

Interview with Brad Keene

Narrator: Brad Keene

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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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 April 5, 1988, Nancy Solomon interviewed Brad Keene as part of the *Long Island Traditions* oral history project. Brad is a seasoned boatman with a deep-rooted connection to his family's maritime legacy. The Keene family has a rich history in Freeport, as Brad's grandfather, Henry Uktch, founded the Freeport Boatman's Association. Brad traces his family lineage back to his great-grandfather, Van Schaaner, who had a fish market in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Throughout the interview, Brad reflects on the lessons and skills his father taught him, including fishing techniques, operating boats, and mending nets. He also discusses his involvement in clamming, explaining the techniques and tools used, such as rakes and tongs. Additionally, Brad shares stories of friends who taught him about cod fishing, particularly Herb White, and discusses the process of setting cod lines and using clams as bait. He mentions the timing of cod fishing during the winter when the cod are migrating and refers to "resident" cod fish. Brad recounts his experiences working on his father's dragger, the *Nora*, from 1967 to 1970 and his father's charter boat. He talks about the daily routine of cod fishing, including the number of tows per day and the catches they made. He also acknowledges the influence of Dick Abbot, who taught him a lot and with whom he worked closely. Brad mentions encountering foreign boats, such as the Russian fleet and Japanese vessels, while out at sea and provides insights into the communication and interactions between different boats. He shares a particularly harrowing incident when his boat sank during a winter storm on January 5, 1988, and describes the crew's reaction and their survival using a raft until rescued by the Coast Guard. Brad discusses other storms he encountered while fishing in the winter and transitions into a discussion about his passion for duck hunting. The interview concludes with Brad discussing the connection between hunting and bay houses, as well as the joy of duck feasts.

Nancy Solomon: Okay. Now, first, how did you get started in all this?

Brad Keene: I started when I was twelve years old. I bought a Garvey, a sixteen-foot boat.

NS: Did your parents –?

BK: My father had a fishing boat for a brief period.

NS: Who is your father?

BK: I'm junior. His name was Bradley Keene, also. He had a boat he kept on Woodcleft Avenue, similar to Tony [inaudible].

NS: So, it was a dragger?

BK: Yes, very similar boat, and he sold fish off the boat.

NS: Wow.

BK: You know where Captain Sparky's is? Right next to – just south of the [inaudible].

NS: Yes, okay.

BK: That's where it was. I was going to say the upper end of Woodcleft.

BK: There were no buildings there then. That's where the boat was tied up.

NS: Huh. Is there a building there now?

BK: Yes, there's a building there now. [inaudible] Fish Market.

NS: That's that first market that you see, I think, on the left.

BK: Right. I used to help him sell fish off the boat. I used to go out with him on weekends.

NS: Did he –?

BK: I would come after school and help out.

NS: Did he ever go work on the bay or strictly on the ocean?

BK: Mainly on the ocean, I guess. He did a lot of different things. He wasn't a full-time fisherman like I am, but he did have a boat for quite a while. Before that, when he was much younger, he used to be in the charter business.

NS: Oh, really?

BK: Yes.

NS: Was he born in Freeport?

BK: No, he was born in Hempstead.

NS: Had anybody prior to that time worked in the fishing business?

BK: My grandfather was one of the founders of the Freeport Boatmen's Association.

NS: Oh, really?

BK: Yeah.

NS: What was his name?

BK: Henry Ultsch.

NS: U-L-S-C-H. Is that how you spell his last name?

BK: It's U-L-T-S-C-H. It's a German name. He was one of – in the '30s, possibly in the end of the '20s.

NS: Was he born in Germany?

BK: No, no.

NS: Where was he from?

BK: He was born here on the island.

NS: Your family goes back a long time on Long Island, it sounds like.

BK: Well, before that, my family is actually from New Hampshire. I don't know how they ended up down here, but I had my great – let me figure this out now. I guess my great-great-grandfather owned and was captain of a Gloucester schooner out of Gloucester.

NS: In Massachusetts?

BK: Gloucester, Massachusetts. They used to go out for like two, three-month voyages. They would salt down the codfish. He used to go mackerel fishing. Remember our conversation on Woodcleft there one day?

NS: Yeah.

BK: While he was on a Mac fishing trip down off Virginia. He was seventy-two years old, and that was one of his last trips. He worked until he was in his seventies.

NS: Wow. Did you ever meet him?

BK: No, he was gone long –

NS: No, He must have died in the 1800s.

BK: I don't know if it was the 1800s. He probably died in the '20s. Probably somewhere in the '20s. His son had a fish market. Through the generations –

NS: It's been passed down.

