

Interview with Tom Kuhner

Narrator: Tom Kuhner

Interviewer: Mary Lee

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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: The interview with Tom Kuhner, conducted by Mary Lee on June 11, 2001, provides a comprehensive narrative of his life as a fisherman on Long Island. Born in Freeport, Kuhner's earliest memories include crabbing and clamming, and starting a lucrative salmon bait business as a child. His fishing career spans various locales, from Freeport to Patchogue, before settling in West Babylon in the mid-1970s. Kuhner's experience is enriched by his relationship with a commercial fisherman who lived with his family during his youth, significantly influencing his skills and career path. Kuhner describes a diverse fishing career, including clamming, eeling, and crabbing, adapting to market demands and environmental changes over the years. He reflects on the decline of the eel market in the mid-1980s and the current predominance of crabbing in his operations. Environmental concerns, such as pollution and the loss of wetlands, alongside overfishing, are noted as significant challenges affecting local fisheries. Kuhner discusses regulatory challenges, including stringent size limits and area restrictions enforced by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), which have impacted his operations. He recalls personal anecdotes of interactions with the DEC and the Coast Guard, highlighting the complexities and frustrations of adhering to regulations. The interview also explores the socio-economic aspects of fishing, such as the decline in the number of baymen, the financial struggles of maintaining a fishing business, and the impact of these challenges on younger generations and family life. Kuhner's narrative underscores the resilience and adaptability required in the fishing industry, as well as the camaraderie and traditions among fishermen. The interview concludes with reflections on the changing landscape of the fishing community and Kuhner's hopes for the future.

Mary Lee: Okay, it's June 11, 2001. My name is Mary Lee. I am here with Tom Kuhner. We're in West Babylon, right near the water, right on the canal, at his home at 39 Grand Street. I'm just going to first start out by asking you where you were born and what are your earliest memories of fishing.

Tom Kuhner: Well, I was born in Freeport. It's on Long Island. We lived on a canal. My first memories were I used to go crabbing and clamming. I guess I was seven or eight years old; I started a salmon bait – I had a small bait business. For a kid, it was a pretty lucrative business. You could make three or four dollars a week delivering the papers. I used to make that in a day sometimes.

ML: Did you have a stand on the side of the road?

TK: No, from the house.

ML: From the house?

TK: Yes. I had a sign up there, and there was a boatyard across the street. I had quite a few customers. They were pretty good.

ML: Some regulars who knew that they could get –?

TK: Yes. They help out a kid, I guess. That's how I kind of started. I did a lot of clamming and eeling. I lived in Freeport until I was about eighteen or nineteen. They closed the bay because of pollution or whatever the reason was. I was about twenty years old. I just got married. Then we had to move. So, we moved out east here to Patchogue. I lived out there for about, I guess, five or six years. Was mostly clamming in those days out there. Then, from Patchogue, I guess we moved here. I've been here a long time.

ML: When did you move here? Do you remember what year it was?

TK: '76. '75 or '76. Then I started eeling again. Eeling was very good.

ML: Was your father a fisherman?

TK: No. But I grew up with fishermen. We rented a room to a commercial fisherman. He used to take me with him when I was a kid. He taught me a lot of stuff. As a matter of fact, his son is a bayman now. He taught me a lot.

ML: How many years did he live with you?

TK: Four or five years.

ML: From about what ages, do you remember?

TK: I was probably about nine until I was twelve or thirteen.

ML: Do you remember his name?

TK: George (Parry?). His son, George, is a bayman also.

ML: Do you ever see him or talk to him?

TK: Once in a while.

ML: That must be nice.

TK: Yes. I learned mostly from his father. When I was a kid, I worked for them. They had a bait business. I used to catch bait and whatever.

ML: So, you would go out on the boat with him on a regular basis?

TK: Yes. Every day we used to go.

ML: What all did you learn from him?

TK: How to catch shiners and killies. Mostly just bait fishing with him. That's mostly what we did. That's why you have to kind of know how to do everything. You have to know how to do a lot of different things in order to make a decent living all the time. See what happened with the eels. Like I was saying, the eeling was very, very good for maybe a ten-year stretch from 1976 until 1986. I fished for the European market. I'll be able to ship to Europe. But the market went, and for some reason, it went bad. I still go eeling, but it's not half as good as it used to be just because of the price of the eels. They're really not worth that much anymore. For a local market, it's not enough for me to even bother with.

ML: What is the majority of your catch now? What is the percentage?

TK: Right now, I'm crabbing. So, I'm catching crabs now.

ML: So, it is almost full of crabs?

