Interview with Tony Sougstad

Narrator: Tony Sougstad
Interviewer: Nancy Solomon
Date: May 22, 1987
Location: Freeport, 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 May 22, 1987, Nancy Solomon conducted a second interview with Sougstad for Long Island Traditions. In this session, Sougstad elaborates on the dangers and challenges associated with being a professional fisherman. In addition to regularly facing harsh weather conditions, Sougstad has had to navigate boats through changing inlets and ice flows. He also speaks to the social dynamics and information-sharing practices among baymen and fishermen, noting the difficulties of breaking into an industry where a close camaraderie exists among those already in the business. However, Sougstad explains that he did receive key lessons from mentors, and he now hopes to train the next generation of fishermen to work on his boat.

Nancy Solomon: Tony, tell me about some of the dangers to commercial fishermen?

Tony Sougstad: According to the insurance companies, we have the most dangerous profession in the world. On a per capita basis, there are more fishermen killed than any other profession. The ones that follow—

NS: What about (injuries?)?

TS: —I can't tell you in what order that they follow. But policemen, firemen, high ironworkers and coalminers. I'm not sure which is next, but they're all right up there. They're all dangerous jobs. Demolition people.

NS: What are some of the things that have happened to you?

TS: I have an excellent safety record. Not too much has happened to me. I've damn near been killed a few times, but it wasn't because of the faulty equipment or anything, it was storms.

NS: Can you tell me about one time?

TS: I told you the story about Georges Bank. Another time I fell through the ice. I fell off a boat and went through the ice. I was strong enough to punch a hole through it with my fist, but you never can find the same hole. So, I punched the hole through with my fist.

NS: How thick was the ice?

TS: It wasn't thick enough for me to stand on. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] Yes, obviously.

TS: It wasn't thick enough for me not be able to punch a hole through it. I got my head up and four or five guys pulled me out. But I'm telling you, I wasn't in there very long.

NS: Do you go out fishing in the winter?

TS: Oh, yes. We were out this winter. We were out in seven-degree weather. It separates the men from the boys. There are not too many people that put themselves through that kind of stress you know, to make a living. We do it because—

NS: Did you ever get caught in an ice flow?

TS: Yes. We've been—not caught, but we sailed through them. I think it was the winter of '78, we had a lot of ice here. We had slush ice all the way out to the sea buoys. We had to have a man in the bow and a spotlight on all the time until we got well out to sea. There was a friend of mine who ran an eighty-foot wood boat called the *Scorpio* that hit an iceberg by Ambrose Lightship. He barely made it back to the dock because it stole the planking.

NS: Was his bow cut through or—

TS: Oh, sure. Yes. He hit a good size iceberg
.
NS: How could you prevent something like that?

TS: Don't go out. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] Well if you go out, what do you do?

TS: There is nothing you can do. You just got to keep a sharp eye. A very sharp eye. When we run out in the dark, we'd keep the spotlight all across the front of the boat all the time because we know there's ice around. But that doesn't happen very often. I can only remember two winters we had ice that thick. Down in Cape May, the ice was so thick it poked holes in the bottom of some of the steel boats.

NS: Oh, Jesus.

TS: Yes. So, that actually is the least of our worries, ice. Because we don't get that much of it here. The winters—

NS: When you're talking about the winter weather or the weather, some of the dangers…

TS: The danger is that the water is very cold. You don't have any time in the water at all. Some say twenty minutes, some say seven minutes. I don't know. I really don't care ever to find out. But you see on the boat, we have survival suits. We won't sail in the winter without them. Of course, they'll keep us alive if the boat goes down. Hopefully, the boat will never go down. But no telling with a boat this age. You know, if it's going to pop a plank or if something's going to fall out of it. I don't think it will. I've been over this boat with a fine-tooth comb. As far as I'm concerned, it's a very good boat. But still in all, there's always that one thing that you could have missed. You always think about something that you could have missed. Like sometimes I worry about the steering gear on the boat. God forbid something should happen to the steering coming through a breaking inlet, we'd be dead.

NS: I hear that that's one of the most difficult things to do.

TS: The steering?

NS: Is getting in the inlet.

TS: Yes. The inlet's getting worse and worse and worse.

NS: How come?

TS: You got to ask Mother Nature. The inlet wants—where did [inaudible] the front of the boat from?

NS: [laughter] Nice thing they're fine.

TS: The inlet wants to run naturally out to the southwest. But they keep dredging it off to the south. The natural sand flow coming down around the jetties—

NS: Creates a lot of bars?