BK: Kind of been in my family.

NS: That is very unusual these days.

BK: This sounds like a wild story.

NS: What?

BK: But my great-great-grandfather who had the schooner was fishing off the Grand Banks one season, and – sounds pretty wild, but the Prince of Wales was on his way to this country or Canada – was some kind of business – and their boat sank, and he picked up the survivors. He actually saved the Prince of Wales. He received a sum of money from the Queen of England or the King of England and gifts. This right here is one of the gifts they received. That's made out of seashells. You can look at it a little closer.

NS: Yes, I will have to take a picture of this.

BK: That's a pretty old antique, so I don't know how much value – it's not really worth much, but that was one of the gifts. [laughter] Before that, who knows?

NS: [laughter] That was your grandfather who –?

BK: That was my great-great-grandfather.

NS: Your great-great-grandfather. Do you know his name?

BK: His name was Daniel Bradley King.

NS: It's pretty unusual. Were there any other stories like that?

BK: That was my son's name, by the way. We named him that.

NS: Were there any other stories about people in your family that you remember like that or remember hearing?

BK: I don't know. Not to do with the water. But that's like the real story I know about him as a captain. It's a story, I guess, because it was an achievement, saving – it was a big deal in those days.

NS: Sure. Still is.

BK: I wish I knew more about him myself. I would like to look up some kind of history books in England, if I ever had the time, and find out if anything is written down about that.

NS: You pretty much grew up, it sounds, around the water between. Did you know your grandfather well?

BK: Henry Ultsch. Yes, I knew him.

NS: What did he do?

BK: Like I said, he was in the charter boat business, and he also had a boatyard on South Main Street. He built a few boats, and he was mainly a bayman and a waterman. He catered to people as far as taking them out fishing. Years ago, in the '30s, he was a bird guide. He used to take people – he would come out from the city, and he would take them out east and bring them pheasant shipping. He used to raise his own dogs and English Springer Spaniels. He'd take them out with the dogs and bring them to like fields where there would be pheasants, and they shoot –

NS: The dogs could sniff the pheasants? Is that it?

BK: Right. They'd shoot the pheasants, and the dogs would retrieve them. It's like a day for the wealthy people of the times.

NS: But that was something that most baymen, I guess, did.

BK: Pardon me?

NS: Most baymen, it seems, were duck hunters.

BK: Hunting, yeah. I guess a lot of them. [inaudible] family was quite involved in the duck hunting and carving duck stools and duck decoys, and all that stuff.

NS: Is that something that anybody in your family did?

BK: What's that?

NS: Got into the decoys? Working the cork decoys?

BK: If they did, it was all gone. A lot of that stuff was no big deal years ago. I guess everybody in this area – it was no big deal. I heard of people that used to burn – to heat – used to burn old decoys years ago.

NS: Oh, god. [laughter]

BK: [inaudible] as antiques.

NS: What was your grandfather's name?

BK: Henry Ultsch.

NS: When you were growing up, what kinds of things did your father teach you to do as far as the fishing business?

BK: I guess how to run a boat, how to take care of a boat, different places to go fishing, and the mending of nets and things like that.

NS: He taught you.

BK: How to take care of the fishing gear.

NS: Was he helpful when you were first growing up?

BK: Oh, yeah. Definitely. It gives you a foundation. Most of the stuff I actually picked up later. It's more technical things I picked up later. You become more interested when you really have to go out and make a living doing it. Bringing in your own money, that's when you get more seriously involved and that type of thing. But, like I said, I have always worked – I used to dig clams, fish. I did all the –

NS: Where did you go clamming?

BK: Right out here in the town of Hampstead Bay. The bay was open then.

NS: Whereabouts on the bay would you go?

BK: All over.

NS: Freeport, Merrick [inaudible]?

BK: From Oceanside to Merrick. Freeport and Baldwin and Merrick – just all over.

NS: Were these hard clams that you were –?

BK: Hard clams.

NS: I have not seen anybody go clamming. What is involved with it?

BK: Clamming?

NS: Yeah. I know that people tread for clams.

BK: The warmer weather, we used to go overboard in the shoal water and tread clams. The colder weather, we use either tongs or rakes. A rake you pull through the bottom – a jerking motion, and tongs – don't know if you've seen the tongs. The two big, long sticks, and you work the head of the tongs together through the mud. You work a little piece of bottom. Then, you raise the tongs to see what's in the rake.

NS: Interesting.

BK: This is still done out in the great South Bay now.

NS: Right. When they opened, I guess [inaudible] –

BK: It's open all the time, like Eastern part of Long Island. But that's how I mainly started.

