think that's the least of our problems because that's really episodic. We control them so much you can't dredge during breeding season anyway. For the reason that you don't want people dredging the sediment up and killing the clams. We've done a good job controlling. See, that's the problem that we've done to ourselves in a perverse way is we focus so much on the one episodic event that we're losing track of the fact. We've got good handle on preventing episodic things from killing. Like a dredging project, a fish dock, or a nuclear power plant, or something like that, that we've lost track that our everyday existence and our way of life is killing off all that we love. As a self-described environmentalist, we've created the ultimate paradox for ourselves. The better job we do of preserving the area, the more people want to live here. So, what we've done is, in a continuing effort to preserve what we hold near and dear, more people want to come out here. So, it's not the big event that's doing it in. But it's everybody who throws some more five, ten, and five on their lawn, or it's everybody who's going to have a green lawn and no mosquitoes, or it's everybody who flushes the toilet. It's everybody whose life is sort of loading all this stuff into the waters. We've always operated on the premise that, "Well, if you can't see it, it can't hurt you." But what we've done is, our bays, in some ways, are our parakeets. They take them down into the mines, right?

NS: Yes.

TR: They croak first. That's how everybody knows something's wrong. In order to occur to somebody that we've got -- if we've got brown tide blooms in our waters on a reasonably consistent basis, that's killing off everything in the water, that something is seriously wrong. But everybody looks at it in terms of, "Well, let's blame somebody else, A." B, non-point source is so overwhelming that everybody sort of looks the other way. A lot of people have sweared that the sewage treatment plant and riverhead has been thoughtful for the brown tide. They may very well be right.

NS: Spent all this time here. This is Nancy Solomon and Tom Ruhle. April 4th, 1997. Tape Two, Side One.

TR: It's actually April 3rd.

NS: Oh, April 3rd.

TR: I haven't been talking that long, or it may seem like it. We just lose track of everything that we throw into the water. We don't see the big collapse. Well, this year, without brown tide, we haven't had big collapses. What happens is, each year, there's maybe 10 percent less shellfish.

Next thing you know, there's like, what happens to the shellfish?

NS: Has there ever been a big collapse?

TR: Brown tide has wiped out the solid population.

NS: Before that?

TR: Not that I remember, although oysters obviously disappeared mysteriously. I mean, they sort of vanished. The wheat fish disappeared completely. Blowfish disappeared completely. They both come back, varying degrees. We almost wiped striped bass out in our little area. I mean, we've got them back now through strict conservation. I mean, all the baymen can't stand the striped bass regulation because it puts them out of business and wrecks the whole thing. But no one can deny they've brought striped bass back. The problem is human nature. You get a reduced fishery, everybody's arguing over it. "My fish. No, my fish. No, my fish." As opposed to saying, how about the fact that this is everybody's fish and they're all -- we're catching the last one, whether it's a sports fisherman or it's a commercial fisherman. The reverse of this, sports fishermen hate commercial fishermen, which is a gross characterization.

NS: Oh, sure. It's well-documented.

TR: What they don't understand is that when you go to supermarkets, the fish didn't fly there on its own accord. They're not two fish out in the back reproducing fish. I mean, commercial fishermen are sort of -- for whatever great benefit that we get to ourselves, we're catching food for other people. For people who don't have the opportunity to live in East Hampton or the time to go out and get a fishing rod and go out and catch fish. So, commercial fishermen play an extraordinarily valuable role because they go out and they catch food for people. People in New York City aren't going to be distressed best if the only way you can get is for sports fishermen to catch it. On the other hand, instead of trying to figure out who's to blame for the last fish, we have to recognize the fact that if we catch the last fish, we're destroying an entire resource for the agency.

NS: Did you find that there were divisions among commercial fishermen between who went shellfishing and who went fin fishing, or was it usually one person would do both?

