

## Interview with George Combs, Jr.

**Narrator:** George Combs, Jr.

**Interviewer:** Nancy Solomon

**Date:** May 15, 1987

**Location:** Amityville, 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 15, 1987, Nancy Solomon interviewed George Combs as part of the *Long Island Traditions* oral history project. George was born and raised in Amityville, New York and comes from a long line of baymen, boat builders, and market gunners dating back to 1644. He discusses significant family members such as his father, a famous decoy carver, and his great-great-grandfather, a privateer and shipbuilder. The conversation covers the evolution of boat types used by the Combs family, such as Garveys and gunning boats, and details their construction techniques. George recounts stories of his grandfather's rum-running activities during Prohibition and the family's involvement in the bay business. The interview also touches on environmental changes and challenges faced by modern baymen, including pollution and overfishing, which have contributed to the decline of the bayman's way of life. Additionally, George reflects on the independence and resilience characteristic of baymen, describing the unique skills and knowledge passed down through generations.

Nancy Solomon: – in Amityville, New York, on May 15th, 1987. [Recording paused.] I just replaced them, so they're all good and charged up.

George Combs: Good.

NS: It's a wonderful little machine.

GC: Yeah, they're handy.

NS: [inaudible]

GC: [inaudible] stand up. [inaudible] customers. I gave you this. You can keep this. NS:

Oh, wow.

GC: Just to give you some history, this was about my father and something about his family because he's a famous decoy carver.

NS: Wow.

GC: Oh, he's well-known throughout the country. He's seventy-six. He lives in Maryland. He moved down in January – Eastern Shore of Maryland. Beautiful down there. He enjoys it. But he's the last of the old-time baymen and market gunners. He did everything.

NS: How did he get into this?

GC: A family tradition. I say our family goes back –

NS: Yeah. Why don't you tell me? I mean, this is all written. I'd rather hear it from you. [laughter]

GC: Yes. As far as Long Island history, we go back to 1644. John Combs –

NS: From England?

GC: Yeah. Well, John Combs come over from Connecticut with Reverend Denton. They settled Hempstead. Two generations before that, John Combs came over on the [inaudible], which was after the *Mayflower*. He married Priscilla Priest; she was on the *Mayflower*. She came over with her father on the *Mayflower*. Within the first year, her father died.

NS: I get the feeling you have told this story a million times. [laughter]

GC: [laughter] Yes, one way or another. So, that's where we trace it from. They settled in Hempstead. Then, they settled [in] Freeport, which then was called Atlanticville, and Raynortown and Baldwin – all through there. All my ancestors were either baymen, boat builders, or farmers. My great-grandfather was George W. Combs [inaudible]. It tells about him

in there. He was a market gunner. He had a little shipyard on South Main Street in Freeport. On the corner of –

NS: [inaudible] Wink Carmen, who apparently learned –

GC: Well, that's junior, yeah. Well, his father was called Wink. NS:

Yeah. He worked for Combs.

GC: Yeah. He worked for my grandfather. My grandfather was Captain Jack Combs. He had the bait dock in Swift Creek in Freeport.

NS: Yeah?

GC: He was well-known in the bay business. He was a rum runner during Prohibition. Oh, yeah, Freeport was a big –

NS: Did you ever hear any stories?

GC: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure.

NS: Well, tell me one. [laughter]

GC: During Prohibition, he ran liquor for Bill McCoy, the real McCoy.

NS: Yeah.

GC: Well, “the real McCoy” term came from Captain Bill McCoy. He had the best liquor during Prohibition. He brought it up from the Virgin Islands on a schooner. He's the first one to do it. My grandfather bought liquor from him. He had the best stuff. The preacher in town – everybody bought liquor. Everybody did. [laughter] He was a rum runner for them. They had boats –

NS: Did he ever get caught?

GC: No. He had boats up to fifty-foot. They had five hundred horsepower Liberty motors in them. It was super-fast. In fact, they had one with a bulletproof pilothouse on it because, later on, it got a little nasty. But he was one of the original rum runners there. But besides that, he was in the bay business. There's a boat on Long Island called a Garvey. They're flat-bottomed.

NS: Yeah. I know what a Garvey is like.

GC: Well, he bought the very first one up from New Jersey around 1920. The very first inboard Garvey was not made in Long Island. It was made in New Jersey. He bought it up here from New Jersey. He bought the first ones up for catching bait.

NS: What about gunning boats? Were those –?

GC: Oh, yes. Well, our family made our own gunning boats, yeah.

NS: Really?

GC: Oh, yeah. Seaford skiffs and boats like that, yeah.

NS: Wow.

GC: Now, like I say, his father was George W. Combs I, born in 1845. He died, I think, about 1934. He died on the eve of his sixty-first wedding anniversary. He died in a house he built to get married. The house was gone –

NS: Do you have a picture of the house?

GC: No. When you go on South Main Street and Atlantic Avenue, on the west side of the road, there's a house on the corner. Just above it, there's an empty lot. Well, that was his house. The garage is in the back. That was his house, which was torn down maybe twelve, fifteen years ago. But he built that house. He lived in that house for sixty-one years.

NS: Wow.

GC: He died. He was a Quaker. He was a little man, about five-foot-six. He was a boat builder. He built boats, and he –

NS: And he built the house. [laughter]

GC: Yeah. He built the house. Then he built killie pots and things. He worked the bay. He was a market gunner. But he was primarily a boat builder.

NS: Do you have any of these things?

GC: Yeah. He has some pictures. I have a couple of things he made. I have a schooner he built. His father –

NS: Really? Could I see that?

GC: Yeah. His father was Daniel Combs, Captain Dan Combs.

NS: This is your great-grandfather?

GC: My great-great-grandfather –

NS: Great-great-grandfather?

GC: – was Captain Dan Combs. During the Civil War, he was a privateer. He spent six years in China. He was a pirate. He was a captain of his own ship. His [inaudible] Captain John Smith because during that time, you never had your own name in case you got caught. But he was a pirate. Spent six years in China. When he came back, he built a shipyard on Sportsmans Avenue. It's still there. That was his.

NS: The Combs' Boatyard.

GC: It was his. Then it was sold to [inaudible].

NS: Is that why Wink Carmen –? I know about the [inaudible].