TK: Right now, yes. All I'm doing now is crabbing. I'll probably stay crabbing for June, July, and August, maybe September. Sometimes, after Labor Day, the price goes way down. So, if that happens, then I go back eeling or clamming or whatever is the best at the time. The changes destroyed all the wetlands on the north side of the bay here. There aren't anymore. They built houses on everything. I don't think it's just here, either. I think it's up and down the coast probably. When I was a kid, when we lived in Freeport, if you lived on the water, you came from the wrong side of the tracks. Now, it's just the opposite. It's the other way around.

ML: I know a lot of people have bay houses. Did you ever have one of those?

TK: I used to stay down at the bay a lot.

ML: You did?

TK: Yes.

ML: Where?

TK: In Freeport.

ML: In Freeport. You would stay in a bay house?

TK: Yes. We stayed there, sure, a few days at a time.

ML: Those were houses that your friends owned?

TK: Yes, the older fellows. It was a nice way to grow up. It really was. Kids missed out on a lot. We'd stay down there for two or three days. I liked it. The hunting season, you would go hunting. It was good.

ML: You did a lot of duck hunting?

TK: Yes, years ago. No more. I must have lost the killer instinct.

ML: [laughter]

TK: I don't go anymore.

ML: What was it like when you went there?

TK: Not like now. You could kind of do anything you wanted to. There's a lot more ducks. [inaudible] kill a lot of ducks. Now, I don't even know, but not much.

ML: Their regulations?

TK: Yes.

ML: Do they enforce that pretty strictly the duck hunting?

TK: Yes. That comes under federal. You got to be careful.

ML: What about when you go out? Are you ever stopped?

TK: Sometimes.

ML: How often do you think that happens?

TK: So far this year, not yet. But not too often. Once in a while, the Coast Guard will stop you. They're pretty decent as long as you've got all your stuff on the boat. The main problem here is the DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation], New York Conservation.

ML: What kind of regulations or rules do they have?

TK: They have size limits on the clams especially. They are hot on the clam.

ML: They have to be under a certain –?

TK: They have to be over an inch thick. Certain areas are closed because of possible pollution. Uncertified areas are closed. If the lines are from here to here, you can't go on the other side of the line. Sometimes, they give you a hard time with these things. Just don't ask me why, but sometimes – not like the Coast Guard or the marine police; they might treat you differently. DEC, I don't know. They're tough, the New York state.

ML: What if someone were caught doing something wrong?

TK: I've been caught plenty of times.

ML: What happens if they decide that you are doing something wrong?

TK: They'll write you a summons. I've already been arrested.

ML: What was that for?

TK: For clamming in illegal water.

ML: Really?

TK: Yes. I'm not the only one. It has happened a few times. A couple of times, I've paid a fine. A couple of times, I was proven not guilty.

ML: Sometimes you feel like it is kind of worth the risk?

TK: It used to be. Not anymore.

ML: But it is not anymore.

TK: The clams –

ML: You can't get enough for it to really be worth it.

TK: This area right here is Babylon, Islip area, eighty percent of all the clams consumed in this country used to come right from here.

ML: Really?

TK: Yes. It's not that many years ago. It was just overfished so bad. It just hasn't come back. I think it's probably more of a natural cycle of things. There were a lot of clams here, and there were a lot of clam diggers, too. There were three thousand guys here at one time.

ML: Wow.

TK: Now, I'm fifty-seven years old. I'm the youngest full-time guy.

ML: Wow.

TK: All that's left here are the old guys. A friend of mine has two sons, young boys. They're like the last young fishermen that have gotten into it.

ML: What are their names?

TK: My friend is Jack Verity. His sons Billy and Jason. Like I said, they're the two youngest guys I know.

ML: How old do you think they are?

TK: Billy's around thirty, and Jason's like twenty-three, twenty-four. My son was also a fisherman. He got a job – got offered a job on Long Island Railroad. You better take it. It's a good job.

ML: How long did he fish?

TK: Until he was over thirty.

ML: Wow. Was it hard for him to leave fishing?

TK: Yes. He didn't like it. He hated it at first, the job, but now he likes it. It's like the real world. You can actually take off. If you're sick, [inaudible] you get paid.

ML: Benefits.

TK: Benefits.

ML: Has that been difficult? You're sort of self-employed, really.

TK: Yes. I'm self-employed, of course. My wife has a job now that pays the benefits, but we've paid for years on our own.

ML: It's tough.

TK: It's a lot of money.

ML: It is.

TK: If you get hurt, you got to be very careful you don't get hurt. If I get hurt, I can't work. Well, too bad. I wouldn't want to do anything else. This is a great life. I don't even consider this work anymore. It's hard work, but it's just, to me, it comes natural. I can't recommend this for any of the young guys. It's just so many. They're regulating you right out of business almost. They make it tough.

ML: Do you always go out on the boat by yourself alone?

TK: Yes, always.

ML: You always fish alone?

TK: Always. I'm so used to going by myself. Crabbing, you could take somebody with you. It could make it a little easier. You could catch a few more crabs, but I'm just so used to going by myself.