TR: Well, some people do anything in terms of making money. I mean, I've had commercial fishermen, long-time commercial fishermen threaten to run me over because they didn't like divers. They tried to outlaw us in 1978. I mean, they literally tried to get the town trustees to make skin diving for shellfish illegal because we were evil. In a perversity of life, which is sort of like what comes around goes around, the same argument was used against them to a degree because the sports fishermen ran up to Albany and said, "Wholesaling is dangerous. They're catching all the fish." They banned wholesaling. Well, if somebody wants to find tax reform, that is, I pay less, you pay more.

[laughter]

TR: Think about that. Bad fishing technique means I use another technique. Yours is bad; mine is good. That's an oversimplification. But, yes, there's always been. I mean, when we fought that in fish factory, the offshore guys were all in favor of this. The inshore guys were all like, "Oh, my god, they're going to wipe out this stuff." Divers always looked at as, like, weird because we use modern techniques. Now, there's a battle between aquaculture and traditional harvesting methods. The traditional harvesters are fearful of aquaculture. The aquaculture is like this is -- it would be analogous to go, "Well, we're going to meet our beef population by running around in the woods looking for cows." If the only way you could buy a turkey in the supermarket was if somebody went out and shot one in the woods and sold it to the IGA, nobody had turkey for Christmas. Being a bayman, as wonderful as it was, is basically an inefficient method. You're running around on the published property trying to round up as many of something, shellfish, and hauling it home and then selling it to somebody as opposed to cultivating the land. On the other hand, you'll learn something from the mistake that we sold all our land out and now we're trying to buy it back.

NS: When you were talking about the modern technology of diving, can you tell me a little bit more about that? You described the flippers that you would use.

TR: The wetsuit, masks, fins. Some people used scuba tanks. They're right down on the bottom. The old method of dragging a rake across the bottom is to drag a rake across the bottom to get a clam. Skin diving, you should go to the clams. You know where they are. You get down there. In some cases, when clams breed, they come up real close to the top and they take the little top of the clam out of the water and then they stand so they can shoot up the eggs and they shoot up the sperm and the meat in the water column and drop down. When they come up that high, you can see them. So, you run amok digging clams for them. I mean, some of my best days have been during breeding season. When they're sporting, they're easier to catch. So, you go out there and catch vast quantities of clams. There's something perverse about that. The argument that was raised, which is superfluous, is where you pick smaller clams. Because with the clam rake, they fall through. But when you're diving, you can see all the sizes. But literally, we go right down there. Our scallops, you get to see them because they're right on top of the bottom. You get to pick them up.

NS: When is clamming season?

TR: June. It's water temperature related. You can trick clam and scallops into spawning several times by perversely cooling them off and then warming them up again.

NS: How would you do that?

TR: Well, that's what aquacultures do. They can manipulate water temperature. Not in the wild. No, in the wild, you would depend on the water temperature. Sometimes you get a double spawn in the fall. But basically, as the clams came out of the cold winter, they would start to spawn when they started warming up. That's when spawning season is. June is the time when you can just pound away and do real well. However, I am convinced clams taste better in the winter. Now, some people say you can't tell the difference, but they really do taste better in the winter. They're traditionally associated with the summer. I mean, no one really thinks, "Well, let's go

out. After a nice day of ice skating, we'll come home and have clams." But the truth of the matter is they taste better in the winter. All shellfish taste better in the winter.

NS: Why is that?

TR: Well, that's a good question. They fatten up through the winter. So, in the winter, they seem to be fatter. They're more milky and watery in the summer. They've just gone through spawning, so I guess they're tired and weakened. That's not based on science. That's based on my observation. But in the winter, they're firm. They're solid. They're fat. They're real happy. They're bulked up through the long winter. So, when you get around them, they really taste better.

NS: How many commercial divers were there, like yourself?

TR: I'd say, you can probably find four or five guys out in Montauk in the summer. In the winter, you can find one or two. But there were always a couple of us out there trying not to run each other over.

NS: Do you remember when the first person try and go diving for clam when that happened?