NS: Was this after school and on weekends, you would do that?

BK: Yes.

NS: Did you have friends you would do that with?

BK: Oh, yeah. Met a lot of fellows.

NS: Who were some of the people that you were friendly with when you were going?

BK: Bob [inaudible]. Do you know him? He's one of the locals from Baldwin. I knew him when I was quite young. Met him down the bay. He also used to do quite a bit of gill netting in the ocean. Gillnet fish. Set lining. I used to have a small boat, I guess, when I first got out of high school, a small thirty-foot boat. We used to go out and set-line cod fish. That was a lot of fun.

NS: Who were some of the people that helped you with it? That seems like a lot. Somebody has to get the clams, and then you got to –

BK: We used to buy the bait. We had men that used to bait the lines for us. Some old-timers.

NS: Who were some of them?

BK: Semi-retired fishermen. Albert White from Baldwin. Walter White.

NS: Yes. I know Herb White.

BK: Herb White, he is a relative of Albert [inaudible]. They used to bait lines for us, seeing that they were in the business and quite experienced. They had done it for over fifty years, and they used to help us out [and] give us a lot of pointers, information on how to do it.

NS: What are some of the things that you have to learn when you're baiting those cod lines?

BK: Some of the things you have to learn?

NS: Yeah. What were some of the pointers they would give you?

BK: I don't know. Just mainly keep the gear in good shape. It's all basic stuff: use good gear, new hooks, and fresh bait.

NS: Do you always use clams when you're going set lining?

BK: Around here? Yeah. Different parts of the coast use different kinds of [inaudible]. I guess around here, the fish are used to feed out clams that are in the bottom. Codfish are bottom feeders. They eat crabs. They eat mussels. Clams. They will eat fish also – herring. Off of Maine and Massachusetts, they use herring and mackerel for bait. They cut them up in chunks. I guess that's more prevalent up there. That's what the fish is used to. That's what they use up there for bait.

NS: Would you ever use set lines for something other than cod?

BK: Well, it's actually a form of long lining. You could call it long lining. We call it set lining. They setline tilefish, swordfish, tuna fish, which is quite popular today.

NS: Did you do that?

BK: I have never done that, no.

NS: When you use the set lines, you only went for codfish.

BK: Codfish? Right.

NS: What time of year would you do that?

BK: In the winter months. November, December, January, February, March, April.

NS: Why is that?

BK: That's the time the codfish migrate down off Long Island.

NS: Okay. Do they like cold water? Is that it?

BK: Well, actually, they're looking for warmer water. They're from the north, and they come down mainly to spawn off Long Island. They look for warmer water.

NS: Okay. But they do not like it too warm. I guess that's why they're not here in the summer.

BK: Yeah.

NS: Okay. I was trying to understand that.

BK: Although there are some resident codfish in the deeper water on some of the rocks of Long Island in the summertime. They're resident. They stay there all year long. I guess they get old, and they don't feel like traveling anymore.

NS: Do you go after those?

BK: I don't, but some people do.

NS: Did you ever make your own boat?

BK: Pardon me.

NS: Did you ever build your own boat?

BK: No, I never built my own boat.

NS: Okay. Where did you get your boats from then?

BK: I guess shopped around like you would shop around for a car and, according to budget and how good the piece of equipment was, decide what kind of boat I would buy.

NS: How old were you when you worked on your first dragger?

BK: Well, like I say, I used to work on my father's dragger. I guess I was thirteen, fourteen, around twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

NS: What was the name of his [inaudible]?

BK: The *Nora*, N-O-R-A.

NS: How long did he run the dragger?

BK: He had the boat around five years.

NS: When was this?

BK: What years?

NS: Yeah. Rough guess.

BK: I guess that would be somewhere around '67, '68, '69. Around those years.

NS: Had he run a dragger before that?

BK: Not before that, no. He was involved in – like I said, he was involved in the charter business for years before that. But he got involved in that for a short period of time.

NS: What was the name of this charter boat?

BK: He had a boat years ago. The (*Bertha U?*). (*Bertha U?*) is the name of the boat.

NS: Do you know why he named it that?

BK: I think that was the name of the boat when he got it.

NS: How long did he run the charter boat for?

BK: I guess he was in that for quite a while, maybe over ten years.

NS: How old were you? I am trying to get a sense of how old were you when he had the charter boat.

BK: Gee, I was just a small kid.

NS: He got the dragger boat. How old were you at that point?

BK: I guess I was ten, eleven, or twelve years old.

NS: How old are you now?

BK: I'm thirty-three.

NS: That was pretty much when you were really getting interested in the water, I would imagine.

