Interview with Lenny Nilson

Narrator: Lenny Nilson
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Abstract: This is an interview with Leonard "Lenny" Nilson, conducted by Steve Warrick on July 15, 2000, at L & L Bait and Tackle in Islip, Long Island. Lenny Nilson was born in July 1947 in Bay Shore, Long Island. He grew up in a family deeply rooted in commercial fishing, with his father immigrating from Sweden in 1929 and establishing a fishing and bait business on West Fire Island. Nilson's early years were spent working alongside his father, gaining hands-on experience in the industry. He later pursued an associate degree in marine biology and served in the Vietnam War before fully committing to the family business. The interview covers Nilson's extensive experience in both bay and ocean fishing. He recounts his early days fishing with his father, the transition of the family business from shrimp and live killie to wholesale bait, and his ventures in pound net fishing in the ocean from the mid-1970s to 1986. Nilson describes the technical aspects of pound net fishing, including site preparation, net setting, and the challenges posed by weather and regulations. Nilson also discusses the significant changes in the fishing industry over the years, including the decline of commercial fishing and the increasing dominance of sport fishing. He reflects on the economic and environmental pressures that have reshaped the industry and the strategies he has employed to adapt, such as returning to bait fishing full-time. Throughout the interview, Nilson emphasizes the importance of preserving the knowledge and skills of commercial fishing despite the many challenges faced by modern fishermen.

Steve Warrick: Hey, this is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. Today, I will be speaking with Leonard "Lenny" Nelson. We are at his company here in Islip. The company's name is L & L Bait and Tackle. We'll be discussing working on the Great South Bay and the bait business. Today's date is July 15, 2000, and this is tape 008, side A. Could you state your full name for me?

Lenny Nilson: Leonard Nilson.

SW: When and where were you born?

LN: I was born in Bay Shore, Long Island, in July 1947.

SW: Have you lived in this area during most of your lifetime here?

LN: During most of my life, yes. In the early '70s, I spent some time commercial fishing down in Florida and Cape Hatteras in North Carolina during the winter months.

SW: How did you get into commercial fishing? Were one of your parents involved?

LN: Yes, my father. I was born into the business. My father immigrated from Sweden back in 1929; he came to this country. He had a commercial fishing background. His whole family – we go back probably a couple hundred, two, three hundred years in the fishing industry. He immigrated here in the 1920s. He started working on Great South Bay all through the 1930s. By about 1945, he decided to go into the bait business. Actually, I grew up on West Fire Island, which is an island out here in Great South Bay. I spent the first five years of my life out there on the island. My dad had a shrimp and live killie business. Then, by 1952, he came ashore to the mainland and started in with the wholesale bait business, which we are in today in the freezer warehouse and distributor and things like that. So, two more years, we have been in business fifty years now.

SW: What was one of your first times out with your dad? Some of your early experiences out there?

LN: My early experience is I was [laughter] probably about four or five years old. My father used to take me out on his workboats with him. Specifically, one time, he had anchored the boat down by the inlet to look for driftwood, which he built his docks and staving out of. He asked me to stay in the boat while he went out of sight looking for wood. You just don't tell a four or five-year-old to stay alone in a boat. What happened is he came back and he found me walking along the jetty down at the end of the inlet on top of the rock jetty. One slip on there, and I would have been over into the tide and gone. I remember that scared him to death to never leave me out of sight again. Then also, I just remember working on the boats with him as he would catch the bait, helping sort the bait, pick the fish out, and various things like that on the boat. Anything that a child could do at that age to help him out on the boat. When you're a kid, it is fun. It's not just work. It's fun.

SW: About what time did you start getting into the work itself then?

LN: Well, the actual work itself, probably, in my teenage years, by the time I was getting to be sixteen, seventeen years old, I was starting to get active working full time on the bay with my father at the plant and everything like that. I went to college for marine biology in 1965. I have an associate degree in marine biology there from Suffolk Community College. That was one of the first years they had the program at that time. That's probably when, in my teenage years, I really got into it active full-time. Of course, after college and then after I was drafted during the Vietnam War era in 1968, then after returning in 1971 from overseas, that's when it became a real full-time occupation for me, say 1971, when I got into it full-time fishing and working in the industry.

SW: Were you mostly working in the bay or on the ocean as well?

LN: It started off in the early '70s when I came back. It was primarily in the bay with the bait fishery. But then my father sold the plant that he had over there in Bay Shore. I came over here where I am now, and I was in partnership with these people. I worked in the ocean from about the mid-1970s to 1986. I spent about twelve years in the ocean with the pound fishery – with the pound nets. We were the last company on the East Coast and probably in the United States to fish these pound nets or trap nets with poles in the ocean.

SW: What company? What was the name?

LN: That was the Sunrise Fish Company. That was the Sunrise Fish Company, which eventually evolved into L & L wholesale Bait now. What we have now is basically a continuation, but we just changed corporation names.

SW: Could you tell me a little bit about how you would go about pound fishing? What do you need to do to get prepared to do that?