GC: They bought it from my ancestors. My great-grandfather –

NS: Your great-great-grandfather.

GC: Yes. My great-grandfather built that one there. His father before him, my great-great-grandfather, both were named Dan. He built schooners. His house is still on Atlantic Avenue in Baldwin. The house is still there, my great-great-grandfather's house.

NS: Because I have been around Baldwin.

GC: Clinton Metz, that's –

NS: Yeah.

GC: Well, he's got history about the family, and one [inaudible] mentions the house. I don't know who [inaudible], but the house is still there on Atlantic Avenue. So, that was my great-great-grandfather. He always built schooners and sailboats and things like that.

NS: Did you learn any of these things?

GC: Yeah. As far as building boats, yeah.

NS: When did you learn?

GC: Well, when I was young – my father and my grandfather. We built our own boats and stuff. We always worked the bay. We're in the bait business.

NS: What kind of boats did you build?

GC: Well, mostly Garveys, flat-bottomed boats for work. We built a couple of gunning boats. I restored some Seaford skiffs, things like that.

NS: I was talking with – I think it was Wink Carmen who said that during the winter, they would put a sail on the gunning boat. Did you do that?

GC: Oh, yeah. They had what they called ice runners on the bottom of the boat. They sailed across the ice. Yeah. That was done, yeah.

NS: Did you ever have an accident doing that? [laughter]

GC: No, no. [inaudible]

NS: Did you ever crash in the ice?

GC: That was done mostly a long time ago. In the past twenty years –

NS: Nobody does that anymore.

GC: – you have big power boats, and it goes through the ice and stuff.

NS: But when you were a kid, you would do –?

GC: Oh, yeah. Things like that, yeah. [inaudible]

NS: Where would you go?

GC: Well, it was in Massapequa. Mostly in South Oyster Bay, Merrick Bay, Bellmore Bay, around there. Yeah.

NS: What other kinds of things did you do when you were a kid?

GC: Well, just anything on the bay, duck shooting, trap muskrats. Because when I was a kid, we still had the bait dock in Swift Creek. The hurricane of '51 took it down. After that, we had a houseboat – I should say a bay house in Massapequa. We're right on the line between Massapequa and the Town of Hempstead. We still have a bay house there now. We keep our equipment and stuff here for catching the killies in the ocean.

NS: You're lucky the kids haven't gotten a hold of it. [laughter]

GC: Well, yeah, every year – but not last year, [but] the year before, they vandalized it twice and tore it all up and stuff.

NS: I know. Do you know George Schmidt?

GC: Yeah.

NS: He was telling me about how the vandals –

GC: Yeah. We don't lock nothing. We have grub in there and stuff. Everything is there. If you lock it, they just destroy it anyway. So, just hope that if they use it, keep it clean and don't

destroy it. Two years ago, they went twice. They broke every window and just threw everything out. Broke the refrigerator, tore it all up. But last year, it was okay.

NS: When you would go duck hunting when you were a kid, what kind of boats did you use, the Garvey or the gunning boat?

GC: Well, we had the Garveys. We had sixteen-foot Garveys with a forty-horse motor on it. We'd tow out the gunning boats.

NS: Forty horses. Wow. [laughter]

GC: Yeah.

NS: You'd tow the gunning boats and then take the gunning boats?

GC: Yes. Tow the gunning boat out. Then we would anchor the boat and take the gunning boat and [inaudible] marsh.

NS: Were these boats you built yourself?

GC: Well, the one I had was built in [inaudible] shipyard. I got that one. My father's boat – he built his own at the time. But mostly, boats we built or picked up and fixed up.

NS: How did you build a Garvey? Did you build Garveys instead?

GC: Yeah. Well, it's not really hard because they're a simple boat to build. It's built out of plywood and oak. You could build a boat in two weeks' time [inaudible].

NS: Did you notch the planks together?

GC: Well, the older boats were cedar sides and plank bottom. Then we started using plywood; it was much easier. The bottom was plywood, one piece. Then we had the sides plywood. Then we glassed over it. It was a lot easier. In fact, there's one out in the back here.

NS: You put fiberglass?

GC: This is what they looked like.

[Recording paused.]

NS: So, basically, the difference between the gunning and the Garveys – the Garveys are a rounder bottomed?

GC: No. The Garveys are flat. The Garvey is a flat-bottomed boat to be used in shoal water and to carry a lot of weight, strictly a work boat. The gunning boats are semi-round. They're very

lightweight. Most of them are like cedar plank. Like that one was cedar planked over oak and then fiberglass [inaudible]. The gunning boat.

NS: Is the one that was on the side?

GC: The gunning boat underneath the canvas. That's made out of cedar. It's oak-ribbed and then fiberglass over it.

NS: Well, the one you have right out here, that's a Garvey.

GC: That's a Garvey. That's a workboat.

NS: So, that is the rounded bottom?

GC: No, the bottom is flat.

NS: But the gunning boat looked flatter.

GC: No, no. The gunning boat's rounded. No, no. The gunning boat is flat-bottomed, but the sides come up round. A Garvey is straight sides and a flat bottom. Garveys are always flat-bottomed. Yeah.

NS: I thought it was exactly the opposite. [laughter]

GC: No, no. A Garvey is a flat-bottomed boat. They're always flat. They might have a little V in the bow. But basically, the whole bottom is flat.

NS: These are your dogs?

GC: Yes, I've got two of them. They're Labrador Retrievers.

NS: Oh, he's beautiful.

GC: Yeah. About three years old. They go with me to the bay every day. NS:

Yeah?

GC: Oh, yeah. I take them all the time. Yeah.

NS: Dogs like to go out on the water?

GC: Oh, love it. They love to go. Yeah.

NS: Yeah? You go swimming, huh?

GC: Yeah. [laughter] They enjoy it.



NS: So, you learned to make –? How old were you when you made your first boat?

GC: Well, let's see. Gosh, I had probably my first boat when I was ten years old, a little piece of thing I picked up and fixed up. Ever since then, I always fixed them up and restored them – had the Seaford skips. As far as building my own boat, probably about maybe sixteen when I built my own boat from scratch.

NS: Wow.

GC: Yeah.

NS: Did you have other friends who built their own boats, or were you the only one?

GC: No. They weren't that mechanically inclined or hung around –

NS: Probably didn't have their families to help them along either.