TS: Creates what we call an outside bar, which is what's there right now. Plus, they never have the inlet marked right. We've been after the Coast Guard for three years. We've sent letters and cried the blues to get the inlet marked properly. The inlet is not marked properly. The inlet is marked terribly. I sent in a petition signed by a hundred and thirty-five watermen around here to get that inlet changed, and they won't do it.

NS: Did they ever respond?

TS: No, they never responded. I have copies of the letter and I've got the original signatures of all the men that signed it.

NS: Is that pretty typical of the Coast Guard?

TS: I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Coast Guard and some Russians. They saved my life. So, I can't say that. But as far as maintaining this inlet, I think they're very lax. Very very lax. There are so many things. Mainly, they don't have it marked properly. But we know the way out. But a strange boat—

NS: Is that something you had to really learn from somebody else and just by going through it?

TS: The inlet constantly is changing. It keeps moving to the west, to the west, to the west. As it moves, we can see the good water. It's very easy to see good water. If it's breaking here and breaking there and it's not breaking here, that's the way you go. Plus, on a nice day, you will look around a little bit, and you'll find where the edges of the bars are. You get a high tide, a nice afternoon, we're coming in. We'll slow down with the fathometer on. We'll look over here, we'll look over there, and say, "Oh, wow. It's deep over here."

NS: How far out do some of these bars go?

TS: Five eighths of a mile, but not here. Outside of Hampton Bay, there's a bar that's out five eighths. Over here, it runs in line with the buoys. Maybe just outside the entrance buoys, the bar runs.

NS: You ever gotten stuck on a bar?

TS: Yes.

NS: What could happen to an iron boat?

TS: We could have rolled the boat over. A lot of guys have. I didn't get stuck with this boat, I got stuck with another boat. I wasn't running it either.

NS: What happened?

TS: It was a big boat like the (*Miss Christie*?) over there. We had our outriggers down and we were coming in. The man who was running the boat missed the deep water and we went on the bar. Now when we went on the bar—

NS: Which way was your bow headed?

TS: We were headed in. So, we took a terrible pounding up there, breaking over the boat. The boat almost went over. If we didn't have the hold-downs on the outrigger, she would have gone over. But I always make a point with any boat that's got outriggers, any big boat, to keep those tie-downs tied down to it inside. We were going to loosen them because we thought it was nice out. But there was a hell of a break in the inlet, we found out. The boat would have rolled over because the outrigger did go down to the bottom.

NS: So, it kept your bow down.

TS: That stopped it from rolling over. It was right after that happened that I sent this petition. It took me a month to get all the signatures. I got some powerful men on there too. Bob Doxsee, Billy Granau from Freeport Sea Clam. You should stop by and see these people because they're the most powerful men in the industry around here that we have. Bob maybe. Billy, you got to get him in the right mood before he'll talk to you. He owns nine big steel boats. They're not all here. He's got some up north and some down here. I worked for him seven years. I have a lot of respect for the man. He taught me discipline, work discipline. He taught me to discipline myself so I could work on my own.

NS: Kind of like you're teaching (Joey?) now?

TS: Trying to. I already taught Cory. Cory's a workaholic right now. It was in him, it just had to be brought out. I brought it out. I feel pretty happy with that guy. Very happy.

NS: Yes, I know.

TS: I love him like one of my sons. He's a wonderful boy. I hope someday that I'll be able to have a boat where I can have the two of them on it. For that reason, if Joey works out, and that reason alone, I'll sell this and buy a bigger one so I can have the two of them on the boat.

NS: It's really important to pass on that tradition.

TS: To me it is, yes. I learned the hard way. (Joey?), I'm giving it to him on a silver platter.

NS: What were some of the problems you had in really teaching yourself?

TS: Getting along with other people.

NS: How come?

TS: Getting along with the people that were already in the business is very difficult.

NS: Seems that there is a certain—

TS: There's a camaraderie amongst them. They're very clandestine. They don't want nobody to know anything about them. They keep to themselves. They have a different set of values and have a different way of life from shore people. Some of them, they don't know any other way. They were born into the business. A person like myself, who's had a taste of both, can equate one to the other.

NS: Do you feel that once you go through a certain period that it gets easier?

TS: Oh, definitely it gets easier. Gets easier in catching the fish. Catching the fish gets easier and easier. Because I know my boat and I know my gear. I know all the local waters. I know what I need to catch fish. As far as selling them for the most money that I possibly can get, I need to be on land to do that.

NS: Do you feel that there is a lot of people right now who just out to get the best deal they can without regard for what you guys get?