ML: That's how most people are that fish. But I guess you'll see fishermen stop and talk to each other.

TK: Once in a while, in the wintertime, I'll invite my friend here, and we'll go together [inaudible]. Basically, most of the guys here go alone.

ML: Your son – is that the only son you have?

TK: Yes.

ML: What was his name again?

TK: Peter.

ML: Peter. Did you have any daughters?

TK: Yes. This is all of my granddaughter's stuff out here. [laughter]

ML: [laughter] Have you also done fishing on the ocean and the bay?

TK: Yes, ocean and bay.

ML: So, what are the differences?

TK: Well, the ocean, I go – usually, my friend – he has a big trawler. I did that for quite a few years.

ML: You worked on a big boat?

TK: Yes. He owns the boat.

ML: How many people worked on that?

TK: Three or four. I did that for quite a few years. That's a big headache. You know what I mean? This here, these little boats, they're little headaches. You got the big boat. You have big headaches, too. You have to always worry about a crew. Very hard to keep a crew now in those big boats. The money is not like it used to be. Again, there aren't any young guys around who want to do that anymore. You can't blame them. You go out for three or four days, five days, you've got to really love it. Young kids now, you can't blame anyone for that. The financial rewards are not that great anymore.

ML: So, what were the major differences between the bigger boat? That was the biggest boat you worked on?

TK: Eighty-five-foot. Nice boat. Pretty modern boat. Like I say, the money wasn't as good as it used to be. I'm getting kind of old to be rolling around in the ocean all the time. I like to be home at night. Basically, I'm really, truly a bayman now. Like I say, if I have to go fishing, I can do it. But I could probably do this. I like this. Catch my eels and crabs. I consider myself to be basically an eeler. Like I say, the bottom fell out of the market. So, for the last twelve years, I've been kind of filling in with the crabs, which is okay.

ML: Do you ever fish at night, or is that something you try to avoid?

TK: On certain times, we used to go eeling at night. If you're fishing for striped bass or something, you go at night. If it calls for going at night, I go. With crabbing, I leave the dock at 4:30, 5:00 o'clock, [and] 11:00 o'clock, I'm all done, 11:30. You go out early, you get in early. There's a lot of boat traffic here, especially on the weekends. The earlier you get down, the better. That's any place around here.

ML: What about your traps that you use? Do you make those yourself?

TK: Yes. I make my eel traps and the crab traps I buy. It's easy to buy them. But I made my eel traps. Everybody thinks they have the best. [laughter]

ML: [laughter] How are yours different?

TK: Basically, everyone has the same little differences here, but basically, they're the same, the same principle.

ML: How are they designed? They have an inner chamber.

TK: Yes. They're called a kitchen [and] parlor trap. That's the standard one. Put the bait in the front part, and when they get the bait, they try to get out and sneak out in the back.

ML: What kind of bait do you use? What do you use for eels?

TK: I use horseshoe crabs and sometimes surf clams. Horseshoe crabs put a lot of regulations on them. That's what I was – tell you about the weekly reports. You have to send in a report every week for the state on how many you've used for the week. I'm crabbing now. I'm not even using those. I still have to send that report in that I didn't use any. If you miss one of the reports, they'll take your license. You got to be like a bookkeeper. I have a separate license book. I have to send in a report on that. Then I have one more I got to send in. If you're real busy and tired, you forget. You don't want to forget. I think Cory had some problems.

ML: Really?

TK: He forgot. Some states, you're not even allowed to [inaudible]. It's true. There's about one-fifth of the horseshoe crabs left. In the last – let me think – twenty years ago, you could fill up a big boat of mine five times. It's just that many. Everything is overfished. If you take something faster than it can grow back, you don't have to be real smart to figure out that sooner or later, there's not going to be any left.

ML: Has pollution been a big problem, or is it mostly overfishing?

TK: I believe mostly overfishing and the filling in of the wetlands has a big, big, major impact. What they did twenty-five or thirty years ago, you're seeing now. You're probably seeing the results now. That and the overfishing. In the whole industry, from clamming right on up to ocean, the big trawlers, everything has been hammered on. Like I say, if you take something faster than it can replenish itself, sooner or later, something has to give.

ML: Besides your traps, what other equipment or tools do you have on board with you?

TK: Clam rakes. Sometimes, I go scalloping – scallop dredges. You have to have a lot of equipment. Crab dredges – sometimes, in the wintertime, I go dredging crabs. I try not to do that much.

ML: If something needed repair, would you repair it, or do you have someone?

TK: Most of the time, I fix my own. I repair my own stuff.

ML: Most of it you bought from a provider?

TK: Yes. The clam rake is a guy from [inaudible]. It's what he does; he makes the rakes.