GC: – the water. Yeah, right. They didn't have that history. Yeah.

NS: Which did you think was –? Did you learn a lot from your father?

GC: Oh, yeah. Oh, gosh, yeah. My grandfather, when I was young – let's see. He was about sixteen when he died. I've been on the water since I could walk, and it was with him. He was showing me everything. So, my grandfather was the first one, and then my father after that. But I was always with my grandfather. Yeah.

NS: I mean, everyone, when they begin, they make a lot of mistakes. Did you? [laughter]

GC: Oh, yeah. They straighten you out pretty quick. You just can't make mistakes really out there. Some mistakes is very costly. But yeah, you learn fast. I had good teachers.

NS: It must be hard when –

GC: Yeah.

NS: What was some of the funny things that happened to you?

GC: Oh, gosh. [laughter] I don't know. I can't remember. I don't know. Maybe fall off the dock a couple of times when I was young, [laughter] tying the boat, and the boat backed up. I was holding on to the rope, and then I fell [inaudible]

NS: [laughter] And go split?

GC: Yeah. So, things like that. When you're young, you wait too long. Say, like we're duck shooting. The tide is basically three to four feet rise and fall on the tide. A lot of places, if you're up in a little pond, half tide on down, it's bare. Before it gets too low, you get out. But

you wait and wait, and all of a sudden, you're there high and dry. You sit there for hours, waiting for the tide to come up to get out. So, dumb things like that. But it didn't take you long to –

NS: Did you ever stay out overnight?

GC: No. I was maybe a couple hours late, but I got back towards – I never [inaudible] all night stuck out in the bay. We stayed down a lot of nights overnight in the bay house. We did that a lot. That was fun on that part.

NS: Did you ever get stuck out on an island? [laughter]

GC: You mean like when a boat drifted away?

NS: That, yeah.

GC: No. I always made sure I had the anchor out when we got out and stuff to be careful. No, I was lucky with that. I didn't do too many stupid things. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] You were lucky.

GC: Well, I had good teachers. That's the thing. They followed the bay, independent, worked with their own bosses, and did what they liked to do.

NS: Is that why you followed in their footsteps?

GC: Yeah. I enjoyed it, yeah.

NS: What are some of the frustrations you have here?

GC: Well, right now, I say I'm the twelfth generation on Long Island. I'm the last one that'll make a living off the bay. It's finished.

NS: Really? You don't have children?

GC: Oh, yeah, I have a son. He's nineteen. But there's no future. The bay is finished. As far as commercial fishing goes, it's changed. Well, a big part of the problem is the people, too many people. They have too many people. It causes pollution. It causes all kinds of problems. Another ruination of the bay is the outboard motor. In the bays here, we have a lot of shallow water, and we have eelgrass. It's marine life. All kinds of little critters live through it. They cut back and forth, and they just tear up all this eelgrass. That kills the life. Then, the eelgrass dies. It lies on the bottom, and it smothers other marine life. The outboard has a lot of pollution in the water. It gives off a lot of oil and gas. If they [inaudible] thousands of outboards –

NS: So, the food [inaudible] –

GC: – that’s around. So, that's a problem. Just modern times have ruined the bay for the baymen. Too many people. The bay is small. All along the shoreline are all houses. It used to be marsh. It used to have different types of marine life and nothing but houses. It's all changed. The environment has changed so much that there's really no future in it. Most of the bays are closed off for clamming. Every year, the fish get scarcer. The bait is scarcer to catch. Stuff is not there. It's just changed. So, basically, I'll be the last generation, realistically, who made a living off the bay, and my days are numbered. You go out there and sail around or whatever. But as far as going out there and depending on the bay for your livelihood, that's a thing of the past. You've got part-timers who go out and catch a few clams. But they couldn't survive just doing that. It's not enough. They have a land job. So, they're not commercial fishermen. They're just what we call part-timers. So, I would say I'm the last generation that's a bayman.

NS: What do you enjoy most about being a bayman?

GC: The sunrise. Getting out there is the most beautiful thing. Go up there early in the morning, and you see the sunrise. It's human nature. You have low aggravation. Maybe the wind’s blowing, or the tide is strong, but it's minor things. You don't have people to contend with and things, all that type of problems. It's just very peaceful. It's [inaudible] on the weekends [inaudible] around. But generally, it's beautiful out in the bay. Whether it's a windy, snowy day or a nice sunny morning, it's beautiful. You have the birds and all the wildlife. If you've been brought up on it, you appreciate it. Most people have no idea what it is today, or they can't comprehend that you like the bay so much. I'm like a dinosaur. It's end of an era. I'm one of the last people who appreciates the bay, what it was like, and that’s [inaudible] still offers.

NS: There seemed to be certain personal characteristics that baymen have.

GC: Basically, they're independent. There's no such thing as a union baymen, like a company's union. You can't get four baymen together to play cards, let alone join an organization to fight for something. They're very independent persons. They have their own lifestyle, their own thoughts. They're very secretive. They won't tell the other baymen much. They're clannish in a way, but yet they're a little individual. If something happened to you, they would take care of you and stuff like that. But they wouldn't tell you things. [laughter] It's a unique thing. But really, the bayman is a thing of the past.

NS: What kinds of things would you guard very secretly if you were a bayman? I don’t know. [Recording paused.] – qualities that baymen [inaudible]?

GC: Baymen and stuff. As I say, a bayman is nonexistent today. A bayman was a person who could go in the bay and do anything. He could clam a hard clam. He could soft clam. He could dig oysters. He could catch eels. He could catch bait. He could adapt for the different seasons. That person no longer exists. What you have is like in Babylon, Bay Shore, and Patchogue, you have a few guys called clam diggers. They go out there in the boat and rake some clams. They don't know how to do anything else.

NS: Much more specialized –

GC: They have no family history on how to do anything else, you see. A bayman is almost nonexistent today because the family tradition is gone because there's nothing there for them to do. The bay is closed off to these different things. Like with me, the only thing that's really, in the last few years, was to catch some bait. We'd catch some killies and green crabs and shrimp, things like that.

NS: Do you do this yourself, or do you have someone who does it?

GC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, my son and I. But this year, it's myself. I catch the bait for the shop and a couple of other places.

NS: Is that hard to learn?