TS: We weeded a lot of those people out. There might be some left. But as far as the people I sell to, they're all pretty good. But for a newcomer coming into the business, and they saw a chance where they could give them a zap-a-do, they'd do it. They're ruthless in that respect. They're very difficult for a newcomer.

NS: Are fishermen at all able to organize to stop something?

TS: Oh my god, yes. Oh yes. You go to some of the other ports, some of the bigger ports like Manasquan, New Jersey and Shinnecock and Point Judith, Rhode Island where there's a lot of boats, you find that they're very well organized. They're organized in the formal co-op. They put all the fish under one roof, and they sell it as a co-op.

NS: I know out of Montauk the co-op had a lot of problems. It still does because they wouldn't work together.

TS: Exactly. Because they're a bunch of Bonackers out there.

NS: [laughter]

TS: I don't know if you know what a Bonacker is. [laughter]

NS: Yes. You know this guy wrote a book about them?

TS: Someone out there, they're studying intermarriages.

NS: [laughter]

TS: Someone from one of the colleges went out there to study intermarriage in Montauk. Because most of those fishing families are.

NS: There is a book, maybe I'll buy it for you, about that.

TS: I'd like to read that. I'm real interested in that.

NS: You could get it at the library.

TS: Probably.

NS: What about here though?

TS: Over here, this port's got a story to tell. And it's why it's in the condition it's in now. Everybody from all over the coast comes here to fish. A very close proximity to Hudson Canyon. Very close proximity to all the whiting grounds outside of New Jersey. We have a very viable fishery here. What happened, when I first came to Freeport, I had been fishing in Montauk and Hampton Bay for five or six years between the two ports.

NS: Was this your business?

TS: No, no it was my business. The fishing out there was very good. When I first learned to fish, I learned how to catch the yellowtail flounder. But that's another story. Getting back to Freeport. When I first came here, there were fifteen boats sailing out of here on a regular basis. All about the size of this one. Some a little bigger, some a little small.

NS: Were they also draggers?

TS: Oh, yes.

NS: Do you call yourself a dragger?

TS: Of course. They were all draggers.

NS: Well, some people call them trawlers.

TS: Anyway, there was fifteen of them. If I search my memory, I could name all of them.

NS: Were most of these—?

TS: Don't break me train of thought, I'll remember it. [laughter] I came here to work for Billy Granau. I came here to run the *Sundance*.

NS: [inaudible] see the *Sundance*. [laughter]

TS: Anyway, the Sundance was eighty-six-foot boat, a little bigger than (*Miss Christie*?) because I had sold my boat. My boat's name was the *Pandora*.

NS: [laughter] It's funny, I probably saw it.

TS: I don't think you ever did. I never had it here. It was out east all the time. So, I sold her mainly because we ran out of yellowtails and that's all I knew how to catch. I came down here and I ran the *Sundance* for Billy. I got involved two and a half years with him. Oh, there are so many stories I could tell you.

NS: Tell me one.

TS: But afterwards, I got involved in the little boats. I got involved in the whiting fishery. Like I said, there were fourteen boats going in and out. We all used to sell to New York. Everybody sold to New York City. There was a place over here called Freeport Fish Packing or Freeport Cold Storage where most everybody packed. It was either there or at Two Cousins or (Frank Apache?) had his own place up the block, the (Apache II?) Dock. Most of the boats—

NS: Where is the Cold Storage?

TS: Cold Storage is gone. Knocked it down.

NS: Where was it?

TS: Right next door.

NS: Where Captain Ben's is now?

TS: No. North of Captain Ben's. Captain Ben's was here, but he wasn't packing any fish. Cold Storage was packing the fish and sending them into the city. Two Cousins was and so was the (Apache Dock?). Then along comes (Jim Bino?) over here at Freeport Cold Storage and says, "Guys, I'm going to solve all your problems. I'm going to buy the fish myself. You paid better money. Cash on the spot." This, that, and the other. So, he started buying fish. Bruce Larson was over there with his little boat. The guy that owns Jone's Inlet Packing, he had a little boat called the *Bozo*.

NS: [laughter] That could be a dangerous name. [laughter]

TS: [laughter] No, there was no more bozos in those days. [laughter] So, anyway, everybody is packing over there. Captain Ben's wanted to get in on the act. Because they're always at odds with each other over fish prices and over this guy was doing what that guy was doing. So, Jerry

started packing fish over here. He built these docks about the same time. But what was happening, there was so much fish coming in, whiting mainly. So much whiting coming in. There was a tremendous volume of fish going off this dock. Squid, my God. In the summertime, what squid we used to pack? It's amazing. Every boat (would come?) in regular, ten thousand, twelve thousand pounds of fish.