ML: Do you remember his name?

TK: It's Armour Instrument.

ML: Ray?

TK: Yes, Ray.

ML: Ray (Schultz?).

TK: Yes. He did a lot – Ray makes all my stuff.

ML: Does he make most of the –?

TK: He makes them. Most of the clam [inaudible], yes.

ML: Everybody.

TK: Everybody knows Ray. I know Ray about thirty years.

ML: Wow.

TK: He made a lot of stuff for me. Well, you know Ray.

ML: Well, I have not met him yet. I am hoping to. I want to talk to him.

TK: He's right up here.

ML: I want to interview him.

TK: Not far away. He makes a lot of stuff. He's a good guy.

ML: Yes?

TK: Yes.

ML: That's good.

TK: He knows everybody.

ML: Do you guys get together a lot, the fishermen, and hang out?

TK: No. We used to, years ago. We used to, but things have changed. We used to kind of hang out in Freeport and Baldwin. An old fisherman, Dick Abbott, lived on a canal like this and kind of hung out at his house. He had a nice big porch on the canal. That was quite a few years ago, fifteen years ago or so, I guess. That was the place. If you wanted to find out what was going on, you went down at Dick's. When he passed away, it was the end of an era. I have guys now that I used to see, I haven't seen some guys in five years. It's because of that ...

[RECORDING PAUSED]

ML: I was wondering if you could tell me what the process is once you get back and you have whatever you have caught that day. What is the process? Do you sell it to a local –?

TK: I sell to a wholesaler. I don't go from store to store. Like I'm crabbing now, I sell it to the crab buyer. He buys from me and quite a few other guys. You could probably make a few dollars more if you wanted to go peddle them around, but I did enough work. I'm going to get rid of them, and I'm done. The same with the clams and all my stuff. I sell everything. If I'm eeling, there's one guy who buys eels up and down the whole coast. I deal with him.

ML: So, generally speaking, eeling is more of a winter –?

TK: Well, no. Spring and fall.

ML: You can do it spring and fall. Then summer is crabbing.

TK: Right.

ML: Then the winter?

TK: It's all clamming. There's no crabs. One year there's no crabs for something. Whatever, I'll go clamming.

ML: Then the winter is a little bit of everything?

TK: Yes. The winter, mostly clamming.

ML: Clamming. What sort of special gear do you have to wear during the different seasons?

TK: I don't know. You just wear less clothes. In the winter, you need good gloves. You got to have good gloves, and you can't let them get wet. I don't wear too many clothes in the wintertime. Once I start working, if you're clamming especially, you start perspiring. You'll get real cold. So, just most important is your hands and good boots.

ML: How long have you had your boat?

TK: I had these boats for a pretty long time.

ML: You have a couple?

TK: Yes.

ML: You have two?

TK: Yes. One's fifteen years old, and one's about ten years old. I used to build my own, but no more.

ML: Really?

TK: No more.

ML: How many have you built?

TK: I don't know.

ML: [laughter]

TK: A lot.

ML: Really?

TK: Yes.

ML: How long does a boat last usually?

TK: If you take care of it, a long time. Like this one here, I got one out here. It's fifteen years. I take good care of my stuff. It'll last you indefinitely if it's a good boat to start with.

ML: Yours that you made – would you sell them to people, or give them or you just use them?

TK: We sold some, and only for our own use. My son used to help. He built quite a few.

ML: How did you learn how to make boats?

TK: From watching the old guys when I was a kid. I used to watch and hang out. I tried a couple on my own.

ML: In Freeport?

TK: It turned out pretty good. I learned everything from other people, basically.

ML: So, you never used a book or tried to figure it out by reading it?

TK: No.

ML: Wow. What are your boats' names? Do they have names?

TK: No.

ML: I know a lot of people name their boats.

TK: No. I don't have them. Just the state. You got to register them. I don't have any names on them. I call them names sometimes.

ML: [laughter]

TK: Boats are very expensive. This is a lot of expense in this business if you have good equipment [inaudible]. Boats now, [inaudible] if you want to get rigged up to go crabbing like this thing, you're talking thirty grand for that. Now, to replace it, I didn't pay that much for it when I bought it. Boats and motors are very high. It's an expensive business to get into anymore. It didn't cost anything. For the initial startup, anybody could go. But now people would think about spending that kind of money just to go part-time or something. We had a lot of problems here with part-timers. I mean, not a problem, but that's one of the reasons why the clams got cleaned up so fast. Half of the guys were firemen and cops and stuff, schoolteachers, people with a lot of time off went clamming. They've changed a lot of laws now, especially for the crabbing and the fishing. You cannot get a license now unless you can prove that you make at least fifty percent of your income from the water. They should have done that a long time ago, but better late than never.

ML: Do you feel like the DEC -? Do you feel like they understand what is going on?