GC: Yeah, it is. You're dealing with nature, and it always plays tricks on you. I'll try to think of what's going to happen.

NS: What are some of the tricks that nature plays on you?

GC: Well, like catching killies, this year was a very bad year for killies, very scarce. There are only a few places that they were in certain holes. You know how to catch them at a certain tide. If you were an hour too late, you wouldn't catch them. They [inaudible]. Certain baits they would take. Every year is a little different.

NS: Why was it so bad last year?

GC: Well, bad last year due to two things. One of them is the previous year, we had the green algae in the bay. The entire bay, you couldn't see in three feet of water. It was kind of a greenish color. They don't know why. It's the plankton in the water. It was just loaded. The whole south shore was loaded with it. That killed the spawn of the killies which were the killies for the following year. The other thing we had – late in the winter, we had thousands and thousands of red-breasted mergansers. They eat tons of killies. We'd never seen so many of those. It was by the thousands. They stayed until March and April. They were all along the shoreline [inaudible] canals. Each one would eat at least two quarts of killies a day.

NS: Must have been great duck hunting.

GC: Yeah, but the season's closed then. So, they had free reign. But it was nature. There's so many mergansers. They had lots of killies – an overabundance of killies. The green algae from the year before – it had a poor spawning season. So, those two things made it a very bad season this year. This year looks a little bit better. But every year, something goes on with nature. It changes. Some years, we don't have grass shrimp in the bay. Some years, there's a lot.

NS: Are killies hard to catch when they're there?

GC: A lot of times, you see them, but they won't go in a trap.

NS: So, what do you do to get them in the trap? [laughter]

GC: You keep at it. That's what you do. You keep trying different places, different tides. NS:

Is there a particular way you have to pull in your line?

GC: Oh, yeah. You have to have your traps set the right way with the tide, the baits you use.

NS: Well, how do the traps have to be set?

GC: [laughter] Well, the traps, the nozzle, it's got to be faced so the tide doesn't put any debris in the funnel to clog it up. You have cabbage and grass and things. So, it's got to put so it doesn't clog it up. Early in the year, the killies, you see them, but they won't [inaudible] because they're spawning. After the middle of July, then they'll feed better. So, it's like fish. You have a certain time you see them, but they won't do nothing. So, you have that to contend with.

NS: What kind of bait do you have to use for killies?

GC: Horseshoe crabs. We call them horse feed. We've been doing – NS:

Do you catch those yourself?

GC: Yeah. We catch them in May and June, and we pen them up.

NS: Because horseshoe crabs – are they not ocean creatures?

GC: Yeah, but they come in the bay to lay their eggs. They come in [inaudible] sandy beaches. The full moon of May and June, they come in. They'll come up on this full moon on top of the tide. They'll lay their eggs on the beaches. Then they go back down. They'll stay in the bay most of the summer, all scattered on the bottom. In the fall, they'll migrate out to the inlet, to the ocean.

NS: Occasionally, they grab a swimmer's leg back. [laughter]

GC: [laughter] Well, [inaudible]. You hear stories.

NS: I know people have gotten bitten by horseshoe crabs. [laughter]

GC: Well, what happens, the horseshoe crabs, they don't have nothing to bother you. But they have the tail – if the tail sticks up and you happen to step on the tail. But their little claws have no power. They just kind of walk on the bottom of it. Plus, he's upside down; his claws are facing the bottom. The only way they can hurt you is if you step on his tail. But he can't hurt you otherwise. We've been doing that for over a hundred years or every year; it's a tradition. You have horse feed round-up. We pen up maybe three or four thousand horseshoe crabs. That's the only time of year we can catch them. We pen them up. That's our bait for all summer.

NS: So, you can only catch killies in the summer, right?

GC: Oh, yeah. We catch killies all summer, yes.

NS: But only in the summer?

GC: Yes. It starts May, and it goes to the beginning of October. NS:

How long do they last if you want to go fishing in April?

GC: The killies? NS:

Yeah. [laughter]

GC: Well, it really doesn't start until May. When the fluke comes in, that's what we have killies for: fluke and crabs. So, according to the fish, it's the season. So, you really use that bait in the summertime.

NS: So, you can only catch certain things that like killies –

GC: At certain time in a year, right, at certain times a year.

NS: – in the summer?

GC: Right. That's it. They migrate like other things.

NS: So, the rest of the year, you cannot catch those things.

GC: Right. There's no need for them because you can't sell them. That's the thing. Years ago, they would catch them in the winter in the boat houses along the shoreline. They would sell them to the farmers for pig feed and things like that. We're talking about fifty years ago.

NS: Well, didn't the farmers used to give you guys the eel spears, though?

GC: Oh, no. No.

NS: No? Where would you get your eel spears from?

GC: The eel spears, there's only one man who made a good eel spear. That's Theodore Bedell in Freeport in Church Street. He's the only –

NS: Yeah, and he's gone.

GC: I still got his stuff. When I was a kid, I remember him. He made –

NS: That's where everyone got their eel spears. [laughter]

GC: I still have his anchors. Great stuff. He was the best blacksmith there was. Eel spears, ice hooks, clam rags – whatever. He was the best there was. Theodore Bedell.

NS: He would make all of your stuff?

GC: There was a (Hendrickson?) in Seaford. He was a good blacksmith. He made a lot of stuff for the local Seaford people. But Theodore Bedell was the best there was.

NS: Is that who Bedell Street was named after?

GC: No. He was on Church Street. Bedell Street –

NS: So, who's the Bedell Street?

GC: The Bedell Street was there when he was alive. So, it wasn't named after him.

NS: No, it was somebody else. [laughter]

GC: Yeah, before his time.

NS: Maybe his father.

GC: You ever go in a Freeport Museum?

NS: Oh, yeah.

GC: Did you see the horseshoe?

NS: Yeah.

GC: I can remember when I was a kid. He would hang it in the blacksmith shop. He made a silver horseshoe out of one bar in the picture frame.

NS: He made it?

GC: Oh, yeah. That's his. He made it. I remember when I was a kid he did it, I think, for the Mineola Fair way back. But I can remember that hanging in his blacksmith shop when I was a kid.

NS: The story I heard was that a lot of fishermen would get their eel spears from some farm – pitchfork, and they would use that.