NS: Jesus. That's a lot of fish.

TS: So, Jerry couldn't handle it. He hired some salesmen to sell the fish.

NS: This is Jerry Bracco?

TS: Yes. He hired salesmen to sell the fish. He put his five little trucks out called the Fish Market on Wheels. He'd load up the trucks and give everybody commission for what they sold. Excuse me. Now about this time, Bruce Larson had had it over at that dock. Over at the Cold Storage Dock. He was having a tough time getting paid. He felt that he was getting a raw deal as far as the prices went.

NS: From the fishermen?

TS: No. Bruce was running his own boat at the time. He was running the *Bozo*. So, in order to get away from that, he opened his own packing dock in Point Lookout. The fellows that were over here, myself, (Billy Wagner, John Dempsey, Jack Dab?). Who else was over here? (Tommy Le Geary?). We didn't want to go. We had a good thing going on here. Until these salesmen that were in the office upstairs started selling the fish for a little or nothing, they would get a penny and a half a pound commission on whatever they sold. That's all they were interested in. So, as far as the wholesale price of the fish, they would drop it just so they could make the sales. Jerry got his money off the bat. The truckers got his money off the bat. Packers got their money off the bat. Which left very little for us. So, I was one of the first boats to pull out with the *Cinderella*. I took the *Cinderella* over to Bruce's dock and fished over there for Bruce for five years.

NS: Did that make a lot of people angry?

TS: No. Eventually everybody went over there. What happened when we first went, Bruce did the same thing as what we used to do years ago. He'd pack out the fish and send them to whatever house you wanted to in the city. And there's fifty-seven different houses to sell to. So, we came in with a load of fish and Bruce would say, "Could I buy ten cartons?" "Sure. I'll tell you when the market returns." So, he'd send ten cartons less to the city. Then he would come in another night, "Can I buy forty cartons?" "Sure." Pretty soon it was the whole load. So, that worked out great. Bruce was buying a whole load.

NS: How long did that last?

TS: He's still doing it.

NS: He's still buying your fish?

TS: No. I sell my own now. Not because of anything that Bruce did to me. Bruce and I are good friends. But I saw money to be made in packing. Not on expensive fish. Like during the summer when we catch two dollar a pound fluke, sometimes it might pay to go over to Bruce's dock so you just don't have the aggravation of handling the fish yourself. But on cheap wintertime fish like whiting, ling, codfish, we can get another twenty cents a pound by packing our own stuff. See now Bruce gets that twenty cents. It's his dock. He's got a lot of money invested. He's got a lot of equipment over there. He needs that twenty cents in order to run the place. So, I get that twenty cents over here.

NS: That's what you were doing that day you came in.

TS: Exactly. And it cost us seven. So, we realized a thirteen-cent profit by packing out our own fishing. Little extra work. The fellows that do the packing on the dock, if they were off the boat, I don't keep that packing money for myself, I throw it into the boat and share it with them. It's worked out pretty good.

NS: Do you find that most people would do that if they have their druthers?

TS: (Charlie?) Cona does. Frank did. It sounds like they're going better. I don't know what's going to happen now because Bruce's business has grown so much. There's a lot of big steel boats over there. It really is no place for boats our size anymore. In that respect, I'm glad I'm out of there.

NS: Do you think there's a big difference between the small boats and the big boats in terms of the way things are done and kinds of people who do that?

TS: There is no comparison. A guy might think he's a good fisherman on a boat like this. When they get in command of a boat like that, he's lost. Absolutely lost, because the gear is so different.

NS: But I would think that you need to know more quantity wise on small boats like this?

TS: Boat like that is a better place for a young man to start.

NS: To learn because you have everything there?

TS: Sure, because there's somebody else that he can pass the buck to. There's plenty of people on the boat.

NS: But would he learn everything that he would need to know?

TS: Eventually he would. Yes, eventually. On this boat you have to perform right away because there's only two of us. On a boat like that, you can break into the more important jobs like handling the wincher or sewing or taking a tow.

NS: It would be hard to start out on a small boat because you have to know everything at once?

TS: Right. (Joey's?) lucky because he got me. If he went cold up to a captain or if a small boat like this went out to sea, the guy would yell and scream at him so much, Joey would never come back. Nobody likes to be yelled and screamed at.

NS: Have you seen guys on big boats, though, who really don't know—?

TS: Most of them don't.

NS: They've been on them for years and they don't know what really needs to be done. That's more special.