TR: I don't know. I don't remember that. I've always dove. I just started as a kid, snorkeling along, and I'd see a blue-clawed crab. I'd grab him, bring him home, eat him. See clams, dig him up. See more clams, dig more of them up. See more clams, dig more of them up, I said, "I could sell these." I started selling them. When I was in eighth grade, I had a commercial license to go scalloping. Fellow scallops. I still have commercial licenses because I go out and catch stuff. I don't sell anything anymore, but I go out and catch it, freeze it, give it away.

NS: Do you think you were among the first that did this?

TR: I was one of the first who really did it on a long-term basis.

NS: That's what I was wondering.

TR: But there were other people. It really started to take off in the mid-[19]70s when they tried to ban it for some strange new endeavor that was endangering the shellfish population. We're still looked on with certain amounts of suspicion. At least now we're sort of considered somewhat mainstream. You have to remember, somebody who was -- if you were forty in 1970 -- it's 1975. You were born in 1935. The way we clam is with the rakes and the tongs. This is the way they've been doing it for hundreds of years. There are all kinds of these guys in rubber suits and snorkels and stuff. My bottom line is, "How many clams can I get in one day?" Still comply with the --

NS: Did you have a boat?

TR: Not really. Yes and no. But the short answer is no. I was very low-tech. I mean, I had a device, which was a boat in a sense of It was a boat, but not in the traditional sense of a boat, an

engine, something like that. I towed it behind me.

NS: So, you had a place to put the clams and your equipment?

TR: Absolutely. Well, what I used to do is I used to go out to the clams. I'd start clamming at the spot. After I got a bushel of clams, I would put them in a basket. I would tie the boat to the basket. Then I would fill each bag up because I'd leave everything under water. So, I'd get six bags, which is three bushels or more. I wasn't going back to my truck until I was done. So, I'd have everything buried under water and I'd lift it off, throw it in my boat, and tow it, and swim that back or walk it back depending on where I was. So, in the sense that I didn't have a power bus, at times during when I commercially did, I had a power bus, but I almost found that to be more efficient, more inefficient, because then you'd have to launch the boat. This way it was like, "Boom, hit the water, and go for it."

NS: Were there some tides that were better for clamming and scalloping than others?

TR: Well, there's three ways to answer that. I'll give you all the answers. We'll be here forever. Soft clamming and hard clamming when you're not diving. The lowest tides are better. Soft clamming, you really need a low tide.

NS: So, you can see the holes.

TR: Well, because they're living in the intertidal zone. They're living between high and low water, the soft clamming. Well, you either go by the law of -- well, as you know the new moon, tides are lowest or you get the compute generated charts off of personal computer.

NS: Well, we're talking about back when you were in college.

TR: Well, I used to buy the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tide charts and study them ferociously. They put the predictions when the tides are lowest. Literally, I'd be like -- I can tell you the last -- this weekend is the new moon. Monday is the new moon so the tides are going to be the lowest on Sunday and the front of my eye probably won't clam on Sunday. But it's really keyed around those. Now, if you're working -- if you're dependent on high and low water, you quite literally in the winter can have no low water during daylight. Low tide is at 6:30 p.m. At 5:30 p.m., you're screwed. If you're dependent on a tide, if you've got to go soft clamming. If you're going to go soft clamming, literally, under low you cannot harvest shellfish at night. I know methods of doing that. I mean, but you really can't. I mean, if you're doing it commercially, you should try to comply with the law. Which sounds like a lot of people don't but I mean, you're not supposed to follow. If you're in a boat, you can clam. But obviously, the more water you've got in there, the bigger pain it is. Diving is weird because in some places, you want high water. You don't want low water. Because if it's real close to the shore, and in some cases, where there's rocks and stuff, you want to be as close to the beach as possible. Especially in the area around Osborne Island, you want as much water in there because you can't snorkel in a foot of water. So, there you almost want high tide. So, there were times when I'd do one method when the tide was -- and when I was treading, I would follow the tide like a maniac. I mean, I remember in the summer treading and going clamming twice a day because low water is