GC: No. A bayman had to have good tools. He's not going to go out with some rinky-dink, homemade thing. He's got to have a good – of course, the money was tight then, but they bartered. They traded stuff. [inaudible] was done. "I'll give you six ducks; you give me this." It

was a few dollars. Of course, things were cheap, but a lot was bartered. But they always had good tools. The blacksmith made the eel spears, the clam rigs, whatever.

NS: Now, was this blacksmith geared most towards baymen, or did he make other things?

GC: Mostly for baymen.

NS: He didn't make wheels and all the stuff that blacksmiths normally –

GC: No. The one who made wheels was a man named –

NS: Somebody else?

GC: – William Southard.

NS: But he was somebody else who did all that stuff?

GC: Yes. But he was in Bellmore. Have you heard about him, William Southard? NS:

No.

GC: His name was William J. Southard. He had a wheelwright shop. He was a blacksmith and had a wheelwright shop on Beltagh Avenue in Bellmore. All the farmers, all the wagon people, even from Freeport or Roosevelt, went to him to have the wagon wheels made.

NS: All the baymen who needed their tools went to Bedell.

GC: Yeah, and Theodore Bedell to have the tools made and stuff.

NS: It's interesting. Because usually you don't get blacksmiths just making only tools related to –

GC: Well, Freeport was, years ago, much, much more – today, it's nothing – years ago, was a bayman's town, whether they fished out in the ocean or in the bay. Many, many people made their living off the bay. They needed somebody to make all these tools. He had so much business from there and the nearby towns.

NS: [inaudible] other things.

GC: Yeah. There's no more baymen. I mean, it's just a thing of the past. But years ago, somebody local made the stuff. There were a lot of people who needed it.

NS: What's the relationship like between the baymen and –

[Recording paused.]



GC: That's a red-breasted merganser that my great-grandfather carved. It's George W. Combs I.

NS: You were telling me about the mergansers.

GC: Yeah, right. This is a picture of him. He had one of the first radios in Freeport. There's a picture of him. Emma Golder was his wife's name. This is on South Main Street, the house he built and lived in until he died with the radio. That's [laughter] way back. But he had one of the first radios in Freeport.

NS: Let me ask you, did most serious duck hunters make their own decoys?

GC: Yeah. A lot of them made their own. A lot of others –

NS: [inaudible]

GC: Yeah, okay. [inaudible] look around [inaudible]. A lot of others bought them. The Veritys were professional decoy carvers. He made his living by carving decoys and selling them to the sportsmen and other people. But most of the baymen –

NS: Was he part of the same family that made the skiffs?

GC: No. Well, yes and no. The Seaford skiff, which is a sailboat, that was invented by a man named William Gritman in 1854 in Seaford. Through the years, later on, Charles Verity built those Seaford skiffs in Freeport, him and his sister. His sister was not toting a full seabag, as they said, and he had to take care of her. She would make sails for him. She'd make the sails. You could have bought a Seaford skiff back, let's say, in the '20s, a Seaford skiff with a pair of oars for thirty-five dollars.

NS: It was still called a Seaford skiff even though it was made in Freeport? [laughter]

GC: Right. Yes. Now, the Verity skiff that you see today, the inboard one, that's a different Verity family. They're not related to the Veritys of Seafords. Totally two different families. The Verity family of Baldwin – gee, I'm trying to think of his name now. Sam Smith, they built the Verity skiffs. They're not related at all to the Seaford Veritys. The Verity Moving Company were from Freeport originally. They're not a Seaford Verity. It's a different Verity, not related. Some of the Seaford Veritys are not related to one another also. Very confusing. But some are, and some are not related. Now, in Freeport, there's a man named – in fact, you should interview him – “Bus” Ellison. He was a cop.

NS: Yes. He's been interviewed. GC:

Oh, he was. Okay.

NS: Yeah.

GC: Him and my father grew up together. In fact, they look like brothers, my father, big man like him. Bus's grandfather made these crane decoys, "Hen" [Henry] Ellison. He was a market gunner in Freeport. He had a Seaford skiff. I don't know if he ever told you about him. But he had a little Seaford skiff, and he had two Springer Spaniels. He was kind of a funny guy [and] none of the family would talk to him. He was kind of a – I don't know – black sheep or an outcast. But he was a market gunner. These two birds –

NS: What's a market gunner?

GC: A market gunner is a person who shoots the birds for money. He shot them. He sent them to hotels or restaurants. It was sold as food. Then he got money for it, a market gunner. That's a term applied to a bayman who made either part or all of his income by shooting the waterfowl for the market, whether New York City or it was a market on Long Island. Don't forget, at that time, there was no such thing as a Frank Perdue with chickens or refrigeration. It was a daily need for birds.

NS: For poultry, yeah.

GC: There was millions of ducks and shorebirds and stuff. When you went to a hotel, they had a shorebird dinner with the Blue Point Oysters. It was a big thing. So, (Hen?) Ellison was a market gunner like my great-grandfather and whatnot.

NS: Now, most of the duck decoys that your father and your grandfather did, were they based on birds that were in this area?

GC: Oh, yeah. They didn't make things that were not here. They made birds that simulated what was flying around.

NS: Okay. They used them?

GC: They were all used for work. There was no such thing –

NS: As a show decoy?

GC: – thirty, forty, fifty years ago, as a decorative decoy. That's relatively recent. All the birds made years ago were made as a working item. Today, they're collectors' items. They're called a floating sculpture. It's American folk art. That's something unique to this country. It all started on Long Island. Long Island has a history of the first decoys made back in the 1700s.

NS: The reason I say is the person who talked with Ellison said – she asked him when he started doing it. He started doing it for money, and he just sold them to –

GC: Yeah. Well, when Bus was young, he was a kid, nobody had money. Things were very tough then. You worked the bay or whatever. They bought it, like I say. He was taught by his grandfather, Hen Ellison. So, I have his gun and some of his decoys. This is my father's –

NS: So, your father and your grandfather were making them for duck hunting?

GC: Yeah, for us to use.

NS: Yes. So, it is a different –

GC: Because there were guys who were professional gunners. I guess my father – he made these birds, too.

NS: What are they made out of?

GC: White cedar, generally, and sugar pine and balsa wood.

NS: Do you know where he would get it?

