Interview with Edward “Lowell” Ockers

Narrator: Edward “Lowell” Ockers
Interviewer: Steve Warrwick
Date: July 6, 2000
Location: West Sayville, NY
Project Name: Long Island Traditions
Project Description: Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders and other maritime tradition bearers.
Principal Investigators: Nancy Solomon
Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting

Abstract: On July 6, 2000, Steve Warrick interviewed Edward Lowell Ockers, or Lowell, as part of the Long Island Traditions Oral History project. Ockers was born in West Sayville in 1933 and has remained a lifelong resident of the area. After serving in the Navy, he began to work on the bay, catching eels using traps purchased from his father–who had also made a living as a local bayman. Ockers discusses various fishing techniques and materials, providing an in-depth description of pound traps and gillnets. In addition to trapping eels, Lowell fished for flounders and caught scallops, crabs, and clams. During the winters, he found work bulk heading and ice cutting and participated in ice sailing when the bay froze over. Lowell details the typical day of a bayman, as well as the challenges and changes to the commercial fishing industry over the years. He explains how his career came to a close in the 1990s, as he and others faced declining fish numbers. Finally, he reflects on the impacts of government regulations and the increase of farmed-raised products.

Steve Warrick: This is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. Today is July 6, year 2000. Today I will be interviewing Lowell Ockers, a long-time bayman who now makes commercial sinkers. We will be at Lowell's house in West Sayville. This is Tape 004, side A. [RECORDING PAUSED] Could you state your full name for me?

Edward Lowell Ockers: My name is Edward Lowell Ockers. They really call me Lowell. I was born in West Sayville in 1933. I've lived here all my life, worked on the bay, and worked for the town. I'm retired now. I will do small jobs for fishermen, hang a net, or make some lead for them or something easy. [laughter]

SW: How did you get started working out in the bay?

ELO: Well, my father was a bayman. He had fish traps down the beach. He had five of them with his uncles and his cousins. They went out of business in 1954. He had some eel traps. I bought those and continued fishing until 1990. It just got bad and couldn't catch enough fish. You could pay the expenses, and that was about it. I sold them. Me and another kid, we fished them two more years. We still couldn't make any money out of it, so kind of gave it up.

SW: Did you go out with your father when he was working at the bay?

ELO: Yes. I fished with my father when I was a kid. I guess we went out when I was eight years old and picked fish. We had to learn to skin blowfish. God, we caught a lot of fish during the war.

SW: What would you do when you skin blowfish?

ELO: Well, you had to clean them to sell them. In other words, you'd cut them behind the head, turn them, and pull the meat out of them. It would be just a piece of meat with a center bone in it. We used to get two dollars a bushel for skinned meat. [laughter] That was good money. Today, God, you'd probably get a hundred dollars or more for a bushel. You'd get more than that. Probably that stuff's five or six dollars a pound now.

SW: Was there a big demand for blowfish?

ELO: Yes. There was a good demand for them. We had a fellow that used to freeze them, and he sold them all winter. We caught other fish with it, weakfish, fluke, kingfish, crabs. Once in a while something odd, like a salmon, not many. There was no bluefish when I was a kid. We thought they were a delicacy. We took them home and ate them. [laughter] Now, you say, "Well, how big are they?" That was funny.

SW: What type of traps was your dad—was he setting pound traps?

ELO: Pound traps. Good-sized pound traps, they set.

SW: Could you describe those traps to me?

ELO: They were on stakes. They were approximately twenty-four feet square. They had a funnel in the back end, and they had a heart shaped in the front of them. And then a long leader, which usually ran—the trap was in the deep water—and it ran up on the shoal of water because the fish swam along the edges and would hit it and follow it. I don't think they ever caught all the fish to lead or hit, but they caught a lot of them.

SW: Were you pulling up the nets mechanically or by hand?

ELO: No, everything was done by hand. They were pulled down. They had pulleys on the bottom. Some of them (where the tide run hard?). And they would pull them up, let the nets go, and then they would have a big twenty-foot sharpie and three men would get in it. They would get in one side of the net and get a hold of the net and force all the fish to the other side or to the big boat. Then they would bail them out, scoop net.

SW: Did you participate in that?