TS: No. The main men on the boat need to be the captain, the first mate, and maybe one deckhand. You know exactly what has to be done on the boat. Between the mate and the deckhand, they make sure everybody else aboard does their share. Mainly, it's boat work.

NS: So, you pretty much got broken in into the business by working on a big boat?

TS: I worked on all size boats. I worked on boats from thirty-five feet up to a hundred feet. I've captained a hundred-foot boats.

NS: Did you learn the most once you got on the smaller boat?

TS: Right here, right on these small boats. This is where you learned your marlinspike seamanship. This is where you learned your tows and how to handle gear, right here. As far as the gear they use, you have to be on them before you realize the catching power those boats have. Once you realize that, then you can change things around and be able to use the power that they have. Some of those boats have seven hundred (share of?) horsepower. Which is a lot, too.

NS: But you might never learn it.

TS: No, you might never learn it. If you don't learn it, you're going to get fired. Because most of those are not owner operated. Most of them, someone owns the boat and they hire a captain to run it.

NS: On the big boats, do you find that there is more of a family tradition involved or is it more anybody?

TS: No. More of a family in the little boats.

NS: Really?

TS: Yes. With the big boats, they'll take any Tom, Dick, and Harry off the street that they can find.

NS: That's what I meant.

TS: But on the little boats, you feel more comfortable with someone that you know. Because there's got to be more trust there.

NS: I'd also think that people also have to check you out along here. A big boat, you can't do that.

TS: Oh, yes. Oh, sure they do. Over at Bruce's there's a lot of competition between the captains over there. This guy comes in with so much fish. That guy comes in with that much fish. He's no good, he didn't catch anything.

NS: Do you find that there is a difference in temperament in the people who are working on the big boats?

TS: No. Everybody who has gone far enough in the business to be able to say they're a professional full-time fisherman and they earn a hundred percent of their salary from it, earned a living from it, has gone through enough. What point am I driving at? Repeat your question. I got carried away.

NS: [laughter] I'm driving at the point. I am trying to get a sense of the people who were working on small boats versus people who were working on the big boats. I was just curious about that because I know there seems to be some difference.

TS: Most of the personnel onboard, there is no difference.

NS: What are some of the immediate dangers?

TS: Being knocked overboard, getting caught in the winch, getting caught in the weather, losing your steering, popping a plank. Guys have gotten wrapped up in those winches and a body is not recognizable. Tow wire breaks, somebody gets their head shot off, it goes one-fifty feet like a cannonball.

NS: Sounds pretty scary.

TS: I've had good friends killed. Good friends whole boat loads off. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: Do you ever get scared?

TS: Do I ever get scared?

NS: Yes, when you're out there?

TS: Do I ever get scared? I suppose so. [laughter] You're not scared at the time, but after you see what you went through, you get scared. You say, "Oh my God." [laughter]

NS: You're laughing. I've been out there sometimes. I'm not sure.

TS: Yes, I guess I've been scared. Not at the time, after it was over.

NS: I've been hearing about how the mayor right now is trying to take away all that.

TS: I don't get involved in Freeport politics. What does she want to do?

NS: Basically, she's not helping you guys. She just wants to turn all the waterfront land into condos.

TS: Not only this port, there's a lot of other ports.

NS: Yes?

TS: Sure. I wish I had the *National Fisherman* here to show you. We had an issue of it with your picture of all the waterfronts building up and the poor little trawler getting squeezed right out. Too much money involved on the waterfronts, but we do need a place.

NS: What are some things you would like to see happen?

TS: What I would like to see happen?

NS: Yes.

TS: What would I like to see happen? I'm kind of satisfied with the way everything's going along right now. But one thing I would like to see happen, I would like to see sports fishermen stopped from being able to sell fish over the dock.

NS: Do they eat up a lot of the business?

TS: That's why the price of flounders is so low right now. They get off the captain whatever, up the block, one of those party boats. They run down here with a string of fish like that. They walk in and sell them. They cover the cost of their trips that way. Guys go out and buy twenty-five-foot makos with twin two-hundred and twenty-five horsepower engines on them and pay for their boats by pin hooking fish on the weekends.

NS: Who are these sports fishermen?

TS: Oh, just hang around here and you'll see plenty of them, when the ocean settles down. It's too rough for them to get out now. They'll come around. You'll see them coming in here and selling fish. There's a bill before the Senate now, two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar commercial fishing license. In other words, you need to have two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar license in order to sell fish. You don't need to have a license to catch them, but you need a license to sell them. So, it might help a little bit. Maybe some of them will stop doing it. Plus, I got other beefs with those

people too. They say that trawlers are depleting the stocks and that we're raping the ocean and destroying everything.