BK: Yes. Yeah.

NS: What kinds of things did you do on the Dragger boat?

BK: Take wheel watches to and from the fishing grounds. Help set and retrieve the gear, cull the fish, ice the fish down, clean the fish. During the winter months, a lot of codfish dragging. Way more than they do today.

NS: They weigh a lot today, even.

BK: Fishing was better. Pardon me?

NS: They still weigh a lot. There just aren't that many.

BK: Right, there was a lot more codfish in those days.

NS: How many tows would you do in a typical day?

BK: He used to go day fishing, and I'd say they make four or five tows a day.

NS: How many fish would he catch?

BK: Fishing can vary from a few hundred pounds to tons. It all depends. Each day is different. Good days and bad days. You hit the mother lode – hit the big school, you'll get the mother lode.

NS: Now, when you say he went day fishing, what time would he leave, and what time would he come back?

BK: I guess, leave anywhere from like two to four in the morning and come back maybe four or five in the afternoon.

NS: Those are long days.

BK: Yes. Fishing is [inaudible].

NS: It is not an eight-hour day.

BK: Fourteen, fifteen-hour days, if not long – eighteen-hour a day job.

NS: Now, did he have somebody who helped him on the boat?

BK: Yes.

NS: Besides you?

BK: Well, I was a help, but I wasn't part of the regular crew, really. Him and another fellow used to – another fellow that worked with him.

NS: What was his name? Do you remember?

BK: His first name was (Al?).

NS: Did you take over that boat from your father at any point?

BK: No, my father got rid of it before I was out of high school. He kind of got out of the business. His health had gone, and he got rid of the boat.

NS: You started working full-time when you got out of high school in the business.

BK: Yes.

NS: What was the first job you had?

BK: I used to work on a boat out of Baldwin called *The Gannet*, which we used to [inaudible] –

NS: Was that on Milburn Creek?

BK: Yes, we used to stay out for mainly five or six days at a time.

NS: Whoa. Major boat here.

BK: We worked around the clock, serious fishing, and I learned a lot. The fellow that owned that boat was Dick Abbott.

NS: He is very well known.

BK: I knew Dick real well. He's passed away now. He taught me a lot about fishing.

NS: How did you meet him? Is he somebody your father knew?

BK: My father knew him, yes. I had met him when I was younger. He had a reputation for being a good fisherman. Like I said, when I got out of high school at one point there, I went with him and fished with him for a couple of years. Later on, years later, when I got my own boat, he had gotten rid of his boat. He went fishing with me.

NS: Really?

BK: Yeah. [laughter]

NS: The two of you were very close, I imagine.

BK: Yeah, I guess so.

NS: What was your job on his boat?

BK: I was like the first mate, I guess. I used to steer the boat and take little watches. On a small boat, when you only have two, three, or four men, you share a lot of jobs.

NS: How big a boat was it?

BK: It was a sixty-foot boat.

NS: That is –

BK: I was cook. I didn't do all the cooking, but I did some cooking, icing of the fish, plus general maintenance on the nets and any of the gear related to the fishing.

NS: Would you go very far offshore when you were working on that boat?

BK: Oh, yeah. We used to go fish the whole Continental Shelf off here, from here to the Hudson Canyon.

NS: Wow. About how many miles is it to the Hudson Canyon?

BK: Seventy-five, eighty miles

NS: Whoa. [laughter]

BK: Yeah, it's a ways.

NS: I imagine you saw a lot of the boats from other countries, as well, [inaudible].

BK: Seen foreign boats, yes. We still see them today, even though they stopped foreign fishing. A few of them are allowed in the country under certain permits for certain species of fish. But years ago, they could come in. Before the two-hundred-mile limit, they could come in and take anything they wanted. Did you ever read the book *Distant Waters*?

NS: No.

BK: You should read that book. If you're interested in fishing, read that book, and it'll tell you more about fishing as far as big boats and foreign fishing. They'll tell you more about it than anybody can ever tell you.

NS: Somebody once told me there were a lot of Russian ships.

BK: They have the largest – I guess they have the largest fishing fleet in the world. I don't know if they still do, but they did.

NS: Did you see a lot of Russian boats?

BK: I have seen Russian boats, but I've seen mostly a variety – Spanish, Portuguese, West German, a few Russian, lot of Japanese. I guess I've mostly seen Japanese fishing boats.

NS: From what you noticed, did they fish differently than the way you guys did?