GC: The only white cedar today would come out of New Jersey. It's very hard. Here's a picture of my father. This is in Freeport. He had a houseboat. This is taken in Swift Creek in Freeport. This is him. That bird is one of the birds that's there on the thing. This was taken in 1940 in Freeport. In fact, here's a thing, too. This is in Freeport. In 1940, they had to keep her alive to sell it. They'd catch the bait. They'd put them in these little carts. They had maybe fifty of these. They put them in the carts. They would sell them with a sailboat like this, and they would tow them from where they caught the bait back to the bait dock. They would tow them there and tie them up. Then somebody would come up with a quart of killies or spearing or whatever. They would dip them out of these boats. That's the last one I know from existence. These are bait carts.

NS: Do you know who made it?

GC: Pardon me?

NS: Was this made by someone in your family?

GC: I don't know. It's so far back in time. It was something around 1890, 1900 that it was made. That's the last one I know in existence.

NS: Wow. You've got a whole museum here. Better than the Freeport Museum. [laughter]

GC: In the Freeport Museum, I got to go there one time and tell them – the picture you took upstairs, Captain Dan, Dan Combs, who have the shipyard on Sportsman, they have a boat model. It's like a yacht, an inboard boat. [Recording paused.] We make our own decoys here for gunning. Yeah. I used to guide. I used to take people out and went to guide them for duck shooting. I'm about the last one that does that.

NS: Did your father teach you?

GC: Oh, yeah. He was a well-known carver. So, he taught me. He taught my son. My son won a couple of ribbons in different decoy shows. My father's other grandson, which is my brother's youngest son, out in Riverhead, won a prize for the national decoy show.

NS: Wow.

GC: He's only sixteen. The kid is talented. NS:

How old were you when you first made –?

GC: Oh, God, I probably made my first – probably you look at a piece of junk. But to me, at the time, it was great. I must have been maybe twelve years old when I made my first decoy. My father carved since he was eight years old. He [inaudible].

NS: Can you tell me how you make it?

GC: Well, at the time, I used a piece of balsa wood, like the old life jackets. A lot of decoys were made from life jackets.

NS: Yeah, the cork inside.

GC: Yeah. You just took a wood rasp, and you shaped it out, and put a [inaudible]. It did the job, but it looked like hell. [laughter] Very simple to make.

NS: Did you paint them?

GC: Yeah. We mixed the paint. It's like a brown and a black. You don't want it black-black, but you want a brown-black. The balsa wood you paint. But cork, you don't paint. You burn them.

NS: How do you burn them?

GC: Let me show you here. A picture's worth a thousand words.

NS: [laughter] Except I can't take a picture.

GC: You take a decoy like this. You've got them all carved out. You put the head on. You take a wet rag and wrap it around the head. You just take the body. You just dip it quick in a little tub of kerosene. You set it on fire. You'll wait maybe about, oh, a minute, two minutes at the most. You put it in water. You take your hands and rub it. You get this nice brown patina, which is ideal. See like this? This is what it looked like. This is after it was burned. They're a perfect color for ducks. They did that –

NS: Then, would you paint the head?

GC: Then you'd paint the head. Now, this is a broadbill. So, this was half burned, and then the back half was painted. But a black duck, he'd be all one color.

NS: Wow.

GC: So, it depends what species –

NS: So, that also must have been hard to also get these little blocks that were still white. How would you get that color?

GC: Oh, we just paint them. These are painted.

NS: So, that's painted on?

GC: But this part here was burnt. This is paint. That's paint, and that's painted. Now, sometimes they painted the whole bird. But the black ducks, they would burn them.

NS: Wow. That's really interesting. Do you only do ducks that are around here [inaudible]?

GC: Yeah. I haven't carved nothing in a long time. As I said, my father was a well-known carver. He made all kinds of shorebirds and ducks and stuff. He was great at it.

NS: I just lost the thought. What kinds of ducks are around here?

GC: Gee, there's a lot. Well, you've got all your diving ducks. You've got your mergansers and your broadbill, old squaws. Years ago, they used to shoot seagulls, too.

NS: Oh, god. [laughter]

GC: Oh, yeah. They shot seagulls, the terns. See the terns?

NS: What would they do with them?

GC: They shot terns and egrets. They had what they called a millinery trade. They would shoot the birds for ladies' hats, the Gibson Girl hats in the 1890s. Well, they would shoot all these birds just for the feathers. They would be skinned out and treated and put it on the hats. So, that was one business there.

NS: Most people who shot ducks, didn't they shoot it for food?

GC: Oh, yeah. But that was a different market gunner. He was a feather hunter. He shot for a particular trade. They wanted just the skins of certain birds. But most of the market gunners shot the different other birds that were just for food.

NS: Were people in your family ever like market gunners?

GC: Oh, yeah.

NS: Yeah? Really?

GC: Yeah. My great-grandfather was. My father shot for market when he was young. Oh, yeah. All my ancestors were market gunners. If anybody made a living out of the bay in the winter months –

NS: They had to –

GC: – the bay was frozen. It was hard to survive. Unless they did something else, a lot of them were gunners; they shot for the market.

NS: Interesting.

GC: Oh, yeah. See, that boat was made by my great-grandfather here, George W. He built that schooner. That's the same style as his grandfather would build. Daniel Combs I, who was the privateer, when he come back, he built schooners in Baldwin. That's what it looked like. They were centerboard schooners anywhere from thirty to sixty feet long. They would use them to carry cargo in the back bays. That's what the boat was.

NS: For duck hunting, I would think that you'd have to have a different attitude towards duck hunting than you would for fishing.

GC: Well, yeah. It's a completely different type of sport. Yeah. But generally, a lot of people did both. It was just sports-oriented. They were outdoorsmen. Don't forget, that was part of putting feed on the table with shooting ducks and catching fish and things like that.

NS: Which do you like more?

GC: I like the birds. I love the birds, even just to watch them. Go out there in the morning and put the decoys out and just see them flying around and stuff on a beautiful day. Once in a while, I see them come in. That's the birds I really always admired.

NS: I was talking to George Schmidt. He said it was the most boring thing he ever did.  
[laughter]

GC: Oh, god. Far from it. Well, everybody's different. It's what the individual likes. So, you can't knock somebody else what they like. To me, I'd rather be out there in the fall of the year and the early winter. It's nice, crisp air. It's quiet. There's not a lot of people around and seeing the birds fly. To me, that's beautiful.