NS: That's a bunch of nonsense.

TS: I'll tell you why it's a bunch of nonsense.

NS: Ninety percent of the fish caught are by sportsmen.

TS: Exactly. You said it in a nutshell.

NS: I just read that somewhere.

TS: Actually, last year it was eighty percent of the fluke caught around here last year, was caught by recreational fishermen, not by trawlers. Eighty percent. It's these empty barrels that are making a lot of noise. Guys like (Nick Harris?).

NS: I don't know him.

TS: (Nick Harris?)? [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: Is he some guy who just comes out here on weekends?

TS: No, I don't see (Nick Harris?). I only saw him once in a while at the meetings. At the Babylon Town Hall, you'll see him.

NS: What are some of the other problems you find now with these sports fishermen?

TS: Not so much with the sports fishermen. I said all I have to say about sports fishermen. But as far as the boating public in general, there's a lack of knowledge of the tool that they have out here on the water. Very dangerous these days. Very, very dangerous with excessive wakes, I don't careisms, no respect for the rights of others. It just goes on and on like that. Here's a family of people out on a rented rowboat from Ed's Fishing Station. It can't be any more than sixteen feet long. They're out there trying to catch a fish. Here comes a guy with a million-dollar Hatteras leaving a tidal wave for a wake. [Whistle] Over the little rowboat goes. No respect for the rights of others whatsoever. No understanding of the rules of the road.

NS: They don't have to get a license, right?

TS: They should. Everybody that runs the boat should be licensed, as far as I'm concerned. Everyone should be licensed. Same way you have to sit for a test to ride a car, only the test for the boat should be on a yearly basis. They should give points on your boating license, the same as you do on your driver's license. You get to have enough points on it and your insurance becomes out of hand and they won't renew your license. Then maybe some of these people will settle themselves down on the ocean. I blame it a lot on the boat manufacturers too.

NS: For making them go so fast?

TS: Yes. You don't put that kind of equipment in the hands of a novice. Something that been handled by a team of professional offshore racers, to put in the hands of a fellow who sits behind a desk for the last forty years and turn them loose in the ocean, is asking for trouble. They're trying to kill the man. It actually is murder.

NS: Interesting. This is going to be forty thousand outboard motorists?

TS: There's going to be forty thousand boaters. That's what they expect is going to use this inlet.

NS: Do you know how many boats used to be at these docks?

TS: Freeport's always been a popular port.

NS: What about when you started?

TS: Oh, there was boats here. There was boats here. Not as many as there are now.

NS: What would you say about half? Maybe a third?

TS: I would say three hundred percent to five hundred percent more. What helped a whole lot is when they came across with these boat garages. Where they put them on racks.

NS: Yes, I saw those over at Hudson Point.

TS: There's three or four of them up and down the creek. They can take a piece of property that would normally handle maybe thirty-five boats—

NS: Handle ten and now it's a hundred—

TS: No, how about three hundred or four hundred? They just stack them up in rows and racks. When the people call in to use their boat, the poor fellows over there work like animals getting them in the water. Then they take them out and put them back in the garage until they want to use the boat again. Dry land marinas is what they're called.

NS: I never saw those until I came here. [laughter]

TS: Remember Freeport is very close proximity to New York. It's probably one of the closest ports to New York that there is. There is boating in Oceanside, but I don't think it's to the extent that it is here.

NS: I know down in Baldwin, there are hardly any commercial fisher boats [inaudible]

TS: I live in Baldwin.

NS: I didn't know that.

TS: They want to keep that residential property. They don't want the place developed and industrialized at all. It's a beautiful neighborhood down along the water in Baldwin. I venture to say it's probably one of the nicer neighborhoods on the South Shore in Nassau. I venture to say it's every bit as affluent as Bayberry Point, maybe more.

NS: Where is Bayberry Point at?

TS: That's in Islip.

NS: This is going back. I'm not sure if you are familiar. But some of the people said that a lot of the bay fishermen in Baldwin were really upset when the draggers started really [inaudible]—I'm talking about fifty, sixty years ago?

TS: Not at all.

NS: No?

TS: Not at all. To my knowledge, not at all. In fact, there some of the better fishermen around here did come from Baldwin.

NS: I know.

TS: We called them Baldwin Bay rats.

NS: [laughter]

TS: They were born with hip boots on.

NS: [laughter]

TS: They came from over there. They worshiped Dick Abbott. I don't know if anybody's brought that name up in the course of conversation before.

NS: Who's he?