BK: Well, they mostly fished the otter trawl, which is the doors in the net that you've seen [inaudible] Koch's boat, only it's much bigger scale and quite sophisticated. They have the latest electronic equipment, and they have a much better system of finding the fish. They use many boats to find the fish. They work together. It's not like [inaudible] keep it a secret. We just had a big tow. They work with each other. It's a little bit different. They also have a tremendous amount of power – huge boats, a lot of power, and big nets, and they'll catch the fish if there are fish around. It's no problem as far as catching it goes.

NS: When you would go out four or five days at a time, I imagine probably you'd get telling stories, that kind of stuff, just to keep yourself amused anyway. [laughter] I don't know. Am I right?

BK: Yes. Well, I guess there's plenty of storytelling, but people think, "What are you doing all that time?" There's a lot to do. You're busy all the time, just like any other job, and the time goes. Before you know it, it's time to come in.

NS: Now, you would go out for four or five days at a time on those boats.

BK: Yeah.

NS: Was there ever any communication with other boats or to shore during that time?

BK: Like on *The Gannet*, you mean?

NS: Yes.

BK: Dick was not a big believer in talking on the radio. There wasn't much communication, no, not on his boat. Pretty much, we did our own thing.

NS: How many other people worked on the boat?

BK: Myself, Dick, and another fellow. Three men.

NS: I assume there were bunk quarters and everything.

BK: Yes. Actually, there were facilities for four or five men. You needed that.

[Recording paused.]

NS: When you stopped working with Dick on his boat, what happened next?

BK: [laughter] I don't know. I've worked on a lot of different boats. All different size boats.

NS: In Freeport and Baldwin?

BK: Mainly, out of Freeport, I guess. We fished out of Freeport with his boat. He was from

Baldwin and all, but we packed the fish out on Woodcleft Canal at the Freeport Fish Packing, which is no longer [inaudible].

NS: That was – I guess Bruce (Larson?) ran that?

BK: No, a few different people had it. They tore the building down. It's right around where the [inaudible] restaurant is.

NS: I remember Tony telling me about that, and I didn't know how that all worked.

BK: I've also worked on clam boats, sea clam boats.

NS: Like George Streit's Boat.

BK: Right. I worked on a couple boats in Freeport, the *Endeavor* and the *Enterprise*; they're seventy foot.

NS: The *Enterprise* I have seen.

BK: Yes. I've worked on that boat, and I've also worked on the *Endeavor*. They go out in the ocean and catch –

NS: Skimmer clams.

BK: – skimmer clams for food, also for bait.

NS: I guess they sell them – the [inaudible] use the skimmer clams.

BK: Well, they sell them mainly to clam processors.

NS: Like Doxsee Sea Clam.

BK: Yeah. Similar to that. Although Doxsee has his own boats.

NS: Yeah, he's got his own boat.

BK: He does his own processing. Sold to a processor, clams are processed, and either ground up and frozen or possibly canned or something like that.

NS: [inaudible] Was there any major difference in the people who were running the draggers and the people who were running the clam boats that you noticed?

BK: [laughter] Not really. They're all watermen. It's just they do different things. People are about the same, just like anything else. People are the same no matter where you go, but a lot of screwballs work on the water, I guess. [laughter]

NS: Why do you say that?

BK: There's a lot of characters; let's put it that way.

NS: Who are some of the characters that you remember or know? I know Tony is quite a character.

BK: [laughter] I don't want to say anything.

NS: It's okay. This isn't going to anybody.

BK: Everybody rewards a character. But like I said, Dick Abbott, he was a real character.

NS: What made him such a character?

BK: He was like an actor.

NS: Yeah? Did he tell stories?

BK: Told a lot of stories. Very funny man.

NS: Do you remember any?

BK: He was quite an intelligent man, but he was very funny. Like I said, he was kind of an actor. He got carried away with things.

NS: Do you remember one time, something he was telling you about, or it was just —?

BK: Not really. Not offhand.

NS: What about your father? Did he have any stories that you remember him telling you about things that had happened to him?

BK: In relation to the water, you mean?

NS: Yeah.

BK: I guess there were a few stories. I don't really remember offhand. I'd have to think about it.

NS: I was just wondering when you were growing up if you remember anything that [inaudible].

BK: Nothing offhand. If I thought about it, there'd probably be a lot of stories. Nothing offhand that's that important.

NS: What was the scariest thing that happened to you? I imagine — was the boat sinking

probably the scariest thing that happened to you?

BK: Well, I was never really that frightened when it happened.

NS: What exactly happened? I know you've gone through this with other people.

BK: We had some compartments on the boat that flooded.

NS: Was there a leak? How did it flood?

BK: I don't know. Possibly, the hull became damaged sometime during the fishing trip. We didn't realize exactly what happened. Like I say, the compartments flooded, and we pumped the compartments, but we never [inaudible] all the water. It was very terrible weather conditions.