at 6:30 p.m. So, three before three after. You get there at sunrise. You clam until 9:30 p.m. You come home. You crash, watch garbage on TV. Around 3:00 in the afternoon, you go back out and clam from 3:00 p.m. until sundown. Because you had no choice when you're treading. Now, when you're diving, sometimes the only thing that really drove me crazy was really low tides. In scalloping, generally speaking, I'd love the low tide the better unless the scallops were in real close and I wanted water underneath. So, what it was, was you'd figure out what you were doing and you'd get the tide charts out and you sort of worked through that. So, I mean, if you're soft clamming which I soft clam commercially sometimes because it's whatever you can harvest and you can get the most money for it. Like now, the calendar's got marks on it and little highlights for the lowest tides of the year and it's short of the weather being hideous or blown out of the east which piles the water up. If you get northwest and high pressure, it'll blow the water up lower. You go for it. Those are the days you're going to go soft clamming. Those are the days you'll do the best hard clamming. So, it can be very tide dependent. But the reason people have boats and eight-foot aluminum handles on clam rigs where you can put three of them on is to avoid being done above the tides. So, I mean, that's the three answers which is sometimes you want high water, most of the time you want low water, and sometimes it doesn't matter that much.

NS: Where would you sell your catch to?

TR: Mostly Gosman's Fish Market, a lot. Stuart's, the seafood shop, other places.

NS: Any particular reason why?

TR: Because my product was good. Gosman's recognized that my product was good. They would take clams from me when maybe they didn't really need them. I wouldn't screw them on the other end when everybody and their brother was looking to buy clams for me. Guys would stop me in restaurants and say, "You want to sell your clams?" I was like, "No, I'd sell them to Gosman's." So, there was loyalty there. They're very honest and I tried to be honest in a good relationship. I mean, ultimately, that's what it is because you try -- if you try screwing people, then they'll say, "Well, we don't want clams today." So, my feeling was I wasn't going to try to get a penny of clams sometimes more somewhere else. On the other hand, they would take clams even if they had them because I was supplying clams to the fish market.

NS: Was it hard to establish that relationship?

TR: Well, early on, it was sort of like -- I had at times gotten stuck with clams, like what's wrong with me? It's tougher in the winter because, in some cases, God puts his clothes and you have to do your hair if you're selling. You sell stuff elsewhere. Scallops, you could always sell. See, that was the beauty with scallops. Scallop people would always buy scallops.

NS: Who would be your scallop customers?

TR: Well, Gosman's used to buy scallops but they'd start closing that time of the year. So, there used to be a lot of shucking houses when I began to right along the highway. Nobody was allowed to -- you weren't technically allowed to hold the scallops at home. It was a violation of

the law, but a lot of people did that. Then they just brought the meat up and they sold them and anybody would buy it. As long as it didn't reek or soak in cold water, you could sell anything.

NS: Would you get more money for shucked scallops or shucked clams?

TR: Well, not shucked clams, but shucked scallops, yes.

NS: That's right. They'd shuck them at the restaurants.

TR: Well, clams, yes. You'd sell them at the shops. But shucked scallops openers were -- yes. I mean, there were times, I used to be up at 1:00 in the morning opening scallops and I'd get up the next day and my blurry eyes would go scallops. But that comes with the territory. Because two weeks later, you might not be getting scallops when you've got clam in there. Sometimes that was a pain in the ass driving around trying to sell stuff in the winter. That's really why I like Gosman's when they're open. I'd harvest it, I'd throw it in my truck, I'd drive it up the road, sell a clam, I'd go back, and keep it up. But that's sort of the way you try to establish a relationship where you just continually supply that way. Some guys do sell stuff in the back of trucks and do all kinds of fun funky things. You could probably increase your fuel per unit price, but I was like -- I'd rather be out harvesting. I'd rather just harvest. When I was clamming, which was a heavy -- which was in the summer, summer being the time of October, I want to harvest. I wasn't into marketing. Dig them up and sell them. I'd rather be digging them up.

NS: Is that a feeling that you felt other commercials?