LN: Well, to get prepared for that, I guess the first thing is the sites that we have where we're allowed to put these in the ocean was up to the Army Corps of Engineers. I remember, we were under their jurisdiction. There was allotted sites where we were allowed to place our nets and nowhere else. The Sunrise Fish Company at one time – because they started doing the pound nets back in the early 1920s. That's how long it went on. They had four or five sites as well as a dozen other companies on Long Island here back then. By the 1960s, the Sunrise Fish Company was the last one to do it. All the other companies, due to economic reasons, were out of business, and Sunrise was the last to do it. To start to do it, the first thing is, once this site is established, where you are allowed, where your permit is, then you have to bring out the poles or trees. These were seventy-five and eighty-foot hickory trees because they had a lot of flexibility to them. We could pump them into the ocean floor, and they could take the motion of the waves and the storms without snapping off as other woods would do. So, we had to bring them out by barge. We had a sixty-foot self-propelled barge. We brought these poles out in the water. We had a blueprint, and we would pump these with water pressure into the bottom of the ocean, into about twelve to fifteen feet under the bottom, and we would pump them in the form of our blueprint. They had to be accurate, and they had to be in that blueprint form because when the nets were brought out to be suspended and hung from these poles – if they were out of

measurement and dimension, the nets would not fish right. They'd be all out of whack, or they would pull too much one way or another way. Basically, after the first ice, the month of March, you wanted to get the poles out there in the ocean and start pumping them. You could only work on nice days, of course, with the barge and pumping them. So, we were restricted by weather. Once we got the poles in the bottom in the configuration we wanted, then the nets were all brought out. The nets were connected to frames. The frames were hung from the poles off the block and tackles. Then, the nets were laid out from the back of the barge. As we went through the poles, they were laid out through the back of the barge. Then, by winches, pulled up to their respective places on the frames and lines and tied in place. Basically, the pound nets were hung a little above the surface with the top, and then they were weighted down with huge iron weights on the bottom, and they fished just off the bottom. We were in about thirty-eight to forty feet of water. I think we were in forty feet of water; our nets were about thirty-eight foot deep. Of course, they were closed at the bottom. So, after the fish, the principle of a trap net is there is about half a mile of a straight liter. It is all based on migratory fish. In the spring, the fish would migrate along the coast, and in the fall, they would migrate back in the other direction along the coast. So, these fish would come along, generally from the west, traveling east, following along the coast of Long Island. They would hit a straight line of netting with their poles. They would want to go offshore in deeper water to follow around. They would follow along this half a mile of straight leader, as we called it. They would find themselves into another area, which was an opening, which we called the hearts. The hearts were circular, and they continued to want to go offshore in deeper water. The hearts would lead into what we called a funnel, which would be fifteen foot wide and converge down into three or four foot at its end. The fish would be led through the funnel, wanting to go off in a deeper water, and then they would fall into the area, which we called the pound or the trap, and that's where it got its name, that type of fishing. It was like a big cereal bowl. It had a bottom to it. The fish could swim around and around and around, but they weren't smart enough to find their way back out that small funnel, that opening. Basically, it would take about the month of March at least, to get the poles out there, and then it would take another few weeks to get the frames and the netting in place. We used to figure probably about a six-week period to get the nets out in place because, by the second week in April, you wanted to have the nets fishing because that is when the first sign of mackerel and whiting and other things – herring – would start to come along the beach. Then, the real production, the real spring migration, would be about the first of May. But there was a few years where everything was in place. A few days later, a northeaster would come through and wipe us out, knock all the poles down, tear up all the nets. Then we could be looking at a many week process to get the site cleared, get new poles out, and get new nets in. The advantage of pound fishing was fish were coming in twenty-four hours a day. Constantly, fish were coming in. All you had to go out there each day with the carrier boat, lift the nets up, and bail the fish live. That was why trap fish brought the best price because they were quality. You were bailing live fish out of the nets down into the fish hole, so you had the best quality fish you could buy. The negative aspect to it is you were at the mercy of the ocean and storms. Hurricanes were our biggest threat. A hurricane could wipe us out overnight, which Gloria did. We lost everything over a hundred thousand dollars' worth of equipment to Gloria. Then, there was another storm I remember back in 1976. I don't remember the name of that one, but we lost everything back then, too. In the last fifteen-year period, we've had two devastating [storms], where we did a lot of damage to the plant here and there. But that's how much – it took a lot of time to place these nets in. As the fish migration started to decline over the years, I think a lot of it – my own – I

don't have any statistics to really back this up, but as more processors and trawlers were able to follow the fish stocks up and down the coast, twelve months out of the year, I believe they broke up that migration run. The stocks weren't there in any numbers anymore for the migration. Besides being at the mercy of the storms, the other negative thing about trap fishing is that you're not mobile. You're in a permanent site. The fish have to come to you as opposed to you going to the fish. If the migration runs weren't along the beach like they were for decades, then we weren't going to catch the fish. That's basically why, in 1986, we decided to give it up. It became the end of an era because we were the last company doing it. We could not support the overhead of the operation anymore with the amount of fish that was being taken.

SW: Then, after 1986, you went back to bait fishing?