TK: No.

ML: Not at all.

TK: No. They don't have a clue. They really, really don't have a clue. They knew nothing about the horseshoe crabs until we had a big meeting, and the baymen kind of filled them in. They really don't have a clue, and it's a shame. [laughter]

ML: Yeah. You guys had a meeting.

TK: There's always something going on.

ML: You invite them, or you asked them to come.

TK: When they're looking to pass some kind of a law, they have that public hearing.

ML: Then you guys speak up.

TK: Yes. You go, and you voice your opinion of what you're thinking of. They don't show me much. I'll be honest with you. I'll tell you what happened. They went from no regulations at all, free for all, to now it's like regulated, so you can hardly move. For years, you could basically just do, take any, whatever you wanted. But it's the same with the ocean trawlers. It's the same thing. It was unregulated. The government made it very easy to get boats. So, a lot of boats got into the fishery. Too many boats, like you say. You're taking out massive fish faster than they

can grow back. Well, something happens. So, now there's hardly any boats left, and those poor guys are regulated. It's bad, and that's what happened. It was like no happy medium.

ML: Are there a lot of the big boats that a lot of guys work for now, or not as many of those anymore?

TK: No. No, there's not as many. No.

ML: Really? Like how many can you think of, like big companies?

TK: I don't know any. Like I say, my friends still got the boat. He's in Point Lookout. Maybe two or three boats left down there.

ML: How many do you think there used to be?

TK: Seven or eight or nine, sometimes ten. [inaudible] Same in Freeport. There are only one or two boats going out of Freeport now in the ocean. Everybody gave it up. Some of the guys didn't have any choice. If you had a smaller boat, you really couldn't go far offshore. You were really limited. It's a shame. Like I say, it went from no regulations at all to just putting a stop. For the sport fishermen also, they put a lot of regulations on them, too. You can't say that they're just picking on commercial fishermen because they're not. They're putting their stoppers on everybody.

ML: Were there a lot of problems between the sports fishermen and the commercial fishermen in the old days?

TK: A little bit, but now, to be honest, not that bad in this state. A lot worse in other states. Some friction, but no, it was never really that bad. In New York State, like I said, there was always a little friction here and there. But it never really got out of hand. Not that I know of.

ML: What about just people on the water for recreation, like skiers?

TK: In the fall, I go set my eel traps up in the canals like [inaudible]. People don't want you over there. I've been going in some of those canals before the houses were there. You run into some unfriendly people. You've got to either try to go real early in the morning. Never on the weekend. Yes, they don't want you –

ML: They just do not want you in the canal.

TK: They don't want you there. They get real angry. People call the police. I wait. I'm not breaking any laws. Like I said, some of these areas I've been going there for thirty-five, forty years. There were no houses there when I started going there. The people around here, I get along with because I've been here probably longer than most of the people in the neighborhood. To see them keeping all this stuff in the yard, this is a running business out of here. The fishermen and clambers, you're allowed to do that. Whatever the reasons are.

ML: What about with your traps? Have you ever had problems with people taking –?

TK: It's terrible.

ML: Really?

TK: It's absolutely terrible.

ML: Is that one of the reasons –?

TK: This is one of the worst areas right here.

ML: Really?

TK: That is absolutely my biggest expense in the crab business is replacing my traps.

ML: Really?

TK: Yes.

ML: They take the whole trap, not just what is caught?

TK: Yes. Gone. When you go in and out of the canals in the fall with your eel traps, you'll get some back off the docks. That is the [inaudible]

[RECORDING PAUSED]

ML: This is side B of tape one with Tom Kuhner. It just seems a little strange that someone would take the whole trap.

TK: It's gotten so bad.

ML: It wouldn't be a commercial fisherman, obviously.

TK: No. It's just people riding around. It's gotten so bad, and the crabbing wasn't that great that I packed it in at certain years. You can't take it anymore. If the crab was real good, well, then you can eat it. If you lose a trap, your rope, your buoy, your leads, and this, and the [inaudible] it's twenty-five dollars. [inaudible] It adds up. This year, I'll lose at least a minimum of a hundred. That's a minimum. It's a terrible problem.

ML: So, you still get a hundred percent of your income from fishing?

TK: Oh, yeah.

ML: Have there ever been years when you were really frustrated?

TK: I've had terrible years. I've been around for a long time. I've seen some hard times. Some of the younger guys I've never seen. It's always been pretty good. I've seen when it's real, real hard to make money. Ask my wife, she'll tell you. Really, the last ten or fifteen years, it's been all right. You never know what's going to happen. I've seen years before I was crabbing – almost every crab in the bay will die. It's just some disease or whatever it is. It can happen. So, things are going great, you're making some money. A week later, well, you got to figure out something else to do. You must be versatile. That's the whole deal.