ELO: No. We were too small. We had to pick fish. Once in a while, they used to let us in the sharpie to get the net up, help get the nets up. But it was nothing to take like fifteen or twenty boxes of fish out of a net. In the spring of the year, they used to catch a lot of bunkers, menhaden, and they used to sell them to the farmers. They put them on the fields for fertilizer. I don't imagine it smelled too good. [laughter] I remember that. They had a big tub there that held, I don't know, two or three bushels. Probably got fifty cents for that. Fish was a cheap item. Like in the city, a lot of big families would buy two or three dollars' worth of fish, and they could feed ten, twelve people with it.

SW: Where were you mostly fishing out in the bay? Where were your dad's traps?

ELO: They were over the beach. They had one in off of Seaview and then on the north side of the channel. They had two on the north side of the channel. One was opposite of Seaview, and the other one was down further in Ocean Beach. Then they had one in what they call Clam Pond. It's over there by Atlantique now. Then the last one, they had it down by Saltaire. That was probably the best trap because it was furthest west.

SW: And these were in the ocean?

ELO: No.

SW: These were in the bay.

ELO: They were all in the bay. They never fished in the ocean in the bay. They sold those traps to Sunrise. They wanted them for the bunkers because they could sell a lot of that stuff. They had the big freezer. I don't know. I think they fished them three years. And then they couldn't get anybody to run it. They thought, "Well," I don't know. They just fished them up. Finally, they sold the boat to a guy that had a fish market over here. He used it for a freight boat to go to Ocean Beach. He had a fish store over there.

SW: When did you start working full time in the bay?

ELO: After I come out. Well, I worked for my father while I was in high school all the time. When he didn't need me, then we went clamming (in the bay?). Then I went in the Navy for four years. I was out to get drafted. Then when I come out in '57, they had been out of business. In the meantime, I bought these eel traps off him, and then I started fishing. We did have some good years catching eels and making money. But catching eels started at the end of September. By Thanksgiving, you were done. You kept the eels in big cars. You kept them until Christmas for the Italian trade because it was something in the religion where they had to have eels on the table. But nowadays, most of them old Italians from Italy are dead. The younger generation don't want to fool with them. They're like us. They put a turkey on a table or a ham, but they do have the traditional dinners. There is a lot of fish. Mostly they buy squid and octopus and shrimp and fillet. But if one of the old families is still alive, the eels will go on the table, even if they don't eat them.

SW: What would you do to catch your eels? What type of pots were you using?

ELO: I had little pound traps. They were on a smaller scale than my father had. All of them were made out of cotton, and I converted them over to nylon. Nylon is a lot less work. It would hold up ten times better. You could fish more stuff and fish more traps. You didn't have to spend all this time repairing gear. The worst part was cutting the poles. You'd have to cut maybe a set of poles, twenty-five poles, and some head poles every year to replace the ones that got broken and got wore out and got old. You did that in the winter when it was cold. I'd trim them up in the yard here. In the fall, I'd take them over the boat and pump them in the bottom. With the eels, you'd catch some fish. The eels you had to keep to get any money out of it. The fish and the crabs, they paid pretty expenses. Gave you a little money to live off of sometimes. Sometimes, it went the other way. [laughter] You'd get about eight good weeks out of it. One couple of years I fished, the weather was nice. I fished a couple of traps, wait until the 15th of December. But you don't catch the eels. You catch flounders and odd stuff like frostfish. They look like codfish, really, but they're small. They're good eating, though. [laughter]
You couldn't get any money for them. Some of the older people, unless they were given to them, knew what they were. They ate them. Most of them are gone now, too.

SW: So, you were using the one trap mainly or?

ELO: No. I fished as high as twelve traps by myself. My father, he had three men involved in that when he fished those traps. They used to do it with three men. But they also had the bigger traps down at the beach. They would take them up in the fall of the year, and then they would fish these until Thanksgiving, these smaller traps. But they had a scow, and they had a big rig. By cutting it down and changing the webbing or the net over to nylon, I could do it myself. But the twelve traps were too many. I mean had days where I could run maybe six traps. I had so many crabs. You take five, six bushels of crabs out of the net. They don't live forever, and you had to get rid of those. God, there was no end to it sometimes. Once in a while, I'd scrape somebody up to help me. That was tough, too, because clamming was good. Sometimes people just couldn't get anybody that really wanted to work either. Trap fishing, that was tough, but you made money out of it.

SW: About how deep of water were you setting your traps in?