TS: Called him Captain Beanie.

NS: Yes?

TS: Dick Abbott had a boat called the *Gannet*. All the fellows that worked in the bay and all the fellows around the waterfront worshiped Dick Abbott because he was such a good fisherman. So, don't anybody say—there was no animosity between baymen and fishermen at all, to the best of my knowledge.

NS: I am getting two different sides. Some say, “Yes, there were terrible fights.” Other people are saying, “No, there was no problem.”

TS: There was no problem. No problem at all.

NS: Do you think it might have just been before you were around here?

TS: If it was, it was back in the ‘20s.

NS: Yes. That’s what I am talking about, ‘20s and ‘30s.

TS: I really doubt it, though.

NS: Yes?

TS: I don’t know what the commercial fishing industry was like around here as far as trawlers go.

NS: Well, that’s when it pretty much started with the draggers and the trawlers.

TS: I don’t think so. I think it started later than that. I think Frank Cona was one of the first people in here and that was in like 1955. Most of the trawler fleet came from Brooklyn. There was forty boats in Brooklyn. And that’s when most of them—

NS: [inaudible] Brooklyn? Did they come here?

TS: They came here because there was better fishing here. Goodbye. There he goes.

NS: [laughter] If you ignore them long enough, they do disappear. [laughter] I don’t know if there will ever be one right answer to that or not.

TS: As far as I’m concerned, there was no animosity whatsoever between baymen. Or as far as I know, since I’ve been in this port—since I’ve known about this port, none whatsoever.

NS: This is a trivia question. What does *E.T.* stand for?

TS: Eleanor and Tony.

NS: Is Eleanor your wife?

TS: My wife. [laughter] That’s what *E.T.* stands for.

NS: Did most fishermen name their boats after their wives?

TS: Well, Frank didn’t. But the *Rosalyn* did. *Rosalyn C*. That’s his wife. This is called *E.T.*

NS: (Wink Carman's?) boat was called (*Wink's Babe*?).

TS: The fact is a friend of mine, his name is—oh I forget his name right now. Anyway, a friend of mine is an artist. He's making up a logo for the boat. Because we're going to paint this tub soon. We're going to take the logo up to (Mr. Sign?) and have it done on a thin sheet of aluminum. It's going on either side of the pilothouse, which is the two fingers with the rows in the middle. With one stem or two roses, a quarter over here and a Coke bottle over there.

NS: [laughter] That sounds great. How did you come up with that?

TS: We thought about it. His name is (Chip?). He is quite an artist and he's got quite an imagination. He makes some beautiful posters. So, he's going to put the rough draft on a poster. Then I'm going to bring it up to (Mr. Sign?) over here.

NS: How come the rose and a Coke bottle? Are those things that you like or it was his idea?

TS: Yes, that was his idea. But they mean things.

NS: No?

TS: I'm not telling you. Don't invade my privacy. I didn't invade yours. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] Okay, okay. I've been to a lot of the fishermen's houses. I haven't been to yours, but this is a guess. I have a feeling I am going to be right though. Is there an anchor in your front or backyard?

TS: No.

NS: No anchor?

TS: No.

NS: No anchor around your house?

TS: No. It's like any other house on the block.

NS: Nothing to tell people that you are a fisherman?

TS: Nothing.

NS: Nothing?

TS: Nothing.

NS: Seems that's the thing to do.

TS: I don't flaunt my business. What I do for a living, I do for a living. I'm proud of what I do for a living. I like what I do.

NS: I know. That's why I am surprised that there isn't—

TS: But I don't flaunt it.

NS: What are some of the non-fish things that you've caught when you've gone out?

TS: Some is (mongo?). [laughter] (Mongo?) are things that come out of the ocean that you can sell.

NS: Yes? [laughter]

TS: Other things we call nautical artifacts.

NS: What do you call the stuff you catch?

TS: Things that we can sell that come out of the ocean. Like we caught a fifty-five-inch propeller.

NS: [laughter]

TS: A four-inch Monel shaft. The keel of a boat, inside and outside packing drains.

NS: You caught the keel of a boat?

TS: Yes.

NS: Jesus.

TS: Well, we catch all kinds of horrible things. Never caught a body.

NS: That's good.

TS: Never caught a body. Never caught a piece of a body.

NS: You could be accused of murder if you did that. [laughter]

TS: [laughter] Never caught a piece of a body. Never had anything like that. But we got some beautiful things out of the ocean. I got an alabaster urn out of the ocean. It's a gorgeous thing with Greek figurines all around it.

NS: Is this from a wreck you think?