ML: When you go duck hunting, the decoys, have you made those?

TK: No.

ML: Do you know any?

TK: Some guys have. Some of them are worth a lot of money.

ML: Yes. [laughter] Do you know anybody who makes really good decoys?

TK: No, not anymore.

ML: No.

TK: (Wink Carmen?) used to make some. He passed away quite a long time ago. That's the only fellow I know.

ML: Do you have any memories from duck hunting, good memories, or experiences?

TK: Yes. I always went with the same guys. It was camaraderie. Again, we stayed down the bay for a few days.

ML: How many guys would usually go?

TK: Six guys. Between four and eight guys. Everybody was friends.

ML: They were all fishermen, or they were different?

TK: Basically, the guys I went with were fishermen.

ML: Was that ever dangerous, or it was pretty safe?

TK: No. Cold and wet.

ML: [laughter] I heard the best time to go is when it is overcast and rainy. Is that right?

TK: Yes. A lot of wind, yes.

ML: Really?

TK: The ducks would fly around a lot lower.

ML: They try and get lower to the water. Is that right?

TK: Yes. Nasty weather is the best. I used to go. One season, we went just about every day after we got done working. Never hardly missed a day. Like I say, the guys I used to go with are all gone or whatever. I used to go with the same guy. You just lose interest in it, which is all right. Cory and them guys still go, I think. There are too many regulations.

ML: I lost my train of thought. I'll just pause this. [RECORDING PAUSED] I was going to ask you about just being out on the water during storms or other dangers.

TK: I don't care much about the weather. I go pretty much. It's got to be pretty bad if I don't go. This bay here is a big bay. It gets rough. You just got to be careful. If you stay home because of the weather – well, you can't. You're not going to be very successful if you do that. So, I try not to let the weather bother me at all, especially when you are crabbing. You've got to try to empty the traps every day, or somebody will empty them for you. I basically go in any kind of weather, short of a hurricane, of course.

ML: Have there ever been any hurricanes?

TK: Oh, yeah. The water was right here where you're sitting.

ML: Really?

TK: Just almost to the top of the deck here.

ML: What year was that?

TK: That was about fifteen years ago.

ML: Wow.

TK: It was a bad one. We had a Halloween storm. It was bad. They made a movie about that. It was called *The Perfect Storm*. That was bad. It was windy, but the tides, we had the tides there. There were three or four tides in a row. It never came in the house, but it was close. That was bad.

ML: Wow. So, the whole canal just flooded.

TK: Yes. That was hard, Hurricane Gloria. They were the two bad ones.

ML: Did anybody get stuck out on the water, or did you hear anything?

TK: No.

ML: There was enough warning.

TK: Yes.

ML: Did you guys stay here, or were you evacuated?

TK: No. We stayed. If I didn't work on the water, I would never live on the water.

ML: Why is that?

TK: It's not worth the aggravation, I'll be honest with you.

ML: What about just being out on the water and falling overboard or anything like that?

TK: A friend of mine, a fellow I used to be partners with, drowned.

ML: Really?

TK: Yeah. We were partners for years. The guy I just told you about with his two sons. They worked on the water as brothers.

ML: What was his name?

TK: His name was Elwood Verity. He was a real good bayman fellow. You never know. He slipped. We really don't know what happened. A propeller hit his head. We had to go down to Montauk and identify the body [inaudible]. It wasn't fun. You never know. You got to be careful. But even if you are careful, something can happen. Here today and gone tomorrow. That was a shock to everybody because he was well-known. You would never think. It's unbelievable. One slip. It's a freak thing, but it can happen.

ML: Having insurance and having insurance for your boat, I can imagine that's pretty...

TK: I don't have it. I don't have insurance on the boats.

ML: Wow.

TK: I'm not paying. It's not worth what they'll charge you.

ML: Yeah, I was going to say it must be really expensive.

TK: Yes, it's insured. If somebody steals a motor or something, but they're not insuring that. Forget about that.

ML: Do a lot of the baymen -? Are a lot of them -? Their boats are not insured?

TK: I would imagine. Yes, it's not. It's hard to get life insurance if you're a commercial fisherman. It's dangerous. It's a dangerous occupation. It's one of the most dangerous – with the trawl. I don't see what we do as dangerous. But fellows on the crab boats up in Alaska, that's dangerous work. Some of the guys, I don't think they'll even insure them.

ML: What makes trawling so dangerous?

TK: Well, there's a lot of machinery involved, winches and stuff like that. Something can break, or you have more of a chance of getting hurt. Chance of things [inaudible]. It's rough, very rough some days. You got to be very careful. To me, this is like playing in the water here. But you never know. Like I say, accidents can happen. If you get hurt, you break your arm or something, that's too bad.

ML: Have you ever been injured where you had to stay off the water?