NS: When this happened, was there a storm going on at the time?

BK: Yes, it was kind of a winter storm. Very cold influx of cold air.

NS: This happened the second week in January.

BK: January 5th.

NS: Okay. Yeah, I know it was the beginning of the month.

BK: It was very bad weather. We had winds over fifty, sixty knots, and five degrees temperature.

NS: Oh, god.

BK: Between that – the boat made a lot of ice. When the weather gets that cold, it's a dangerous situation, really. Any of the spray that hit the boat turned to ice. We fought to try and keep the boat afloat [inaudible] abandon the boat.

NS: There was you, and who else was on the boat?

BK: The two other crew members.

NS: What were their names? Are their names. They're still here.

BK: Jack (Gunn?) and Jimmy Sullivan. So, we contacted the Coast Guard.

NS: When did you find out that the leak was – that it was flooding that badly? Because you'd been out there for a few days [inaudible].

BK: We were out about four days at the time.

NS: When did you find out it was flooding?

BK: Well, we had it in – it was Tuesday morning there of the 5th. I think it was a Tuesday. We were about halfway home, and we noticed that the stern was down a little bit further than normal. It didn't really look too bad. But the boat didn't seem quite right. I said, "Well, we better check the compartments out, check the fish hole out, and all that." There was water in the – the fish hole that was dry, but there was water in the stern compartments, and we started pumping them out. Water just kept gaining, and we never could. Eventually, the compartments were completely flooded, and there was water over all the access hatches. The whole stern deck was underwater, and we were like this for four or five hours before we actually got off it. It just got worse and worse and worse. The ice built up. When the sun went down, that's when the boat really made ice. The temperature really dropped.

NS: You had been out since when? Sunday?

BK: No, we were out, like I say, around –

NK: So, you had left port on Friday.

BK: I guess Friday. Started fishing on Friday. Thursday night, we left. We got off the boat. It looked like an iceberg. Just incredible. We contacted the Coast Guard a few hours before we had actually abandoned the boat.

NS: What time was this? What time of day?

BK: That the boat went down? Around eleven o'clock at night. They dispatched a helicopter from Cape May, New Jersey, and they flew over the boat. They were on the scene for about an hour before we actually got off the boat.

NS: How did it feel when you were out there?

BK: When we got off the boat?

NS: Were you scared when this was all happening? It sounds terrifying.

BK: You don't really think about it that way. You just say, "What can I do in this situation? What's the best thing to do to keep the boat afloat? If we have to get off, what do we have to do? What about the crew?" I tried not to say anything to make those guys panic. I don't say, "Oh my God, we're sinking," or anything like that.

NS: Were they scared?

BK: They were very cool, calm, and collected. Very professional about the whole thing. I was glad of that because you have somebody on the boat that panics, it can make a very bad situation. They kept their heads the whole time, and I did, and there was no problem at all.

NS: You still had the radio communication?

BK: Yeah.

NS: How far offshore were you?

BK: We were about forty miles offshore when it happened.

NS: Oh, god.

BK: She started to list over to the starboard, and after a while, it became quite a bad list. She was going down to the stern quite rapidly. Every five or ten minutes that we looked at her, she'd be down a few inches further. I was afraid she might actually roll over. Finally, I said, "Well, it's time to get off the boat." We got in our survival suits. We have these survival suits that keep the whole body warm and sheltered from the elements. We flighted the raft, and we went in the raft and pushed away from the boat. The helicopter came down and pulled us out.

NS: How long were you in the raft for?

BK: About a half an hour, I guess.

NS: How long did it take for the helicopter to get out to get you?

BK: They were over us before we got off the boat. We were in radio contact with them.

NS: When did you call them for help?

BK: Like I said, we were in touch with the Coast Guard a few hours before it actually went down.

NS: Around 8:00?

BK: I think it was even a little before that.

NS: They came right out?

BK: No, they didn't come right out. In fact, it took them a while before they could actually find a helicopter to come and get us. They didn't send any boats out. Most of the boats were too small. They wouldn't send them in those weather conditions. It was kind of a weird feeling. That was a little strange. Here we are, we're going out, working in this. They wouldn't even send the boat out. Said, "Too bad for us. The weather conditions are too bad for us to come out." I didn't really care for that when they said that. But they finally did send a big cutter out of, I think, Sandy Hook, which didn't arrive on the scene until we were long gone. We were already up and gone in the helicopter. I think they arrived on the scene about an hour after we got off the boat. The boat was still afloat, but it was just barely afloat. Soon after that, she went down. You don't want to be on a boat when it's in the process of going down because somebody

could get tangled up and then go down with it. It was quite an experience.