TR: Why did a lot of people -- I mean, I think that's what really hurts a lot. Because people never view fishing or scalloping or shellfish as work in the sense that making ROI calculations on investments in time, how much is my yield going to do if I do this. It's not like that kind of a cold calculation. People love doing it. I mean, everybody has these the warped version of the payment, which is this stuff that's been romanticized by everyone from Billy Joel to every South of the Highway cocktail party pictures and photo essays and stuff like that. Part of it is wonderful. Part of it is these are pretty -- there's days that are pretty nasty and hideous cold feet, chapped hands.

NS: How many days would you go out as a year-round?

TR: I never really kept track. I don't know. I mean, I'm trying to do a quick math in my head.

NS: I know. I did the same thing.

TR: I say twenty days, but I don't know if that's right or wrong. But there were days when you'd go out there and you'd sort of see if you could do anything and you were really good and you would go home. It's sort of something I love doing. What I make now in my lifestyle that I've now become accustomed to, I don't -- I'm in a position where I can't really go back and do it. I'd love to go back and play on my wife. She knows I love to go back and play. She would be supportive of it, but economics, it just doesn't work. But I love doing it. There's nothing I love more. It's like weird. How can you work fourteen hours a day at times? I'm not going to sit here

and tell you I work fourteen hours a day every day. It was like seven days a week, twenty-four days a week, and I used to take Christmas off. Because I didn't -- that wasn't it. You didn't really do that. I mean, it was weeks I didn't work. There were weeks I did other things. I mean, there were months I did other things at times. Because sometimes in the winter, my father had a carpentry business because I worked with him because I'd make more money or it just -- it was like, I'm not going to kill myself in February. But I missed clamming so much. Why don't I recreationally clam? I mean, a friend of mine and I were out there this year in a snowstorm. Well, we didn't have any snow this year.

NS: We had none.

TR: Well, we had two.

NS: Yes. You had one more storm than Upper Island.

TR: Well, we had an overnight snowstorm in January. We were out there in the middle of a snowstorm clamming, late on a Saturday, and it snowed into a Sunday and it was a Sunday morning. Well, what the hell are we doing out there? He's an excellent plumber. I'm a civil servant. But what the hell are the two of us doing, standing in the middle of Lake Montauk with these huge rakes clamming when we both have four more clams with us than we need? So, I go home and give them out, I mean, give them away. We love it. I mean, it's like, it's fun. It's a way of life. You're out there in the outdoors. You're commuting with nature. I'm in a wetsuit. He's in a pair of high-tech waders. But you love it. We just absolutely plain love it. So, it's hard to say -- I mean, people worked real hard and people made money and didn't make money, but that wasn't really the purpose of it. It was just because they loved doing it. It's one of those things that, like probably a lot of other things, are going to pass me as living. But it isn't as bucolic as a lot of people seem to think. I've been cold. I've been wet. I've been cut. I've been bitten by jellyfish. Terrorized by, in one case, a seal. Nearly run over by water skiers. All kinds of stuff happen to me. It's not like all Billy Joel. The upside to it is everybody loves it. The downside is, I mean, there's people who don't have medical insurance, pension plans, can't swim. I mean, this thing that drowned out here. He couldn't swim. Now I'm like, "How do I open the water and not swim?" Not my problem. But it was something I loved doing. I still miss it. When I'm out there, I'm happy.

NS: When did you decide that you weren't going to do clamming anymore?

TR: Well, it's weird. I ran for office for various reasons. But I figured, "Hey, it's half-worth, part-time. I can do self-interest on the side." Boy, was that a rude awakening?

NS: It's a part-time salary. It's a part-time job.

TR: Yes, exactly.

NS: It's not my job.

TR: In theory, I'll clam on the side. Hey, I can do both. I can do something I love and make a

difference. Well, what happened was I wound up, as it turned out, being more of a full-time job. Then I wound up, while I was on the town board, with a wife and a house. Then I wound up in the real world. Oh, my god. Now, I just start thinking about that.

NS: When were you elected?