NS: I guess, these days, with the water being so popular.

GC: Oh, yeah. In the summertime, it's unreal. Now, I'm going to show you this. You should really take a picture.

[Recording paused.]

NS: – between the ocean fishermen and the baymen.

GC: Well, what it was, the change of seasons. Now, let's go back, say, fifty, seventy-five years ago. There was almost no such thing then as draggers like you see today in Freeport. They were nonexistent then to speak of.

NS: Do you know if they started pretty much in the '30s and '40s?

GC: Yes. In the '40s on, they started. But before that, it wasn't. What there was – you had people who were setliners. They would go out in the fall of the year with the Verity skiffs. They'd go out in the ocean, and they'd set these setlines to catch codfish.

NS: Yes, gill nets.

GC: Well, no, gill nets are separate. This is a setline. This is a long line, maybe two miles long. Every, say, ten, fifteen feet apart, there'd be a little line tied to it with a hook and a piece of bait. These were set out in the ocean. These are the setlines they were called. They were put in big tubs. You'd go along and just let it out. It would catch codfish. Then, along the beach, they'd have nets like haul seine nets, which they had out in Amagansett. They would come out in the ocean with the dory around a school of fish and come back. So, they caught fish that way. They were baymen. But they only fished for maybe a couple weeks of the year in these particular things when the fish came through. The rest of the year, they were in the bay.

NS: In the bay.

GC: They were in the bay mostly. The ocean fishermen, now, it's year-round. Years ago, it was only a certain time of the year when a fish migrated; you was there to catch them. After that, you went back into the bay and did your own business. So, it was different types.

NS: Did that create problems when these draggers started coming through?

GC: Well, yeah. They do when they come in close. If they stay offshore, it's okay. But when they come in like they do now, sometimes they sneak in around the mouth of the inlet, and they're catching the fish coming in the bay to spawn – there, again, there's too much pressure. There's not that much fish; the price is higher, so the guys work harder. Some guys cheat. It's more pressure on the fish. There are more being caught. They don't get a chance to spawn out. So, this caused problems today, which you didn't have years ago.

NS: Were there ever any fights over it? Do you know?

GC: No, not that I know of. Just maybe words passed about. But I wouldn't say no fights that I even knew about.

NS: Were most of the baymen, like fourth or fifth generation, like your family?

GC: Well, they were. Let's say they were up to maybe twenty years ago. I'd say about twenty years ago was the end of them. After that, the new generation – the kids didn't want to do that. Too much work. There was no future there. Whatever the reasons were. So, it just changed.

NS: Well, I don't know, but most of the people who made their living on the ocean were first and second-generation.

GC: Yes. They were either part-timers or whatever, or that's the first time they did it. But the true bayman, I'd say, is like a dinosaur. He's almost extinct today. Changing times made it happen.

NS: Who were the major settlers around here? Were they English?

GC: Oh, yeah. English was the big thing. When you get around Sayville, they were Dutch. I can't remember. But Pop says when he was younger, they called them Sayville Dutchmen. They came over from Holland. He can remember they had beautiful boats, the bay boats, sloops, painted beautiful colors. They were very proud people. They would tong oysters, the Blue Point oysters, and tong clams. He can remember they used to use the wooden shoes on the boat. They stayed on the boat, the shoes. When they'd go off, they'd – no, there were Dutch people. Everyone was very clannish. You couldn't go in there. They'd go to church on Sunday. But they would turn around and burn your boat up.

NS: Really?

GC: Oh, god. They still are today.

NS: Is Sayville on the north shore?

GC: No, south shore. Oh, gosh. Islip and Bay Shore. NS:

Yeah.

GC: It's past there. Sayville. Some of the families are still left on the bay. We'd be considered an outsider if we went out there to, say, oyster or clam. [If] we kept the boat out there, we'd come back the next day, the boat would be burnt up. They were very, very clannish. They would let no outsiders in.

NS: Wow.

GC: They go to church and all this. But they turn around and almost cut your throat. [laughter]

NS: [laughter] Were there other ports that you could not go to?

GC: Well, even through here, the Seafordites, the Seaford people were very clannish. They kept to themselves. Very few people in Seaford ever went to Freeport. This goes back early 1900s.



Very few ever traveled. It was a long distance. Everything was right in that little town. They stayed. They worked that little bay.

NS: It's still like that.

GC: Yes. The people from Seaford – well, unfortunately, there's no old-timers left. It's changed.

NS: But the fishermen in Seaford keep to themselves –

GC: Yeah.

NS: – and the fishermen in Freeport had their [inaudible].

GC: Yeah, they did. Well, see, the Freeport people were more ocean-going people because they were close to the inlet. They had harbor, good harbor. The Seaford people were back baymen. They were more of the snipe shooters. They're catching clams and stuff. Because everything was under sail, and it took a long while to go from Seaford to the inlet. That was a long journey by sail. So, you had things like that. Some of the families were clannish, some of the Veritys and the others. They'd be, "This is my part of the bay. You keep away." [inaudible] things that happen ...

[Recording paused.]

NS: So, the Seaford people would keep to themselves.

GC: Oh, yeah. They keep to themselves. I'd say the Freeport people, they would, a lot of times, keep to themselves. They had their own part of the bay, their own type of working in the bay. Well, one of the few exceptions, like my great-grandfather – see those red eel pots?

NS: Yeah.

GC: He built those.

NS: Wow.

GC: I have the motors here.

NS: We have to take another picture. [laughter]

GC: On this side up here, this is the mold over here, the funnel, and a big body mold. In the wintertime, he'd make them. They're out of rattan and split white oak. He would cut the little trees down, split the oak.

NS: Wow.

GC: Then we'd take a stagecoach, go to New York. He would get the rattan. He would weave the baskets. Now, they were made to catch eels. He'd make them in the wintertime. In the summer of the year, he'd have a sloop. He would put these on the boat. He would sail from Freeport all the way to Amityville in one straight line, going right across the bay. He have little birch stakes. He'd put the stake in the bottom. Of course, it stuck out above the water. He'd tie one of these eel traps to the stake. Because being round, it would roll away. He would sail. He would set them. Two days later, he would sail back out and lift them up and change the bait. He would go all the way to Amityville. He's one of the few people, say, from Freeport who would travel –

NS: That distance.