LN: Right. After being in the bait business, growing up in it and doing that most of my life, and still having a bait business going on here along with the ocean operation, I decided to go back into the bait business full time, and that's what I knew. Also, as maybe other baymen have told you, I saw what was happening to the bay, with fish stocks, with all the regulations that we were facing, with the quality of the environment and the water out there. It just looked like not a wise decision for me to try to support my family and mortgage and all the other things that go along with it by just fishing off the bay. Sport fishing is growing larger and larger every year. Unfortunately, the commercial fishing seems to be dwindling. It seemed to be the safest direction for us to go in was to go back into the bait business, which we always knew, because that seems to be the direction. We see so many commercial fishermen today want to continue to work on the bay. But whatever they are catching, it is pretty much geared to ending up back in the hands of the sport fishermen for bait or for whatever use. But it seems to be the way of survival.

SW: What type of bait fishing would you be doing then?

LN: Our bait fishing, some people call them minnows, we call them silver sides. But our specialty has always been the northern silver side, or spearing, as a lot of people call it. That's something that's caught with a haul seine is basically what we use – very small mesh. You're talking three sixteen and quarter-inch mesh, very small because the fish are very small. It is done out of sharpies, eighteen, twenty-foot sharpies. It can be done with one man, but it is hard, generally, two-men crew. Basically, we are circle-setting around the bait fish. Then, we have to be able to haul it back to a sandbar or beach. As opposed to a purse seine where you can set it in the middle of the water and haul back, the haul seine has to be taken back to some point of land. There's a big bag in the middle of the seine, and the fish are forced into the bag and then brought up on the beach basically, and then bailed out into our boats. There is a spring run of bait that starts around March, runs through about the middle of June and later June. Then there is another fall run again that can start late August and September and run all the way till Thanksgiving. We do that again in the fall, for that. But basically, so there is a spring and a fall run for the bait. The other thing that we did for quite a bit was the menhaden or the bunkers. Remember the herring family. We use larger haul seines – the small haul seines for the bait. For the minnows, they run a hundred foot and ten or fifteen feet deep. For the menhaden, of course, we are fishing three and four hundred feet nets. That's thirty feet deep, forty feet deep for those. They primarily fished in the rivers in Eastern Long Island. Also, in the bay if it is close enough to

shore. But when they come up into the bays in the rivers, in the spring, primarily same thing, May and June are the two months. We are able to seine them in the rivers up there. The last four, five, six years, though, we don't know what happened, but the fish just have not been showing up. Then we are fighting a lot of townships. The state gives us a license to do it, but the town tries to pass a local ordinance to say that we can't. So, it becomes in and out of court with the townships and the fighting of local ordinances. We fought with some towns, and we've won the decision, and we have won the right to go back and be able to do it. But it seems like we come back and we have to deal with vandalism. Someone has vandalized our boat trailers or our trucks while we are out fishing. There's a lot of harassment out there in the water. It's gotten to the point where most of us gave up the bunker fishing or the menhaden just simply because we just can't take harassment from the towns or the locals. The local people are the sport fishermen. What's funny – because we are producing a product for the sports fishermen, and they want it badly, but yet they don't want us fishing there. Everyone tells us, "Go somewhere else." Everywhere you go, we're supposed to go somewhere else. As one old fisherman said one time, he said, "Where are we supposed to go, up in the trees?" Because that's it. So, basically, we've given up the menhaden fishery. But even with the minnows, the silversides, the spearing, as much demand as there is for it, we seem to be – wherever we go, people don't want us there. Let's put it that way.

SW: Now, when you're setting your bait nets out, are you letting the fish come to you at that point? Are you looking for particular spots where you can [inaudible]?

LN: No. The life cycle of a silverside is probably only about a year and a half. I don't know, quite two years, maybe a year and a half. In other words, the fish that we catch this year – the fish that come back the next year are different fish. They're not the same fish because the lifecycle is so short. But what's interesting is for some reason, they come back to the same areas, the same parts of the bay, the same islands, the same rivers. There's some instinct that is telling them they like that bottom; they like that area. So, basically, after a culmination of thirty or forty years doing it, you learn all these areas. So, basically, you go to these areas to look for the fish. It takes a keen eye with the bait fish. You have to be able to read the water. In nice weather, when the water is calm, and the sun is out, these fish will jump on top of the water. They can be easily seen. In cold weather, they don't show. Sometimes, it's just a little ripple against the wave. It's just a little nose ring; one little piece of bait might come up and stick his nose at the surface and make a little ring on the water. But if your eye can catch it, that is good enough to let you know that there's fish there. If it is cold weather and you know the fish are down below, you'll take a chance of what we call a blind set. We will set the net in the chance that we thought we read something that possibly there might be. Sometimes, we come up with nothing; sometimes, a good catch. A lot of, I guess maybe [laughter] what I might be doing here is – I don't know who hears it – might be divulging a lot of trade secrets. Because a lot of the newer fishermen can go into a river ahead of us and not be able to see the fish because they simply cannot read the water. They cannot read the signs. They don't have the know-how. They can pass right over a big body of fish and never see them. We can come right behind them and have a good set. So, it takes a lot of keen interest because a lot of people that I take out on the boat with me that fish with me, if they're not experienced, they don't see a thing. I'm saying, "Look, look right there, that's fish." They can't see it, they can't tell a thing. But I've been fortunate enough to have a few fishermen that are working with me now and in the past over the

last twenty years that are actually older than me and maybe have not bait fished as much, but they know how to read the water. They know what the bay is because they've spent their whole life on it, too. They've become very helpful to me in my fishery that way.