ELO: Most of it was in shallow water. It was maybe six foot. The deepest part they ran right from the shore, right off, into about six feet of water. Some of them I had a couple of shoal traps. It was about four foot of water over there on Nicoll's Point. Anywhere from four to six feet, most of them were. They averaged around five, depending on the tide. I had one real deep now—I used to pump the (head?) out of it. I'd pump the leader in, and the water was on top of my shoulder. It was low tide. I would get in the water and pump the poles. That was another advantage I had over. They would use waders sometimes until they got up to the—until they started to fill up. Then they would go put the scow in and put the rest of the thing in. But I would pump all the poles first. They would pump poles and put half the trap on, like the leader. They put the leader on. They come back and put the head, the box, or the body of the trap in. I found it was better to pump all the poles. You can't pump poles and put nets on at the same time. Don't work good.

SW: Did you do anything when it was iced over on the bay?

ELO: Yes. During the winter, sometimes we would find maybe a job putting bulkhead in for somebody, which would take two to three weeks. Couldn't find that if there was ice in the bay. You could walk on it. We used to walk on the ice and cut ice and dig clams through the ice. It had to be nice. Maybe one winter we went to Bayberry Point. There was a big hole there. We got a hold of an old rowboat. It wasn't too big, twelve-foot or so. Two of us went and we would clam out of that, catch a few clams. Something to do. So, you make grocery money. But a lot of winters we're open. We were quite a stretch there. We had scallops, and the bay scallops around. That was good. If it blowed one day, you could open them the next. We used to dredge scallops. We used to dredge crabs. Well, there was a few—some years that was better than others. But I would say mainly, from December or first of the year, things were tough. If the bay froze before Christmas, it was a long winter—cold, hard. Sometimes you wouldn't work for a week or two. But then we'd always just maybe go to Bellport and go sailing on the ice. Did something you wanted to do [laughter] Some guys went to Florida with their money. The winters were the toughest. You had to kind of learn to save for a rainy day because your bills go on. You got to eat.

SW: What was sailing on the ice like?

ELO: That was scooter. That was fun. You put two or three guys in a boat, and you had to steer with the jib. The wind can't blow a real hard wind. But if it blew, say ten, twelve, fifteen miles an hour, that was fun. That was nice. That thing glided. We used to go quite a ways with them. We used to go away from Bellport. Me and (Johnny?), we sailed way up in Nicoll's Point one time. That was the furthest we ever—because we knew on Nicoll's Point, we didn't get too close to the Point. We knew how good the ice was offshore. But on the Point, the tide runs. The ice would get thin. So, before we got to the Point, I said, "Hey." He said, "Yes." We turned around. We went back. We used to jump ice holes. You get a hole in the ice or a big crack and get going pretty good with that thing and zing it right across. Some of them didn't come out. They

couldn't get up to the other side and bust the ice. Most of them things leaked because they were in somebody's barn all year and they would bring them out. We used to race them on weekends, too, down here. There'd be eight or ten, twelve, fourteen of them. We raced them.

SW: These were mostly baymen that were doing it?

ELO: Yes. It started out as baymen. I don't know, I think it started really with the Coast Guard when they had a lot along the shore. They had Fire Island, and they had one over here. In the Pines, they had a building. I think they had one to the west of, I would say, east of Water Island, they had one there, too. They probably had one in Smith Point. They had stations all along. And them guys, they couldn't—there was no road over. If the bay was open, they could get food supply back and forth. If it froze, then I think that's how they put flat runners on it. They put some kind of a sail on it rather than pulling sleds and stuff across. They devised some way to sail it. Then they couldn't steer it. Then finally, it got around to angle iron runners. They were this way, and they were like—they cut in, and they held the ice pretty good. You had to keep them sharp. You had to work on them a little bit. We used to take them off. One of the fishermen, they had a table saw with a piece of—I don't know if it was sandpaper or a piece of gritter or stone or something. We used to sharpen them on that. Used to let us sharpen them. We used to go ice skating on the bay and all the ponds. The ponds they used to freeze. But now they've built on top of the ponds and all the warm water from the cesspools runs into the pond, and they don't freeze. It's got to be cold for a pond to freeze now. Pretty cold.

SW: Now, how about during the rest of the year, in the spring and summer? What would you do?