TK: Not real bad. One time, for a couple of weeks, I got hurt. I was [inaudible] eels. So, I don't have any to show you. But you pull this rig through the mud; it's got ice picks sticking through it. I hit a big wreck, and I fell down in the boat. My foot came down, and the ice pick went almost through it. I got hurt. I was hurt bad then. I was laid up for a couple of weeks. That's the only time I ever lost any time.

ML: Have you known anybody who has had to give up fishing?

TK: Let me think. Short of death or anything. Well, yes. I should say a lot of clammers had done other things. A couple guys here now still go clamming, but they got to take part-time jobs, night jobs. You just couldn't. You're just trying to dig clams, but you're not getting by. It's all right for a fill-in. Like you say, you have to know how to do everything. You have to know how to do it good. I've been doing this for a long time. Like I said, I could not picture myself doing anything else but this. I plan on retiring someday. I'd like to go down on St. John's River in Florida. I like it down there. I go down to the [inaudible]. I'd have to be on the water, though. I could never be off the water. I know. But we were down there. We kind of like it there. Hopefully, that's where I'll end up.

ML: Do you think it is difficult for your wife? Have you ever heard that it is hard for fishermen's wives?

TK: Yes. It's hard for especially the trawler fishermen. They're gone. They're always gone, especially the younger guys. Like my friend, he's a good friend of mine. When he first got the boat, he got to go, go, go. You're never home. Never home to the wife. Never home to the kids. I went with them for ten years, all in all. You're gone away from home a lot. It's not good for the family life. Fishermen tend to be hard workers and hard drinkers, too, some of it. Really. It's part of it. It's all got to do with the camaraderie life.

ML: Are there any specific terms that fishermen would use that other people would not understand? A language?

TK: Not that I know of. You could be talking about certain things on a boat that people wouldn't know about. Other than that, the fishermen of today, the trawler fishermen, are very, very – you got to be pretty intelligent guys. A lot of high-tech stuff on the boats now. They made it easy. That's another thing why everything was overfished. They came out with all these electronics. You didn't have to know much. Here he is now.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

ML: This is Mary Lee back again, and I am here with Jack. What was your last name?

Jack Verity: Jack Verity.

ML: Verity, that is right. We were just talking a little bit about, I guess, some of the challenges of being a bayman. Traps being stolen and government regulations.

JV: Federal, really. [inaudible]

ML: Federal.

TK: Federal and state.

ML: Are there any other specific challenges that you have experienced?

JV: I was just saying there's no clams on the island at all. If it wasn't for the crabs, we couldn't do it. I'd have to get a job at fifty-nine years old.

ML: I was just going to ask what you like the most about fishing.

JV: I like eeling the most. Because you don't lose that many traps. Because we fish them underwater. We don't have buoys on the eel traps. But the crab traps [inaudible].

TK: [inaudible] hotcakes. [laughter]

JV: Eighty or ninety a season, I lose.

ML: Really?

JV: Yes.

ML: Wow.

JV: They're over twenty dollars a trap. The state says to put big buoys on them. I got buoys fourteen, fifteen inches. They go on before the little ones because the people can see them easier. [laughter] They blame it on the kids. It ain't the kids; it's the grown-ups. That's not kids.

TK: Yeah. This is the worst area for that. Where he lives, it's the worst.

ML: Also, I wanted to see if you had ever caught anything really interesting.

TK: Oh, yeah.

ML: Like unusual.

TK: I must have caught something.

JV: [inaudible]

TK: What'd you catch –? Of course, I forget what he caught. When Elwood was alive? [inaudible] Some kind of big fish? I forgot what it was.

JV: [inaudible] We used to catch old bottles [inaudible].

TK: Old bottles. A lot of stuff like that.

ML: No bodies? [laughter]

TK: No, no. No bodies, no.

ML: That is good.

JV: We're [inaudible].

TK: Yes.

ML: With tonging, that's for oysters?

TK: Clams.

ML: That is for clams. How do you find that work? Is it really difficult?

TK: It's hard work.

JV: It's hard.

TK: Any kind of clamming is hard work. That's probably the hardest work we do, probably.

JV: Clamming is hard.

TK: It's hard.

ML: Can you just tell when you close it whether or not [inaudible] –?

JV: You can feel the clams. Dig them out.

TK: You can feel the clams.

JV: Reel them out. Me and Tommy, we used to rake all the time.

TK: Yeah. We raked [inaudible]. The older guys are tongers. Like I said, I'm the youngest guy here, right?

JV: Yeah. Well, you're fifty-seven.

TK: Fifty-seven.

JV: The youngest bayman left, fifty-seven. That's a shame. Long Island used to be the biggest for baymen. I think the town of Islip in the '70s, there were fifteen hundred licenses given out.

TK: It was three thousand between the [inaudible].

JV: Huh?