TR: [19]88. So, you kind of start being respectable. You start a pension plan. Now, I'm college-educated, so arguably I'm just underachieving in a way. Loving every minute of it. But now, I'm, like, now I'm respectable. I'm assistant director of housing and community development for the Town of East Hampton. I make a decent living. I have a house, a mortgage, a wife, a dead car at this point. So, I can't really go back to the somewhat irresponsible. I can't make the amount of money I need to make to survive. So, about the same time, like, [19]86, [19]87, when the brown tide hits real hard, it's real hard diving and you can't see the bottom. You're a foot away from it. That was very depressing. Not depressing in the clinical sense. It was depressing, but, like, what am I doing out here? Because it really made -- not only was the perception that the reality of it -- I mean, if the brown tide going unabated would have wiped out my existence. I wouldn't have been able to clam. Even if I was having trouble clamming, which is legitimately what was happening to me in the late [19]80s, because the brown tide was making it possible. I was diving for clams and I couldn't see them. They were also killing off the baby clams. So, lights go off, bells go off, not being all that stupid. This continues much longer. There aren't going to be any clams and I'm not going to have any money. That double-ended thing sort of led one to believe that -- and then happenstance being what it was, I wound up running for office as an undergraduate. Then I just devolved into -- away from it. I sorely missed it. In some sense, it's self-delusional. Because I miss the [19]70s and [19]80s. I don't miss the time with the brown tide and the diminishing harvest. I miss the old days. If somebody's thirty-nine, talking about the old days, like, reminiscing with the -- like those were the days, that's really what I miss. I don't miss the brown tide. I don't miss looking at the world. It's like Charlotte Brown. I miss the days with the scallops. I go scalloping on opening day. I get to eat scallops. I have to do that. That's downright depressing. Why do I keep going? Because I remember when I went out there in the [19]70s. I remember eating scallops, freezing enough scallops away from myself so that I'd have scallops all winter. That's what I remember when I'm out there on opening day. I don't remember the year I got nothing. Well, I do remember when I got my truck back. So, yes, it's memories. Now, I'm in the position of being a gentleman baymen. What's a gentleman? Well, I can go out in a snowstorm. But I can go out in a snowstorm knowing that the mortgage is paid for and that I'm not going to -- I can go home early if I have to. I don't have to stay, I think, three hours or two hours. I don't even have to stay up there at all. I love it. I enjoy it. I miss it. But what I'm missing is, I'm really missing the [19]70s and the [19]80s, the early [19]80s, because that's when it was really productive and prosperous. There was stuff around. The adrenaline would be flowing when it was scallop season, and then watching the World Series, shuffling scallops. I mean, those kind of memories. My late cat who used to sit next to me.

NS: This is Nancy Solomon and Tom Ruhle. Take 2, Side 2.

TR: My cat, my old cat, who I got when I was with my current wife. I was eight, and that cat lived until I was approximately twenty-five was -- used to love scallops. Absolutely loved raw

scallops. That cat would sit next to me when I'd chuck scallops. The health department would love this story, I mean, the D.C. would love this, definitely. You'd chuck away. When you got to a small one that wasn't really that valuable, you'd flip one over to the cat. The cat would eat the scallop raw. You'd put a little -- put it in the shell, and he'd really love it. But if you had really good scallops, and you were, like, chucking away, the cat didn't get the requisite scallop fast enough, he would put his paw up on your leg. Like, hey, give me a scallop.

[laughter]

TR: So, I'd chuck this and then he'd be like, "Oh, no, no, no, no." I'd chuck the cat a scallop. Sounds totally and completely crazy, but that cat grew up with me scalloping. That cat would sit next to my father and I when we were shucking scallops in the backyard. That cat would, like, demand its requisite scallops. Those are the kind of things I miss, but that's not the reality. The reality is that this year, I got to mix in those scallops. Probably, arguably, the best bayman in Montauk got, maybe, who's somebody you should probably talk to, (Stuart Heaton?), who, in my humble opinion, is the best guy out there now, in terms of scalloping, clams, and everything else, and striped bass, and everything else. Stuart didn't do that well. he really had a couple more bushel dredging than I did diving. So, it was a bleak year. So, my memories of what I miss is what I missed in the past. I guess I'm rational enough to know that, but still, I miss it a lot.