ELO: Well, when it got around to March, the ice went away, then we used to have these flounder fykes. We used to set them. Some guys used to walk on the ice and set them under the ice, but I never did that. Of course, when I first started flounders, it wasn't worth any money because they were kind of spawned out and thin. But eventually, they couldn't get enough fillet, so they started cutting them. In the last years, we fished for them. Then we got some decent money for them. We used to be able to catch quite a few of them, too. But that would last until maybe the middle of March. By that time, the weather was back pretty gooey. You could go clamming again. You had some poles over the beach to pump. If somebody wanted to dock or something, you put that in for them. In between, you went clamming a little bit.

SW: So, you did a little bit of everything out there?

ELO: Yes. Kind of, yes.

SW: You think that's what a bayman does? A bayman sort of does everything.

ELO: Well, even Jerry Collins' father, he used to set fykes, I guess, with his brothers and his uncles. He had one brother that was a carpenter. I know that. Anyway, his uncle used to set fykes. I'm pretty sure his father set fykes. Sometimes they did it for something to do because they got a nickel for them fish. That was a lot of money. Probably you could buy a chicken probably in them days for fifty cents. [laughter] But, take a guy like his father. Strictly, he went

clamming. There's a lot of baymen. That's all they did is they went clamming. But then some of them, if scalloping was good, they'd go scalloping. But there was a few that wouldn't even go scalloping, they just went clamming.

SW: Do you think there is a difference between somebody who just goes clamming and somebody who works a number of different traps?

ELO: No.

SW: They're still all baymen?

ELO: Still a bayman. You still got to get up in the morning, and you still got to go. Once you got stuff in the water, I mean you're kind of married to it. You got to keep track of it. If you went clamming and you wanted two days off to go upstate in the fall of the year or you wanted a week to go upstate in the fall of the year to go deer shooting, you just told somebody, "You look at my boat." Up you went and you came back and went back clamming. It was a fairly good life. You could get a day off when you wanted it.

SW: How about the hours? What was a typical day you would put in?

ELO: You'd probably get down in a boat. Well, when I went fishing, I went early. When it was daylight, I'd always work into the wind. So, if the wind I knew, could tell the wind, say was going to be to the west. I went east, and I started running those traps east. I'd work my way west. If the wind was east, I'd go to the west and work. It was easier. You didn't have to turn the boat around all the time. It worked out better. But really, like a clammer, he would start, say he got work, say 6:30 in the morning, and he'd work until 2:00. Some guys worked until 3:00, 2:30. A lot of the [inaudible] they only worked until 1:30. 2:00 o'clock was late for them. I don't know why. Well, they had to go bowling that night, I guess. [laughter]

SW: How long were you out on the bay for a typical day?

ELO: A typical day probably, by the time you got there, it was 6:30, quarter to 7:00. And I would work until 2:30. I didn't go bowling. [laughter] No. I worked at it. Maybe I worked too hard. I don't know.

SW: Where did you dock your boat?

ELO: It was over here in a creek. I laid in a creek, God, thirty years, I guess. One time, I was the oldest one laying down here. But then when (Mr. Bates?) died, his nephew got a hold of it. He seen that it was worth money. They just jacked the price up. Today you've got to look around. Those yachts, they'll pay fifteen, eighteen, two-thousand dollars for a berth for the season. If you want to lay there all winter, then that's another price. (Mr. Bates?), he was the only one to let you lay there, and then he sent you the bill. Most of them do it the other way around.

SW: So, is that just one of the differences you've seen over the years?

ELO: Yes. [laughter] No. Gradually, clamming went down and some guys they went to work. Like me, they went to work in a school, or they had a job with the town, or they got a job with the county. One kid, he went in the lawn business, cutting the lawns. Probably when he started, they used to rotor till your garden at night after they come home from clamming. Then gradually, they got in the lawn cutting business. He's still in it today. Anybody that got off the bay, they couldn't make any money, or they weren't near retirement age. Insurance that got to be a big, big problem, health insurance. You had to buy that every year. Your boat berth, you had to haul the boat out. Like me, I had more expenses than a lot of them because I bought insurance for the traps, and my wife suing me. [laughter] I didn't think I could stand that. But anyway.

SW: Now, did you ever have any problem with people damaging your traps, running over them or?