TS: No, it's over on the Cholera Banks. Cholera Banks is quite a spot to fish. There's a lot of

stuff on the bottom over there. I've got a cup and saucer and plate from the *Lusitania*.

NS: *Lusitania*, it sunk over in England?

TS: Yes, but she must've been in New York once or twice. Because I got a plate from her. Bone China plate. [laughter]

NS: Cool. Jesus.

TS: I got all kinds of stuff.

NS: [laughter]

TS: I caught a huge deadeye. Deadeye is about that big, I had it mounted.

NS: What's a deadeye?

TS: Deadeye is before they had turn buckles. This is how they pulled the stay wires tight on sailing ships. This must have come from pretty good-sized sailing ship. It was a big deadeye. The holes in it for the ropes—where they reel the ropes through, has got to be an inch and three quarters. So, I had that mounted and I got my swordfish bills. I got a lot of stuff in the house. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

TS: Bottles.

NS: Do you ever find people who wanted to trade you for some of that stuff?

TS: No, not really. I don't bring it out. I leave it in the house. That's for my own enjoyment.

NS: I heard this story about how, I guess it was (Wink Carman?) who had caught this incredible anchor.

TS: Oh, there's a lot of anchors that are caught. You see a big one outside of (Erhardt's?). That was probably one of the clam boats. We catch mostly pieces of barge wreckage, junk crap.

NS: [laughter] Alongside the fish?

TS: We try not to catch those things. They do a lot of damage to the gear. But if it's there, it's there. Now every time we go into a new area, we have to clean it out before we can fish. If we know there's fish there, we will clean it out.

NS: How do you clean it out or how do you do that?

TS: By catching everything in the area. If you hook up on something that's too big, you mark it

down as a hang.

NS: So, you would have to basically go around the area quite a bit before even fishing?

TS: You'd have to scout the area, yes.

NS: How long would it take you to scout the area?

TS: Maybe two years.

NS: What do you do while you are scouting the area? Obviously, you are not going to stop fishing.

TS: I'll show you. Actually, you can't fish without it.

NS: I know. How many years did it take you to put all this together?

TS: A long time.

NS: Ten or twenty years?

TS: But what other guys will do with me now, I've been around a long time. I can go somewhere else with this boat and we will trade about their area, what they know, for what I know from here. I won't do that unless they know the guy is square. He won't do it unless he knows I'm square.

NS: I heard that term before. Do you know where it came from? You are square-headed? [laughter]

TS: Oh no. It's square with people. Square with people means you're honest and you actually really are fishing—

NS: That is what square-headed apparently means.

TS: No, square-headed means stubborn.

NS: Somebody told me [inaudible]—

TS: A square-head Norwegian is a stubborn Norwegian. That's a slang for a Norwegian person, is a square-head.

NS: Really?

TS: Yes.

NS: Has anybody ever called you that?

TS: Yes. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] I just remembered Al Grover told me that if he wanted to characterize a really tight ship he said square-headed ship.

TS: No, he's wrong. He's very wrong. You want to characterize a really tight ship, it's Bristol.

NS: Bristol?

TS: Right. From Bristol, Massachusetts. Because they keep those boats up there immaculate. So, anything that's in good shape is called a Bristol ship.

NS: What would a sloppy ship be called?

TS: I can't repeat it. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] Oh, (international?) thing?

TS: No, it's not a nice one.

NS: It's hard to get at this because it's probably—you're probably not even conscious of it. But some of the other terms that only fishermen would know to call them.

TS: You've heard some of them mentioned today, Kelly eyes, dandelions, backstraps, scissors, trawl doors, (j?) hooks.

NS: But those are for technical things. I am talking about things that aren't physical things.

TS: No. We're not very—you could go to the library and get out some really (seaman-like?) terms. But we don't do that. Port and starboard, that's a lot of crap. That's the right side of the boat and not the left side of the boat. That's downstairs and there's upstairs. Okay?

NS: [laughter] Okay. It's funny. In sailing, they don't let you get away without calling everything port or starboard.

TS: Do you know the whistle signal for two trips passing on the stern?

NS: No.

TS: That's the important stuff. Do you know the day marker for a trawler out in the ocean?

NS: No.

TS: Do you know the day marker for a submarine on the surface and the night marker? Can you tell which way a ship is going in the night? So, you told me what importance port and starboard

is? Can you look in the radar and tell a ship when it's on a collision course with you? Can you take a relative bearing according to that ship to you?

NS: No.

TS: That's important. This terminology is a lot of crap.

NS: I think that's about—

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

Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 07/12/2024