NS: One of the things that I've always been curious about, for people who don't make their living off the bay, you see these maps, the nautical charts, the NOAA maps. Are they realistic in terms of what you have found in terms of the contours and the depths?

TR: Yes, but the degree of subtlety isn't there. The difference between a foot of water and three feet of water can be the difference between where there's clams and where there's not clams and along those gradations. So, in terms of not running your boat up on the bottom, they're good charts. Finding stuff, again, you'll never do it. You'll never do it.

NS: What about the shoreline, has the shoreline changed? I know erosion is a much bigger problem.

TR: Well, the ocean shoreline is --

NS: What about the bay shoreline?

TR: Well, there's erosion on the bay, too. That's why there's a lot of erosion on the bay because it's far less protected. Our bay side, Montauk up to [inaudible], is wide open. I mean, Peconic Bay is downright flat. I mean, friends of mine and I were surfing, I mean, bodyboarding, in my case, on the bay last year. Now, as irrational as that may sound, we're talking six-to-eight-foot waves coming in a cloud. There were literally surfers out there, and serious bodyboarders like me. There was also a lot of this. Our bay is sort of not the bucolic, peconic, as you get this far east. I mean, we're talking serious rough water. That's the way we get a lot more stress because it's more ocean-like. But yes, that stuff's getting pounded away. I mean, to me, erosion's not a big deal, because it's natural. You figure the shellfish have been around for what, a hundred, a million years, a long time. That stuff's unaffected by erosion.

NS: That's what I was wondering.

TR: We stick a house on top of the bluff and announce this.

NS: What about the kind of erosion form water skis and jet skis, has that affected the shellfishing habitats?

TR: Well, the problem you have with jet skis is that they're irrationally operated by people who are into adrenaline. It's the estuary you've got to watch. I mean, it's the intertidal zone, a.k.a. wetlands, saltwater wetlands, that you don't want people in running around with that kind of stuff, damaging it.

NS: So, there has been damage to the wetlands?

TR: Yes. There's been plenty of damage and stuff like that. Water skiers are fine. It's just boats, in general, put oil and stuff into the water. I mean, I almost got run over by a water skier, but that's just me.

NS: Can you think of particular areas where there's been a major change, a significant change, because of boats?

TR: Well, there's just so many of them. I mean, jet skis are now becoming almost ubiquitous. They're banned from the harbors in East Tampa today. I mean, I've been kayaking in Northwest Creek and rolling along in a passive and serene surroundings, seem to be accosted by [drilling sound]. That's an aesthetics argument, but it's a pain in the ass if you're the one who's paddling along gently on a kayak. My wife and I have three kayaks between us, one two-man and two one-man. We go out in the bay, so we paddle around and we enjoy it. These things are a noise intrusion, like you would believe. Plus, in some cases, they've been operated very dangerously. The operators are to blame for that. I mean, I was clamming in the middle of Fort Pond Bay once, just seeing if there was anything out there, and these two jet skiers were like circling my boat just because I was a nice turnaround. I'm like not -- was not pleased with their activity. That was the [19]70s, basically.

NS: I am wondering if there is a long-term impact on the shellfish activities?

TR: I don't know that there is, or isn't. But it's sort of an aesthetics argument. Welcome to nature. What nature sounds like is [drilling sound].

NS: Right. I understand that, and I sympathize with it as well.

TR: I mean, it's shut down, and people are living crap out of it.

NS: I'm just wondering if there's –

TR: Well, you don't know what's doing it. I mean, obviously --

NS: Well, we can try and isolate specific things. If there's one area where you know there's been a lot of water skiing or jet skiing, and now there are no clams.

TR: Water skiers tend to a deeper water. Jet skiers have been banned from the harbors. I wrote that law, so I kind of know that.

NS: It is a good law.