ELO: No. One time, they tried to get rid of me. They said it wasn't a fish trap area. I got lucky. The government changed laws and said if it wasn't blocking, say like the mouth of a river—if it was to the one side of a creek, it wasn't right in front of the creek or something, it wasn't a navigational hazard. I should say, you could do it. That saved me. You can still do it today if it's not a navigational hazard. But those big traps my father had down at the beach, you'd never—with the boat traffic today, he'd run through them, and he'd bust them up. Out east yet, the boat traffic, say in Shinnecock, out there, that's more like a board of trustees that control, say Shinnecock Bay. We don't have that up here. They have dates when you can put a trap and when you have to take it out. That's a good idea, before the season. If you want a spring fish, say you can put it in at the end of March, but by the first of May, fifteenth of April, or somewhere in there, you have to take it up, and you can't put it back until, say the fifteenth of September. [RECORDING PAUSED]

SW: This is Steve Warrick again speaking with Lowell Ockers. This is Tape 004, and this is side B. We were talking about trapping and the different laws now. Before, when you were working in the bay, did people respect your trap areas?

ELO: Oh yes. Well, I had no competition. [laughter] One time, I did think I was going to get threatened, but I said to myself, "My God, by the time they cut the poles and make the trap." I had another guy on the other side of me. He fished down in Patchogue, but I had nobody to the west. (Lou Still?), he was the last one that fished to the west. He probably went out of business around 1950. He was getting old, and he was the last one up there. There was a guy in Bellport Bay, and then there was, I think, old Tom Poole. He was down there. And then (Englehardt?) bought up most of his stuff. It was in Brookhaven, Carman's River. That was always a good place down there to catch eels. To my knowledge, there was only ever one guy that tried it in Moriches Bay. But then down through Shinnecock, there was a Warner that fished in Quogue. He just got old. He had a beautiful setup. He was right on a canal there, and he used to pull his boat. He had a boat. He went around. He pulled his boat right in the boathouse. On the other end, he used to keep all his nets and stuff. Today that's all gone. It's gone. There's a big old house there now. He used to have his poles there. He used to cut the grass. He tarred his net there. Yes. Used to hang them up. Used to go down there in September. He got them hanging up and drying.

SW: So, you were one of the last ones out here in the South Bay.

ELO: Yes. I was the last one in South Bay that tried and did it. There was a kid that fished in Patchogue last year. He fished I think three traps. He's home. He's sick as a dog. I think he's got cancer on him. I asked—I had a guy over here yesterday. I said, "How's Tommy?" He said, "He's not very good." Well, maybe he's got a nephew. Maybe he'll do it. I don't know.

SW: So, you didn't have to worry too much then about—?

ELO: No, no. Competition was—like I said, I guess it was four years that were real good years. You caught any volume of eels. We had a guy from Maine. He'd come down. He bought them, and he sent them to Europe. The Dutch had a boat. She must have been over a hundred foot. It was nothing but a tank. The engine looked like an oil tanker. The engine in the pilothouse was all (aft?), and the crew slept up front. The boat, they would fill it with eels and float it across to Europe. It would start way down south and go up to the Chesapeake. I think it went into Delaware Bay. He bought in there, and then he'd come to New York. I think his last stop was somewhere in, say Boston or Maine. He'd go back with that for as quick as he could fill it. Then they took eels in tank trucks, like a oil tanker. They aerated them. They took them down to the piers and disconnected them off the tractor-trailer, hoisted them up, lashed them to the deck, and they went to Europe. Got to Europe, off they went, tractor-trailer. The Germans, German people and probably the Dutch, Belgians, Belgian people in Belgium, and England—probably the biggest market for them was in Germany. They ate them smoked, smoked eels. In England, they pickled them. Jellied eels, they called them. Of course, Holland, they used to catch a lot of their own. But they keep some of them—I guess they were like a big bay, and they closed them off with dams and stuff. Of course, they caught the eels up. The fish they couldn't catch, they had to put them back because they were for the sports people. I don't know. But now they fish farm a lot of eels. They raise them in South America. Japan raises eels. China, like third world countries where they don't pay a lot of money, and they can have them watched. They send them back here. You can go down to Chinatown in New York. I think they pay two and a quarter for them. They're a little different. They're kind of a greenish looking eel. They're not as dark as the ones here. But they're all the same size. They're beautiful looking. Somebody like me, if eeling was good, I'd have to compete against them kind of people. Today there's a lot of things besides eels that are fish farmed. Clams is one of them. Shrimp is another one. Catfish, trout, and salmon is their biggest things. There's a certain amount of these hybrid striped bass that are raised now. Oysters, clams, I said before. Down south they can raise a clam in just about a year, almost marketable size. It's all the same size kind of. It's always nice and good looking, clean, white. I can see, or I never thought it would work as good as it does. But I could see him putting a harvester of, say clams or wild stuff out of—you've got to compete with somebody that can raise thousands of these things.