NS: It sounds very scary.

BK: I was just glad to get off at the time. Like I said, I'm glad nobody –

NS: How about now? Does it scare you when you think about it now?

BK: Not at all, really. I don't want to have it happen again, don't get me wrong. Basically, I'm glad nobody got hurt. If somebody had gotten hurt, seriously hurt, or somebody drowned in the process, that would have really upset me. You know? Boats can always be replaced. It's material things. But if one of the crew members were killed, I don't think I could take that. That would really upset me.

NS: Had you been in any serious storms before this one that you remember?

BK: Oh, yeah. We have been in quite a few blows over the years.

NS: Do you remember any one particularly?

BK: No. You don't really – when you fish offshore in the wintertime, and you're out four, five, six, seven days at a time, it's inevitable; you're going to run into storms, and it's part of the job. It's not that you take it for granted. But when we come in, we don't say, "Gee, it was really bad. It's just part of the job." You come in and take the fish out, and you forget about it. You have to go home and rest for a few days or take off a few days and come back down the boat, get the boat ready, and go back out again. It's just a never-ending cycle. The weather isn't something that concerns you all the time when you fish offshore like that.

NS: You would go out regardless of what the forecasts were, it sounds like.

BK: Oh, no. We always –

NS: Unless you knew there was a hurricane coming.

BK: Right. We would always listen to the forecast. If it was going to be very, very bad weather, we wouldn't go out in it. Sometimes, when you're way off –

NS: But if there was just chance of rain –?

BK: So, when you're way offshore, you're not an hour away from home; you could be twenty hours steam away from home. Sometimes, it may not pay to go home because, by the time you do get home, the weather's going to be nice again. Why go home in the bad weather?

NS: Right. If it's going to clear up.

BK: So, that's how that works. The whole trip we were out, that trip was very – had gale winds

up every day. Gale-force winds every day. [laughter]

NS: You do what you have to do.

BK: Sounds crazy, but that's what we do. It's part of it.

[Recording paused.]

NS: How old were you when you first started going duck hunting?

BK: I was twelve years old when I first [inaudible] Carmen took me.

NS: Oh, really? Now, was he your stepfather at that point?

BK: A friend of the family's

NS: He was friends with my father.

NS: Did your father die young?

BK: Yes. My father died when I was just nineteen.

NS: Oh, boy. How old was he?

BK: Fifty-one.

NS: You do not mind my asking, how did he die?

BK: He had a heart attack.

NS: That's very young for a heart attack.

BK: Not really. He abused himself.

NS: Yeah. And paid for it.

BK: A lot of partying and smoking, drinking, and he was overweight. That's what happens. I've done quite a bit of duck hunting through the years. It's a lot of fun.

NS: Did you ever cover your own decoys?

BK: A little bit. I played with it a little bit. I never really got too involved in it, though.

NS: How would you make them?

BK: Generally, you start with a block of wood, and you have what they call a pattern, which

gives you a rough shape of a bird.

NS: The bottom board, kind of.

BK: A side profile of the body. You draw the pattern on the block of wood, you put it on a band saw, and you cut it out. You take a rough wood file.

NS: A rasp?

BK: Rasp. Wood files we used also. You shape the body and the tail and just get it the way it should be and sand it. We also have patterns for the heads – take another block of wood, draw a pattern for a head on the block of wood, cut it out on the bandsaw, and do the same thing. Eventually, peg the head on the body and a little more sanding. Then, you can either paint it or varnish it. Like I said, I never got too involved in it.

NS: What did you do?

BK: I've made a few. I don't know what happened to them.

NS: Did you paint them or varnish them?

BK: I think I varnished them.

NS: You didn't use cork? Because I know some people would –

BK: No, these were more for show. Cork is very quick, and they paint the cork later.

NS: Do you have any of them here?

BK: I have a lot of decoys here in the garage.

NS: Can I see some of them? How about another time if I could come by?

BK: I've got a load of them. I've got all kinds of decoys.

NS: I got my camera.

BK: Okay. I must have a hundred. They're in the loft in the garage. I have to pull out my truck, then pull my wife's car out.

NS: How about another day if I came by?

BK: [inaudible] I'll do it if you want me to.

NS: Yes, I do. I really want to see them, but it's a little bit late, and it sounds very involving – getting the car out and getting everything down from the shelf. Did you ever make decoys that

you would use in hunting?