SW: You think that's an important quality that you need? Do you really need to know the bay?

LN: We have a lot of good men here in this bay, especially Great South Bay. It's a large bay. There's a lot of things going on. There's a lot of good men here that really study. Some fellows just go out there and haphazardly set nets or pots or that and just hope for a good catch. Then there's men that study like we do over the years. We keep records. We keep books. We study the fish, we study their habits, we study the bay. These fellows are the ones that are most effective because as fishing gets harder, you have to be able to really read these fish more effectively if you are going to stay alive and continue in it. It also means fishing more gear if the law allows it – fishing more pots, fishing longer nets – to be able to catch everything. That's what happened in Japan [inaudible]. Twenty years ago, we were almost bought out by a big company in Japan with the pound nets. They wanted to bring over larger nets, and they wanted – where it took us five or six or seven men to fish a net, it took them thirty or forty men to fish a net because they were much larger. They wanted to bring them over here. They felt, at one time, it was profitable for them to bring these nets over, buy out the company, and fish them. For some reason, at the last minute, they forfeited a down payment, and we never heard from them again. We don't know the reason why they gave it up. But I bring this up because the reason is that they overfished their areas, and the only way that they could stay alive was to fine-tune their nets [and] make them more effective. One man stated, "If we are down to just very few fish stocks, we have to make our fishing techniques and our equipment to the point where we are able to catch every last fish." Of course, where does that leave the future? Nowhere, and that's why Japan has looked to other countries and other areas of the world to supply them with fish. This is what a man has to do to stay alive here. No, we are not going to catch every last fish. But if we're going to stay alive, we have to be more effective in the type of gear that we use. Of course, that effectiveness is restricted by the laws. We are limited to mesh sizes, the lengths of nets, the amount of pots, and things like that that we have to do. All we can do is maximize what we have and still be within the law in the legal limits.

SW: Now, are you buying your nets? Are you making them yourself?

LN: We make them ourselves only. My father made his own nets [and] showed me how to do it. I fished with an Italian gentleman who really, I would say, back in the 1930s and '40s, the immigrants from Italy did a lot of that overseas. They were the first ones to really come here and get involved in the bait business because, don't forget, back in the 1930s and '40s, there was not that much sport fishing. We didn't have sport boats. It was all commercial men out there. It wasn't until, I would say, probably the early mid-1950s before there became some kind of viable sport fishing industry, of which my father started to get into the bait business. Sunrise and White Cap right here also followed suit in the late '40s and early '50s where there became some sport fishing industry, starting to get developed. That's basically how it got started, anyway, in that direction.

SW: So, how do you go about making your nets?

LN: First of all, you have to buy the material. We're not back like in the sixteen hundreds when you had to get a ball of twine and make every mesh. The material for the netting today is all made on machines. It's all knitted and done on machines. But you buy the material, buy the pound in roll or bulk. Then, according to the type of net, like where we're using a bait seine, we have to cut it. We have to cut it to the dimensions, to the height and length that we want it. Then, after everything is cut, it has to be what we call double salvaged. In other words, we have to double-[strengthen] all the edges in plain language. When there is strain put on the net, it isn't pulled apart. It doesn't come apart. Some people will just get lazy and cut it and then try to hang it together. After a little bit of fishing or strain, it just all starts to tear apart and come apart. After all the edges are double-needle, as we call it, or double salvage is the true term, then they have to be sewn together. All the sections are sewn together. The wings are just straight pieces of netting, and then you have what we call the pocket or the bunt, where the fish go into. Sometimes, that is tapered, or sometimes, it's in a square box. But that all has to be sewn together. After the net is all sewn together, it has to be stretched outside for weeks because cold and heat and rain and sunlight – the material, which is all nylon today – they started originally back centuries ago with linen, and then linen turned into cotton. Cotton nets were only good for two or three years. Cotton rots. They fell apart. By the early 1960s, that's when the pound nets out in the ocean, our bait seines – they started coming up with nylon, new synthetics. That was great because now we could make a net – if we repaired a net and took care of it, we could make a net last for twenty to thirty years as opposed to two or three years. That's just what we did, how long our nets lasted. After the net was stretched – if you didn't stretch the net once it was hung to the cork line and lead line, after fishing it for a few weeks, it could get all pulled out of shape because it wasn't tight or stretched properly. You could get a lot of sags. A lot of fishermen that don't know how to do this complained that their net gets all out of shape and would not fish right, and that is because they are not taking the proper procedures. So, after the net is stretched properly, then it gets hung onto a top line or float line, which enables the net to float at the surface. Then, the bottom line is a lead line, which enables the net to bring it to the bottom. If the net doesn't float at the surface and it doesn't sit on the bottom when it comes to the seine nets, the fish will go over the top or under the bottom, simple as that. That's the same procedure – cutting it, sewing it, putting the sections together, stretching it, and then putting on your corks and lead. Once that's done, you have a finished product.