SW: Did you ever think that you would be one of the last people out here doing the eeling?

ELO: No. No. God, after I'd come out of the service and caught eels and clams, and then we got real good sets of clams. I just thought it would go on for years and years. It would never change. But gradually, it just went downhill. If you could catch ten, twelve thousand pounds of eels in the fall of the year and keep them until Christmas, you made good money. If you caught more, yes. You were limited to how many eels you could sell. I sold eels all the way from New York up

in Freeport. I peddled them into the tank truck. They was a little cheaper. But if you caught a lot of eels and you called the tank truck up, you was kind of at the mercy of the tank truck's price. Because he had to ship them to Europe and all that. You sold them, say for twenty cents. He probably sold them for thirty, and then the freight on them to Europe. They flew them. They still do it. Plane loads of eels to Europe.

SW: How many were you catching at the end? Were you still catching a lot of eels?

ELO: No, the last year we fished, I fished with that kid. We caught a thousand pounds of eels. We got four dollars for them, but four thousand dollars just didn't cut it. It just didn't. We caught a few fish that paid the expenses. Then I worked up in the airport at the time, and I'd work nights up there. Fish every other day with him, and he'd go clamming every other day to make ends meet. That's how he survived. But after we fished two years, he says to me, "No." He says, "No more." But I still got all the nets. [laughter]

SW: How did you feel when you finally got out of the bay? Did you miss it?

ELO: Oh yes. Because you was your own boss, you could do what you wanted. Once you get on the shore and you get a boss, he tells you what to do. I was doing all my own thinking. It was hard. I got in the airport. I said, "You've got to learn that they do all the thinking for you up here." Do this, do that, do that, do this. If you got time, do that. You got it done and went home. It was nice, though. You got a paycheck every week. [laughter]

SW: Did you really have to know the bay in order to survive out there and to make a living?

ELO: Yes. Like catching eels, I could sit here in the living room. If it got dark and stormy and the wind was southwest, you could tell you were going to catch. You knew you were going to have eels the next day. You wouldn't catch eels on a full moon because it would get real bright. Eel likes it dark. Get on the other side of what they call the dark side of the moon, then you'd catch eels. I had years when the yields were real thick, they were good years, three or four years. You'd get a heavy frost, and you catch them. You always caught some if you got a real heavy frost. Because what they'd do is they would start to move out of the creeks and off of the shores and they'd start migrating back and forth along the shore. Then it would blow, like push them off to the shores kind of, and you would catch them. But a lot of them came out of the creeks and out of the river up here.

SW: Now, besides being your own boss, what did you like about being on the water?

ELO: I don't know. I used to watch the sun come up in the morning. I liked about...I don't know it's just like it was an independent life. You went clamming, and the more you worked, or you got lucky. You caught a few clams. You put them on a dock. That was kind of like the end of it. If you had a bad day, the idea was don't take it home with you. Forget about it. Leave it on the boat. Tomorrow is another day. If you did find a few clams, like a little streak of clams, you worked on it, maybe around it for four or five days, you got a decent edge of clams. You worked there for maybe two weeks in that area or in the whole. That was nice.

SW: Now, you're making sinkers, right? How did you get into making the sinkers?