TR: I wish you could ban them from everywhere. They shouldn't be in the harbors because they're operated irrationally. Anyone like the guy tried to tell me at the public hearing, these things are for -- they advertise them to be like wave riders. So, I mean, they're just a big old nuisance. The problem is the more internal combustion engines you put on water, the more oils and gases and things like that, and that is fatal to safety by every stretch of the imagination. I mean, you can't reasonably --

NS: Have you seen more boats over the years?

TR: Absolutely. Except I think things are getting somewhat better. We went through a period where people used to throw garbage. Just routinely throw garbage off the side of sailboats that were moored in Lake Montauk. Barbecues. I mean, barbecue at night, and throw it all in the water. People are getting better about using the water as one giant waste disposal. People are getting better about not throwing out as much. There's still jerks out there, but it's getting better. We're tackling the obvious stuff, like don't throw stuff in the water. Non-point sources are killing us because we can't identify the specifics. But in the old days, people threw everything. You'd find dumpsters in the water, garbage cans. Now, there's a lot less junk in the water. The waters are getting better in some degrees.

NS: How many more boats are there now, say, compared to when you were growing up? Twice as many? Three times as many?

TR: I'd say there's maybe one and a half times the amount of boats. But the period of time that they're out there is greatly extended. It used to be Labor Day, everybody disappeared. Now, there's people out there from April to November, easy. So, the season's expanded, which is good for commerce, but it's having more of an impact. The sailboats have gone up. I mean, the people mooring have gone up, coming over and sleeping on their boats and stuff like that. That's up. I mean, powerboats are up, too. Not as dramatically in the sense that the big boom took place probably in the [19]70s. From the [19]60s, clearly. In my recollections as a kid, there's a tremendous increase. Most of that increase was in the [19]70s. It sort of stabilized in the [19]80s, and it's grown gently. But the season's expanded dramatically. But that sort of has to do with demographics in the area, too. Huge boom in the [19]80s and [19]70s. [19]60s was really less because there were just less people.

NS: Nobody could get there.

TR: Right.

NS: [inaudible]

TR: Yes.

NS: There was no LIE.

TR: Right. Then they improved our life off the deep end. The closet's here. It always fills up. Infrastructure's great, except it has a price.

NS: Are there other things that come to your mind that we haven't talked about? I am feeling like we've covered a great deal.

TR: Yes. We've covered just about everything that's possible.

NS: I'm going to turn off the tape recorder, because I want to ask you about some of the other people I should talk to.

TR: I guess, the one last thing. This community, prior to its invasion, was a farming and fishing community, essentially, a few other things. The collapse of the fishing industry and the reduction in the quality of the bays has been directly related to the increase in population. You could almost plot that on a graph. Some places, the farms' impacts are going to be felt because of chemical fertilizers and things like that. The loss of the baymen's way of life is sort of symbolic of what happened to the entire area. That's the interesting sense of where were we and where are we now and where are we going. If we lose it, because the bays, especially the inland bays, are so -- they're sort of either a harbinger or a precursor of things to come. I mean, [inaudible], you sort of looked at the comments and said, "Oh, my god, the pale box means that all these harbingers --" actually, if you look at the water, it's a real good indicator of what's happening. In the sense that it's somewhat, in some cases, I think, getting better now, it's a good sign. But a lot of the excesses of the [19]60s and [19]70s manifested themselves in the water in the [19]70s and [19]80s. We got a bit of a time delay. But it's a real mirror of what we've been doing. That, by default, has affected the baymen because we've been really dependent on water quality more than anything else. We're not planting those shellfish. This is nature. When you really see it on a day-to-day basis, you can see the deterioration. It's deterioration of a lot of things. So, it's just one of those things that's symbolic of a lot. That's why saving the Peconic is symbolic of a lot of things, too. So, to save your way of life while you're saving that body of water. It's not just let's save this body of water at the -- saving that body of water is a Peconic County idea. The whole thing is trying to save the way things used to be.

NS: This is the end of our interview. Thank you. Tape Two, Side Two.

[end of transcript]