SW: So, you really have to know what you're doing with the netting.

LN: You have to know what you are doing. I fished for about twenty years with an Italian fisherman who was one of the immigrants, one of the early starters. He's eighty years old today and still fishes for me. He still fishes for me. He basically showed me all these secrets on how to put a net together. He still does make nets for most of the fishermen that are involved in the bait fishery or has made nets for everybody. My always joke to him, though, is he's putting everybody in the business. Every time he makes a net for another guy, it's just more competition for us out there on the water. There's too many now for the little bit of bait there is. Because everybody engaged in the bait fishery is all out there in those spring months or fall months doing it, we still have a lot of competition to put up with. But, like I said, I learned from him. I have made now for the last fifteen years, I've made most of all my nets myself. You can go down South – Mississippi, Louisiana. You can go to Tennessee and places like that, and they will

make your seines. But they cut corners. They don't double salvage. Instead of hanging a cork every six inches or something, they will hang it every so many feet. Basically, to me, I call them play nets. You get around fish; the fish go over the top, and they go underneath the bottom. They just don't fish well at all. But if a fisherman does not have the know-how of putting his own net together or having somebody that can make a good one for them, he has to go to the net shops and order one. But they're really not good. Any good fisherman that knows what he is doing usually makes his own nets.

[Recording paused.]

SW: This is Steve Warrick continuing my conversation with Lenny Nilson. This is tape 008, and we're on side B, July 15th, 2000. Besides just knowing how to make the nets, you have to know how to set the nets and where to place them. Now, do you think that is a lost art in a sense, or do you think enough people are learning?

LN: Well, I don't know if it's a lost art. People are still learning as long as people are willing to teach them. We still have in the bait business here because a lot of other fisheries are closed or dying, the need for the bait and sport fishing – a lot of fishermen have gotten nets. That's why we said before, we have more and more competition. More fellows are saying, "Hey, this is one avenue that's possibly still alive." They have a boat already. They go get a net, and then they have no idea what they're doing. They think it is so easy just to go out and catch bait, but they find out that there is an art to it. There is a lot of knowledge to be effective. Anybody can get lucky one day and catch a big catch. But it happens – even for us that know what we're doing, those big catches come far and few between. Maybe once or twice a whole season do we really have what we call a big catch. We're in the right place at the right time. A lot of that is just plain luck, not knowledge. But without the knowledge, I couldn't think of trying to do it today and try to make a living or be effective at it. Because you do need the knowledge, but then again, how do you get the knowledge? You got to spend time out there in the water. If you're lucky enough to have an older fisherman help tell you, like I had my dad help me and some other older fishermen help me in the beginning, you're fortunate. You can learn on your own, but it's a long, hard process – frustrating. You have to have the patience to be able to stick up with it. But for a fisherman to start off with this, like in any other fishing, to think he is going out there and ask other fishermen on the dock to tell them where to go and how to do it, they have another thing coming. Fishermen are not going to divulge information because it's only going to hurt them. It's only going to take away from them. It's only going to cause more competition. I've tried to be helpful over the years to people, and it has sometimes hurt me because I have divulged a little bit too much. But at the same time, where we are in the bait business, and we buy from most of these fishermen, I try to be helpful because it will benefit me. If they can catch the fish, then I can get the product that I need to supply my people with. So, it's twofold. Sometimes, it's a situation that fishermen don't like because although we are buying the bait from the fishermen on the water, we are also out there fishing ourselves. Fishermen are apprehensive sometimes to bring us the bait for fear that if I learn where they caught it that day, I will be out there tomorrow. But out of respect, we usually know where these fellows work, and we usually go in a different direction, or we usually have an agreement. "Okay. You fish east, and I'll fish west, and we'll not get in each other's way," because I am only going to get their product anyway. But sometimes there is a conflict, and sometimes fishermen tell me that I

shouldn't be out there on the water. I should be back here at the business. But I've been out on the water longer than most any of them. So, I feel I have a right to do it as much as they do.

SW: I wanted to ask you about boundary lines and if people do cross them or if there is a certain code of ethics among the guys out there fishing.

LN: There is a code of ethics, whether it is bait fishing, whether it is setting crab pots, [or] gill netting. With most fishermen that I've known my whole life and how they work, there is a common respect. The bond is that they're both doing the same thing. They're both on the water. They're both on the same side. The enemy to them might be the sports fishermen. The enemy to them might be the public or that person that has built a new house on the shoreline that doesn't want to see them anymore. That could be the enemy. But there is a common bond among commercial fishermen. But at the same time, it's very competitive. They're out there trying to make a living, and even though this fellow next to them has a common bond, at the same time, don't get in my face. Don't get too close. You kind of set imaginary boundaries. With the crabbing that we have going on in Great South Bay now, yes, there is imaginary boundaries with each crabber. They hold the same area every year as in the lobster industry. But every once in a while, one will feel that it's better over there and then try to infringe upon his territory. There'll always be that one fisherman. I can name half a dozen, and I am not going to name names, but we all know people out there that get in each other's face or try to overtake someone's area with a lot of gear to try to push them or force them out. They do not hold respect for the rest of the men on the water. So yes, in general, we try to set imaginary boundaries, but at the same time, we have to understand the water is open to all – sport fishing, commercial – and no one owns it. So, you are free to go wherever you want to go. But we have to try to live with each other out there, so that's why we try to set boundaries.