ELO: I used them. My father used to put chain on the nets. You had to take the chain off. You had to put it on and take it off when you were done using it. We used to keep it in barrels of oil, so it didn't rust all up. It was a lot of work. When I first started fishing, I used to fish five or six traps because of all this extra work. So, I thought there's got to be a better way. So, I went to an old fellow down in Brookhaven, and he used chain, but he left it on all the time. He didn't have the heavier chain as I had. He had a couple of traps. He says, "I got lead on them, lead weight." He says, "That works good." So, I looked at it, and I said, "I'll try it." I got a mold made, and I tried a couple of traps. I couldn't really see any difference from the chain. So, gradually, I changed them all over. I also changed the webbing, the net from cotton to nylon. You could leave it on all the time. They were a little heavy, but it worked better. It worked a lot better. Then from there, with the lead, I had a friend who used to borrow the mold. He used to have gill nets, and he used lead on his gillnets. He'd make up what he wanted. Then he used to make a little extra, and these lobster guys started buying it off of him for their buoys. Their buoy weights because of the tide in the sound. They've come to mow the grass. [laughter] But anyway, he didn't want to do it anymore. So, he says to me, "You make lead for them." So, he had one customer, so I took that. Gradually, he went out of business, that guy. I got a couple. It was a guy who went in the fishnet business over in Riverhead. He contacted me. Do you want to shut the window?

SW: You were saying you picked up his customers?

ELO: Yes. He gave me his customer down in Moriches. Then I got a couple of other smaller guys. Some of them are gone, some of them retired. Some of them don't use the lead anymore, they use sink rope. Okay, okay—he'll lick you to death [laughter] You know, you use the sink rope from the buoy to the pot. Then the guy in Riverhead, he wanted lead for the bottom of these trawl nets. I make that for him. It's just a small, small business. I suppose I could expand it a little if I wanted to go down into Jersey, and over to Rhode Island or into Boston with the stuff. But then you've got to ship it. I'm happy to stay small.

SW: You started out doing it for yourself.

ELO: Yes. I really started out doing it for myself. I copied a mold off another fisherman. He let me use the mold and found a guy. He used to come and buy small eels off me. He had a machine shop. What he really got into was, he's making reels. He finally moved to Florida. He got into making these specialty reels. They really looked like for fly rods and stuff. I presume he got into making reels for salt water after a while. But the guy was up and around [inaudible] They got a name for them guys. He made a lot of jigs. They had holes drilled in them for different applications. He used to buy these small eels off me. He says to me, "If you ever want any machine work done," he says, "Come and see me." So, I went to see him. [laughter] I still got the mold. It's a good mold. Since then, I've copied two more off of it.

SW: How do you feel about selling them to the commercial fishermen? Does it make you feel good about helping them out?

ELO: Yes. I do help them out. Well, if they want them delivered, I bring them to them. I had a guy over here last night. He paid me. I made him a hundred fifty pounds of pencil leads for his monkfish nets. He's going bluefishing now. Yes, I'll help them out. I've got a guy too, he brings a gillnet here every year, or two—two gillnets. He's got like four of them and he changes the net in them because when the net is new it's a light blue color and the sun raises hell with it. You turn a net like that, white, you won't catch half the fish. So, they get two years out of them. That's like a monofilament net. He's a lobsterman. He catches his own bait. Spring of the year, and he salts it. Lobstermen have a big expense, big time. Of course, they make good money. [laughter] Don't let them fool you.

SW: Do you think making the sinkers keeps you connected with the bay?

ELO: Yes. It keeps me connected a little bit. I go down the end of the dock most mornings and watch them catch a kingfish or a crab or something. I do keep a group of friends that were fishermen. I have a friend that lives in Southold. I have another one that lives in Orient. Two of them are living in Orient. He's marrying to a trap fisherman. I have a friend in Hampton Bays. We call each other up maybe once a year, always Christmas time. Up to the west there, I knew a lot of them. But they're like me. They're getting old. Like that movie you got. I looked at it. (Beverly?) says to me, "My God," she says, "Them guys are old." I says, "Yes. You're looking at one of them." [laughter] But I remember that (Seafirst?) guy—is it (Seafirst?)? The one that catches chowders mostly. Opens them for either Lindenhurst fish or some restaurant. He takes the shells, and they make jewelry out of that blue part. I says, "Well, how do you get—because when you open a clam, the muscles hang on." He says, "Oh that's easy. I put them in milk crates." He says, "I put them by my boat." And he says, "The killies eat them—the muscles off." [laughter] I says, "You're pretty, pretty good." Of course, I don't get the *National Fishermen* anymore because that's too full bad advice of laws from the government. But I get the publication that comes out of, I guess, Rhode Island. I think the same outfit owns the *Commercial Fisheries Review*. That gives you kind of what's going on a little bit down here and over in the south and over on that shore. I read that. Sometimes I don't read all of it. Them laws, I—. But it was funny. We used to have a guy who used to belong to the Long Island Fishermen's Association. So, you open your mouth, you get to be on a board of directors. So, right away I did that. Not to get on the board, but anyway, ran at (Miller?) for quite a while, probably twenty years. He used to tell us, he says, "The government is going to come along." He says, "They're going to tell you what to do, what you can catch." A lot of the guys they would laugh at him because they'd never seen laws like this. Now you can catch twenty-five hundred pounds of squid, stuff like that. There's a limit on monkfish. I guess there's a limit on fluke. I think you're allowed fifty pounds a day. It's hard on guys that's got big boats. Fuel oil is probably a dollar and a quarter by now. They get two big engines downstairs running. Skimmer business, that was another. You can take (Charlie?) down here. He can go one day a week now. I think there's a limit, I think there's seven cages. I think there are thirty bushels in a cage, two hundred, two hundred and ten bushels. Somehow, in the end, I think the government will put the commercial man out of business. Because I could see this farm-raised stuff getting more and more. I went in (Edwards'?) store. I was talking to the kid up there. He says to me, "Everything is farm-raised." I said, "Yes, so I see." He says, "Salmon, catfish." I said, "Oh yes." He says, "Very few, what they call whole fish, like a bluefish or a mackerel, a weakfish, southern fish, croakers, and stuff." He says, "Do I handle it?" I says, "No, you probably sell mostly