GC: – that distance to do what he did. He was well-known for catching soft crabs. He would shed crabs out in the summertime and things like that. He was great at the soft crab business, catching crabs and shedding them. In the fall of the year, he would shoot for market. In between that little shipyard he had, he'd fix boats up and stuff.

NS: There are so many things that you would have to make in order to be a good bayman.

GC: Yeah. Well, see, years ago, things weren't readily available like they were today. The other thing, there was no money. So, you may do with what you found. That's the thing.

NS: Or what you made.

GC: Ingenuity. Yeah, what you put together, whatever, or you trade and things like that. So, that's the way to survive.

NS: Well, I guess that is more ocean, but did you ever catch lobsters? [laughter]

GC: No. There's only, gosh, maybe one or two people – no, that's even not that long ago. Say, maybe thirty, forty years ago, there was one or two people who ran out – the Doxsees was was one of them. They ran off with lobster pots. But before that, really, there was – lobsters was considered trash fish at one time.

NS: [laughter]

GC: Oh, yeah. Probably going back, say, more than forty years ago, lobsters, every one of them, they were nothing. They wouldn't bother. They would rather catch blackfish or sea bass or something like that. Yeah. So, that's a relatively new thing, lobsters. It's only been in the past forty years that they come into their own. Sure.

NS: Are there different ways of catching the different kinds of clams, like skimmer clam, and then –

GC: Well, yeah. Well, skimmer clam is an ocean clam. They catch them out in the ocean.

NS: Do all the ocean fishermen use skimmer clams, or do baymen use skimmer clams?

GC: No, the baymen wouldn't use them. The ocean people, they catch them. Today, they have big hydraulic dredges with water pressure. Believe it or not, most of the skimmer clams today are not sold for bait. They're sold to Howard Johnson's and the other places for fried clams. That's what they use: skimmer clams. They cut them in strips and process them, which [inaudible]. They're okay. But years ago, they would have a dredge. They would tow on the sail out in the ocean to catch skimmers. Only a couple people did that, but there was a lot of baymen inside with rakes and tongs and stuff who would catch the hard clams. They have what they call Shinnecock rake. I have one of those in the store window. It's a big rake with the curved teeth on it. That was used in the channels to dig up the chowder clams and stuff. Then they have people who dig soft clams. When the tide got down, the bar was exposed. They would hack out the clams out of the bottom. They had a little fork. It's coolie labor. I've done it, too. It's hard. You're in the mud. You're bending over. You're digging in the bottom. You've got to dig down about twelve, fourteen inches to get the soft clams out. You got to be careful of how you dug because if you broke the shell of the clam, you couldn't sell them. So, soft clamming was another technique, another kind of clam to catch. Then they had people –

NS: Plus, it did not pay a lot –

GC: Well, no.

NS: – back then.

GC: But something you had to do when things were slow. Nobody wanted the hard clams. Then they tried soft clams. The other thing they did – black mussels. There were a lot of them. They come and go with the years. They would rake the black mussels and send them to market. But you had all kinds of things years ago, which you don't have today because of the pollution and the bottom's disturbed and everything else.

NS: What were some of the scary things that would happen to you when you'd go out fishing?

GC: Well, probably [inaudible] the most would be the fog, especially at nighttime. If you get fog at nighttime, it's totally devastating. You just anchor up and stay. There's nothing you can do. No matter how good you are, you just couldn't get nowhere. So, you just had to sit put. But I'll tell you the scariest thing there is in the bay –

NS: That happened to you.

GC: – in the wintertime is an ice floe. Ice drifts – when the ice starts to – within a few days, when it gets, say, five degrees, the bay can freeze up within a few days. It really gets cold. It stays frozen fine. But when it starts to break up, you have ice floes. With the strong currents, there'd be big – like the size of a house – big pieces of ice come down with the tide. That's a lot of pressure. Say, you broke through the ice, and you got down to, say, south side of the bay where you want to, say, duck shoot. In the afternoon, you want to go back home. You go up. The channel you come down through is all clogged up with these ice floes. You can't get

through it. You're stranded there all night. It's five or ten degrees. You could freeze to death. So, the most scary thing would be an ice floe, being stuck in an ice floe in the wintertime.

NS: Did that ever happen to you?

GC: Well, the thing that happened to me – one of the things you do in the wintertime was clamming; we'd be overboard. We have waders on. You'd be in, say, four or five feet of water. The tide won't get it down enough for the bar to be bare. But there are clams. So, you can get overboard raking with the waders and stuff on. One time, I had this ice floe come down. It almost took me away. Because how are you going to stop it? When the ice is coming, there's so much pressure. You can't hold it back. If I'm here and the ice is coming, and there's a channel behind me, it's going to push right into deep water. You're going to drown. So, that almost happened to me. That was probably the scariest thing: an ice floe.

GC: What did you do?

NS: I kept ahead of it. I kept working on the edge. I knew the channel was there. But there was a little bar there. If I could get past the ice floe, I'd still be in [inaudible] water, and the ice would go by me. If I stayed where I was, it would just drag me into the deep water, and that was it.

NS: [laughter] So, you knew to stay put to make sure –

GC: Yeah. I'm just lucky. If I was fifty feet more one way, I wouldn't have enough time to get around. But the ice floe is probably the most –

NS: Were you alone?

GC: – devastating thing. Yeah. It can really either maroon you or crush your boat. Or you're stranded on the ice. You can't get through it. It's super cold. You've got nighttime coming on. Forget it. So, that would be the –

NS: Did you ever get shot by another duck hunter?

GC: No.

NS: [laughter]

GC: No. [inaudible] gunning. I'm very careful with them. A lot of people I take out – clients were wealthy. They gun over the world. They will go pheasant shooting here or there. They're safety conscious. They're gentlemen. They know the [inaudible]. A yo-yo comes out from the city. They know how to take care of themselves. I never had any problems.

NS: Not even with the yo-yos from the city? [laughter]

GC: No. With those, I kind of avoid. [laughter]

NS: [laughter]

GC: When they talk, you can tell just pretty well what the person is. I say, "Well, gee, I'm all booked up." I'll give him somebody else's number. A bayman, he's independently poor.  
[laughter] He don't give a damn ...

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/10/2024