SW: Now, besides the economic importance of, say, somebody who you've taught to make that, and there are out there fishing, is there anything else you get from teaching them? Is there any satisfaction that you've shown them something?

LN: Yeah, I guess. I think the one thing is that we do not want to see commercial fishing become a lost art, to see it become extinct, just like whaling. Whaling came to an end for many different economic reasons. Just like the pound fishing we talked about earlier, as far as the ocean goes and what we did, that was an end of an era that came to an end. Older fishermen that did it, as myself, look back at sadness to see that it's no longer going on anymore, that it is gone forever. It is only photographs and documents that we have on it. So, I wouldn't want to see everything disappear commercially. People realize not only their bait that they use to go fishing comes from a commercial fisherman. The fish that they find in the retail fish market comes from commercial fishermen. Someone has to catch those fish. So, there is satisfaction in trying to teach somebody, hoping that someone will follow up. But in most cases, those of us that are involved in commercial fishing today don't want to see their families continue on. If we have sons or daughters or whoever, we don't like to see them continue on simply because we know how hard it's going to be for them in the future to make a living. How hard they have to work, how many hours they have to put up, how many frustrations they have to deal with to try to make a living. We encourage the younger people to get an education, get a job, and follow on. All of us commercial fishermen and all of us that work on the water usually depend on a wife right now

with a job that has benefits because most commercial fishermen don't have and cannot afford the health benefits and the retirement and the other things that go along with a land job if you want to call it that.

SW: Now, before you had mentioned in the past a lot of different ethnic groups that were commercial fishermen, people involved. How did they all get along? You're Scandinavian background, Italian, and, of course, the Dutch.

LN: Right. There was Italian, Scandinavians – the Dutch was a big group here on Long Island. Scandinavians got divided between the Swedes and the Norwegians even. If you were Norwegian or you were Swedish to each other, you might as well have been Greek or Italian or something else because there was a lot of rivalry between it. Norway, of course, even though we're from Sweden, Norway is the bigger of fishing because they have a much larger coastline exposed to the sea, whereas Sweden only has the lower southern part. But yes, on Long Island and back in the 1920s and '30s, when my dad immigrated here, it was to Long Island, especially, I would say, the Scandinavians and the Dutch. The Italians came maybe a little bit later in the '40s, and stuff like that was involved. It's just from my knowledge of what I know. But there was a lot of rivalry, a lot of rivalry ethnic-wise that way.

SW: Did it ever go over and spill onto the water?

LN: Yes, of course. There was a lot of not only shouting and hollering at each other but there was fist fights and hatchets thrown at each other. Attempted strangulations that I know of – attempted drownings. These are all stories that I've heard and been told from the generation before me that I fished with and that I knew well of what went on the water back then. There was an intense rivalry, maybe more than now. They felt that certain areas and things were theirs, and don't you get too close to me. There was a lot of fighting going on. Fighting ashore. If the fishermen did not feel the man at the packing house treated him fairly and gave him the right price for his fish that day, there was big fights. Back then, it resorted to more fist fights than just verbal. So, there was a tremendous amount of rivalry that way, and it was more than just verbal.

SW: Now, have there been any fishermen that you know, including yourself, that have stories or legends associated with them about being the best fishermen or anything like that? Anybody achieve legendary status?

LN: I guess there was people – what comes offhand here is the Schaper family, which was the previous owner here of the Sunrise Fish Company. There were three generations since almost the turn of the century in the pound fishing. They came over from Holland. The Schaper family, as they were called, was well known by everyone on the South Shore here because of the size of their operation. It was a very large family. There was four brothers and a father active, and then an uncle before them with the father. Then, some grandsons took over after that. Eventually, I was in partnership with them. But the Schaper family would be legendary because they were in it for sixty or seventy years. They had a very large operation. They were very hardworking people. They spent their entire life on the ocean. Of course, across the canal here, White Cap Fish Company was the Lundstedt Brothers; they were Swedish. What was interesting about them is they came from the same area of Sweden that my father did, and they immigrated over