swordfish, tuna fish, and shrimp." He said, "Yes." Tuna fish is the biggest fish that they eat nowadays. It comes in cans and off of your grill. Ain't bad grilled.

SW: What about other than the regulations, what was the biggest change you saw to the bay out here?

ELO: Population, people. I never realized—like in the fall of the year, when you had to run eels, say to Freeport or Oceanside or down the city or halfway over down the other side, I had a couple of guys over in Westbury, another one in Jericho. But the traffic, the cars, the people that want to live by the water. A lot of people who live by the water and that fish trap was there, say for thirty years, they don't want to look at that. They want a clear view of... But some of them like to look at it. I had one guy, he used to call me up over here on the other side. He said, "You going to put that?" "Yes. Don't worry about it." When you fish like that, you kind of got to work with the people. There was somebody who was a pain, I had one guy on the other side of Bayport. He used to want to buy fish off me. You have a couple. You would give him a dollar's worth of fish, a few crabs, and he'd be happy. I never moved the net because somebody didn't like it. I could get very uppity. I'm not always nice. [laughter] But today, I don't think you could do it. I really don't think you could do it.

SW: Now, if you wanted people to know what a bayman does or to tell them how you feel about being a bayman? What would you tell them?

ELO: I don't know. If they want to say they wanted to go in to be a bayman, to go in a business like that, no. With the laws today, and there's hardly any clams. The big clammers, the good clammers that are left, they're working in Staten Island now catching that polluted stuff and selling it to somebody with a relay system. They've made some good money down here, real good. Now, it's okay—how a lot of guys got by was their wife worked. Say, your wife worked in the hospital. She had good insurance where you didn't have to pay for it, or they worked for the telephone company or they worked somewhere or for the town, the state, county. I don't say you couldn't. Today you couldn't just be a clammer. You'd have to go with crab pots. In the spring, you'd have to go with a gillnet, see if you can catch bunkers and a few weakfish. Sell that and go into crabbing. Maybe during the summer, you'd have to go clamming. Say, in the fall, you could go back into your crabbing again. Then gradually, you could work yourself around. Maybe if you had some fykes left, flounder fykes, you could do that. But to go study clamming, you'd have to either be on Social Security, because you can't catch that many clams anymore. Granted, the price is good. You could probably get a hundred dollars for a clam bag. There's a kid down here, he works in the city. He's a transit cop. He's got a boat down here. Every once in a while he goes. He says to me, "Boy, I worked all day for a bag of clams." He just does it. He's got a good job. See lobster guys over in the sound, they made a lot of money, or they did. They had good years, very good. Now it's on the other side. You see the sign up here, four for twenty-three dollars. That used to read five for twenty dollars. It was three dollars cheaper. You got another one for six sometimes you used to see. The people used to peddle them on the road. See, I'm a little older now. I've been off the bay for maybe ten years. There's other ways and easier ways to make money. Like my son, it cost me a lot of money to send him to college, but he's got a good job. He can just—

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Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 07/01/2024