TK: Between Babylon and Islip, there was three thousand. A lot of [inaudible].

JV: That's a lot of baymen, right?

ML: That is.

TK: I don't think there's a hundred. No way.

ML: When were there three thousand?

TK: It was '70s.

JV: In the '70s, early '70s – '72, '75, and then it went down.

ML: Do you ever hear from these people that used to be baymen?

JV: No. They all got jobs. They [inaudible].

ML: Well, I think I have asked most of my questions. Is there something else you guys want to talk about? I know that some baymen have things in their yards that are kind of nautical, like an anchor in the front yard.

TK: His anchor.

JV: I had a nice anchor.

ML: Yeah?

JV: Somebody carried it away.

ML: Really?

JV: It took my wife three years to get after me to paint it. I put it out on the front lawn. Four days, it was gone.

ML: No.

JV: It got to weigh about eighty pounds.

ML: How did they take it? In the middle of the night?

JV: Carried it away, I guess.

ML: In the middle of the night?

JV: Yes, I guess.

ML: No.

JV: I live in a nice neighborhood. Beautiful neighborhood.

ML: Did you have it out there unpainted for a while?

JV: No. I had it in the garage. Then I painted it and put it out in the front.

ML: Put it out. Wow.

JV: Somebody needed an anchor. The Amityville cop – they laughed. They said, "You got to chain them down. Got to anchor them to the ground somehow." [laughter]

ML: Chain them to the grass?

JV: Yes.

ML: How are you going to do that? What about you? Do you have anything nautical?

TK: Yes.

ML: I know a lot of baymen have –

TK: All my stuff that I use. That's what my traps [inaudible].

JV: Some old-fashioned decoys. We don't keep them out. We had them in the house.

ML: Well, thank you both so much.

TK: That's okay.

ML: I appreciate your generosity in letting me come by. [RECORDING PAUSED] We're just back again. We were talking about some of the superstitions. You were saying that it's bad luck for a seagull –

JV: To hurt a seagull.

ML: To hurt a seagull.

JV: If you're a commercial fisherman or do anything at all on the water, it's bad luck.

ML: There were some others.

TK: The thing that you should never ever do on a boat is never ever turn the hatch cover upside down. Never.

ML: Really?

TK: Oh, yeah. That is the kiss of death. I know guys, if you're getting ready to leave on a trip for fishing, if you turn the hatch cover upside down, [inaudible]

JV: They won't go. They won't leave the dock.

TK: Never whistle on a boat.

ML: Never whistle.

TK: Never. Never whistle on a boat.

ML: How do you learn these superstitions?

TK: From the old guys.

JV: From the old-timers.

ML: Never whistle on a boat. So, that is bad luck if you do that?

TK: Yes.

JV: Yes.

ML: Are there any other –?

TK: [inaudible] pointed the wrong way. You should never have your boat point in the way that you're going to leave in the morning.

ML: Really?

TK: That's right.

ML: So, you should have to make a circle to get out.

TK: Yes, a circle.

JV: A circle.

ML: Do you do that often?

JV: Yes, same way.

ML: Same way.

JV: Of course, these canals are narrow. [inaudible] bigger boats.

TK: Never turn the hatch cover upside down. That's the kiss of death.

ML: What about certain rituals when you are leaving your house or eating food?

JV: [inaudible] walk out the back door, walk [inaudible] boat.

TK: I'm trying to think.

JV: My father said never go fishing on Christmas, no holidays [inaudible].

ML: Really?

JV: He had a boat. He had somebody working with him, and he didn't go out at Christmas. The other guy took the boat [inaudible]. My father said [inaudible], "Never put your foot on that boat again as long as I'm alive." He never did. [inaudible] Christmas – took the boat without him. He was cod fishing at that time – set line.

ML: So, you still don't work on Christmas and holidays?

TK: Christmas, no.

JV: Thanksgiving, I go out in the morning. [inaudible]

TK: In the morning. That's the only two holidays.

ML: So, I guess vacations are –?

TK: In the wintertime, when the bay is froze.

JV: Froze. [inaudible]. We work seven days a week.

TK: You can't – never plan. I never went away in the summer.

JV: Never.

TK: Upstate or something. Forget about it. Forget about it. You could do it, but it's not very smart. Do you know what I mean?

ML: Do you ever go out when there is ice?

TK: Oh, yeah.

JV: Oh, yeah.

ML: And do ice fishing?

TK: Not as much as –

JV: [inaudible]

ML: Not ice fishing. There is more of a sludge.

TK: You got to break through the ice. Not anymore. We used to.

JV: We used to.

TK: [inaudible] stay home for a couple of weeks there.

JV: [laughter] I think we put our hours in [inaudible] cold. That's for the young generation.

TK: Right. Let them do it.

ML: Well, thank you again.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/5/2024