here at different times. But my father ended up in Bay Shore with his fish business and bait business. They ended up over here in the next town of Islip with theirs. They go back as twelve and fourteen-year-old kids in Sweden, knowing each other and fishing with their families together to knowing each other over here. So, the Lundstedts again became very famous over here. They were also pound fishing like the Schaper family. There have been some books and documentation done by them. One of the Lundstedt brothers wrote a book one time – I don't know the name of it – about his life on the sea and how they came over to this country and everything like that with some photographs. They were also the first one here on Long Island to put up a freezer. This property crossed the canal and was known as Bailey's Lumberyard. That went back to the 1800s. They converted the lumber mill or sawmill into an ammonia plant, into a freezer warehouse. They were the first ones to sense that rather than being at the mercy of the fish market by sending their catches in fresh and taking whatever the market was to pay that day, they could take their products and freeze them. First of all, have a supply when things got scarce later in the year, and also command more money for it. The Lundstedts over there were probably famous because they put up the first freezer. The Sunrise Fish Company followed suit in 1950, about five years later. My father followed two years later, in 1952, with putting up his freezer plant in Bay Shore, which was Nilson's Frozen Bait. So, basically, we had three freezer warehouses, if you want to call it, in the same town or same area here, all in the fish business, all in the bait business at one time or another, and all distributing. They were competitive in one way, but yet they also all worked with each other that way. I would say, right, there is the Schaper family here and the Lundstedt brothers over there in [inaudible]. In Long Island, on the South [inaudible], each town has its heritage with so many generations of this name family. There's been books, and Billy Joel has done stories about things, such as the Lesters and the Bennetts out in Amagansett. There's been a lot of documentation about them. But in this area here, you would look at these places here, those families. That would be about the best.

SW: Now, being in this area and working on the bay and the ocean, how has that really shaped your life? What do you think it has instilled in you?

LN: Well, I guess it has instilled in me the same things that my father instilled in me, that you're only going to get out of it what you put into it. If you're hardworking and you give it your best, there is rewards to come from the water. It's always been good to me. It's always been rewarding to me. If you're that type of person, and we do have them, that likes to get out on the water at 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning and come home at 2:00 in the afternoon, you cannot expect much. Our typical day starts at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, sometimes 1:00 or 2:00, but 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and ends at 5:00, 6:00, 7:00, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00 o'clock at night. Usually, you got to figure a twelve to sixteen-hour a day minimum for what we do. But what it's done for me is it's instilled that hard work because we'll reap our rewards that way. For me, it's always been an honesty thing. We've always had a reputation of being honest and never cheating anyone. I've always tried to live my life that way. Most fishermen, of course, work seven days a week. My dad taught me a long time ago; he said that if you can't earn a living and you cannot make it six days a week, you're not going to make up the difference by working on Sundays, that seventh day. He always instilled on me that way. As far as my opinion, my body, after working sixteen or eighteen hours a day, six days a week, my body needs a physical rest on Sunday. Also, spiritually, I've been very active. As a lot of fishermen, a lot of your Dutch fishermen have been very active in West Sable with the Dutch Reformed Church. I've been very active with the

Christian church for twenty-five or thirty years now. My parents always brought me to church. My dad was not much of a churchgoer; my mom was. But I learned that the body needs a spiritual rest and it needs a physical rest on Sunday, and this is what the Lord intended. So basically, I can see it in my life because there's a lot of fishermen that have worked seven days a week. I have worked six days a week very hard in my life, and I am just as far ahead financially, if not more, by doing it. So, we need to take a break once in a while, we need to take a rest. Of course, like some fishermen's wives said, well, they have all winter to sleep. Because during those – January to March or those – January, February and March are hard months on the water. That is when everything comes to a halt as far as the baymen goes. If you want to go out there and scratch some clams, okay. But that is why fishermen have to work as hard as they do. You have to make two days' wages every day if you're going to pay your bills and get through the winter. But, personally, I do not care how busy and how much fish there is to catch; I can't do it seven days a week. I cannot do it. I have to take a break, that one day a week. But the rewards besides the hard work ethic and the honesty part of it – and not everyone is honest – the other reward is the independence. I think that's what we value more than anything. As I said before, you can get up as early as you want, and you can work as late as you want. Everyone has that opportunity on the water if that's what you want to do. So, no one can ever begrudge someone else for making more money because he wants to work harder at it. But the idea is you don't really have to answer to anyone. You're not punching a clock. There's that independence that I think most of us wouldn't trade. I love doing what I'm doing, even though I've been doing it my whole life since a kid. I still enjoy being on the water, and I can't wait until that first spring thaw when the ice breaks. We know that first few fish are going to start showing up. We can't wait to get going. I think most fishermen you talk to, the independence is a very important thing. That's what keeps us going. Very difficult now that we're coming to a time where it is hard to make a living on the water. We're just facing now this decline of the lobster industry, where most lobstermen [are] getting jobs on the land to try to survive. It kills most fishermen. They've never really worked for anybody before. It's very hard to sit and listen to somebody. Maybe we are too independent. We don't like taking orders from people. We don't like coming and going by the clock and things like that. But reality is, if I have a family, I have a mortgage, I have kids, I got to do it to pay my bills. The bills are there. You have to do it. But if you are fortunate not to have to, like some of the older fellows [whose] kids are older and their mortgages are paid off, they can afford to be a little bit more independent. They can still try to stick it out on the water. But I think those are very good qualities of learning how to work hard, how to be honest at what you do. Working with your hands to me is nothing better. I know we need our brains for a lot of things today, especially in business. But still, I know a lot of people said that my place is in the office, running my business from here, the chair, and not being out there on the water. But there's still an aspect of us that tells me I want to be out on the water. My therapy. I need to be out on the water to get away from this place at times. Not only that – I can't sit here and learn what is going on in the fishing industry by being at my desk. When I'm out there on the water, I'm seeing what is going on firsthand with the fishing, with the fishermen. When someone tells me over the phone that this is that way and that way, I know whether they're telling me the truth or not because I am out there with them. I think we need to be out there and be a part of the industry that way. Those are the type of rewards that stand out most for all of us, and those are the ones that are hard to give up. We just don't want to give up that independence.