BK: No. I've done a little hunting with [inaudible]. I've helped him a few times. He's very good at it. Like I say, I'm just an amateur at it. He is a fanatical duck hunter and a very good duck hunter. He knows where to go. He watches where the birds go.

NS: What is his name?

BK: Jim [inaudible].

NS: Jimbo. I have to catch up with him.

BK: Excellent gunner and hunter. He's very good at it. He's the person to go with if you ever want to go duck hunting. He was one of my partners in duck hunting.

NS: Now, when you would go out with Wink, would you use his gunning boat, or did you have your own gunning boat?

BK: I had my own gunning boats, but we use his – he had a low Garvey. [inaudible]

NS: With the [inaudible] and everything.

BK: We used to take that. It is a little more comfortable than the duck boat.

NS: Did you have a duck boat as well?

BK: Yes. I've had a couple of duck boats. [inaudible]

NS: I've heard all kinds of horror stories about people going out duck hunting. I'm sure you have yours. What was the worst weather when you went duck hunting?

BK: The worst thing that can happen is you go out to a place, a real cold day. You don't have any sandwiches with you, and maybe there is not enough to drink. You rig out in a spot, and the birds never fly there. For some reason, the birds are spooked. They won't fly into your [inaudible]. The tide goes out, and you're stuck there. That's about the worst thing.

NS: Did that happen to you?

BK: Oh, yeah, many times.

NS: [laughter]

BK: I won't let it happen to me again, but that's happened.

NS: What would happen when the tide [would] go out? Because you would be stuck there until the tide came –

BK: A lot of times, where you are, there is water, but to get out of the small bay that you're in, the inlet is dry, so you're stuck in it. If you want to get out, it involves just walking through the mud, pushing the boat, and pulling the boat.

NS: How long would that take you to get back into –?

BK: Not even worth it. You're better off sitting there, waiting for the –

NS: How long would you be waiting there for the –?

BK: The tide is six hours [inaudible].

NS: Right. So, you'd be sitting there freezing.

BK: Yeah.

NS: What would you do to keep warm? You couldn't just sit there.

BK: [laughter] Walk around on the meadows. I do not know. You always dress for the situation. It's not like you would freeze. But you get a little cold.

NS: Be stranded out there.

BK: Boring. That's boring.

NS: Yes. I can imagine.

BK: Maybe you'll rearrange the duck decoys and hope that something will fly. Who knows? Maybe it will start to snow, and you won't see anything. If it snows, you won't get any birds. Visibility gets real bad. The birds will not see the decoys.

NS: Because one of the expressions I heard is the worse the weather, the better duck hunting.

BK: Right. Usually, yeah.

NS: Except for snow.

BK: Like I said, if it snows real hard, then the visibility goes down to nothing. Then, even the birds themselves can't see your decoys.

NS: What kinds of ducks would you mainly shoot?

BK: Mainly black duck and mallard.

NS: Black duck. Is that only on this part of Long Island that you would see those?

BK: This is about the best area, I guess, right around here.

NS: Would you see them any other places?

BK: See them in the Great South Bay and anywhere on Long Island, really.

NS: But mostly on Long Island. You wouldn't see them in other parts of the coast, would you?

BK: Oh, yeah.

NS: You would?

BK: They catch some – also, I think black ducks – middle of the country. They come down from Canada, and it's different parts of the country you will see [inaudible].

NS: Would you go out to Wink's bay house when you were duck hunting?

BK: Yeah, we've been there a few times. Jimbo used to have a bay house for a period of time before the town moved him out of it.

NS: Oh, really?

BK: He leased it. He didn't really own it. He took over the lease, and I guess he lost his lease, and they [inaudible] it there. [laughter] We used to stay there quite often.

NS: What would you do with the duck after? Would you cook them?

BK: Oh, yeah. We ate all of them.

NS: What would you do with it?

BK: We used to gut the duck, clean it, and take its feathers off. I like roast black duck myself, but we also used to breast a lot of them out. I'd cook the breast in a frying pan with wine and mushrooms and garlic and onions and stuff like that.

NS: Sounds like you really enjoy eating a lot of that stuff.

BK: I love it. We used to bring ducks also to Dick Abbott's house, where he would make big duck dinners, and we would have like ten or twelve people over and have a big feast, wild rice, potatoes, green onions, and all the other things that go with it. He also used to bring Wink's father quite a few ducks. He was also an avid duck hunter and very good hunter.

NS: That's Leon?

BK: He would also make ducks for us. I enjoyed it.

NS: Do you still go duck hunting?

BK: I have not been in the last few years, but maybe I will go this season. I keep up my license, but the last couple of years, I haven't gone.

NS: Yeah.

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

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 6/8/2024