SW: Now, looking back on your occupation and what you have done doing a lot of commercial

fishing and bay activities, what would you consider yourself a commercial fisherman, a bayman, and why?

LN: Would I consider myself a commercial fisherman or a bayman? First of all, a bayman – to me, a bayman – knowing what a bayman is, a bayman is a bayman. Anyone who works the waters, the local bays and rivers and streams or whatever you want to call it. That can include – whether it is clamming, shellfish, or fish – any type of netting. But most people look at a bayman as a clammer. Most people out there are uneducated about the fishing aspect of the bayman. They see a bayman, and they say, "You're a clammer." When we pull up in a gas station to get fuel for our boats, they say, "Oh, you're going clamming." They have no idea, even though our nets are right there in the boat, what we do. I don't like the term bayman, even though it is correct – a bayman, anyone working in water. I don't like the term bayman because of the connotation that you're just a clammer. People might disagree with me. But the term commercial fisherman includes the fishing. That includes the fishing. A bayman, to me, sometimes just includes the shellfishing aspect of it. But if we are commercial fishing and we are restricted to the bay, then I guess maybe we are a bayman. But commercial fishing also includes the ocean. Where I have spent a good part of my life in the ocean as well as the bay, I would like to classify myself if you are going to have a classification as a commercial fisherman, including the bay and the ocean. And including all types – most of us, even though bait fishing and haul seining has been my primary thing, I have done just about anything that you could think of on any type of method of fishing on the bay at one time or another simply because you have to be diversified. You have to be able to switch from one method to another if one method is poor, or if that type of fish isn't around this year, you have to be able to switch to something else. So, that is why, over the years, you do end up being versatile and doing just about everything. Most baymen that I know have. Very few people have done just one thing their whole life and the one that stands out to me would be the clammer. Some, we have long-time clammers who have just clammed all their life. But if we started getting into the fishing aspect of it, commercial fishing, most fishermen have done just about everything. Whatever's lucrative at the time that way.

SW: Now, what would you like people to know who have no idea of what you do? What would you like them to know about yourself and the people who have worked on the water? What would you tell them?

LN: First of all, before you are so quick to annihilate us, before you're so quick to tell us to get out of where we are and go somewhere else to realize that we were there before you. Most of us that have worked the bay and are my age have been on the water for thirty or forty years or more. We were there first before we had development on the island, before we had all this large group of sport fishing. Yes, we're willing to share it with you. We realize that we don't own it but realize that we were here first. Give us a little bit of respect because we're not looking for sympathy. We chose to do this for an occupation. So, we're not trying to cry on anybody's shoulders that we have to work eighteen hours a day to make a living and work so hard. But understand what we really have to go through to make a living as opposed to someone sitting in an office. I don't begrudge anybody getting an education because I have a college education. Like I said, marine biology. I have a degree in computer programming, so I don't begrudge anybody going out and getting an education and not having to work so hard for their living. That's okay. But understand that we do have to work hard and don't make us look like the bad

guy out there. Like we're out there stealing and raping and taking everything from the water. There is going to be a bad apple in every bunch. There is always going to be a few commercial fishermen or baymen that are going to take things illegally that are going to take more than is allotted. But it's not fair because of what they do to generalize all of us as committing these crimes or all of us as doing these things. Most of us out there are trying to earn a living the honest way and working hard. I would want them to realize that we are just out there making a living. But yet, people are uneducated about what we're doing. The first thing is we're always doing something wrong. Rather than ask in a nice way, "What are you doing," the first thing is, "You're illegal, right? You can't do that." They don't understand the laws. We try to educate them to what the laws are. Most times, they call the authorities on us anyway. Then the authorities, being the DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation], which we have to live under, has to educate them to who we are, what we are, and that we are legal in doing what we're doing. But that doesn't change their attitude about us. They still don't want us around. So, I would just hope to educate people – what they would want to know is we're there, we were there first, we're trying to make a living and leave us alone. Too much of our equipment is vandalized out there. I could give you many, many instances of people's nets being cut up because they don't want them there. All their crab pots being opened up, and all their catches being emptied out and dumped back in the water. There's been a tremendous amount of vandalism. The more people we have on the water, the more vandalism. A fisherman can't get sleep there with his equipment, but this is what it is getting the point to. I've been fortunate enough to – the type of fishing we do, the same fishing – our nets come home with us on the boat every day. But a lot of gear stays out there overnight, and that is prone to vandalism.

SW: Okay.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/28/2024