

## **Interview with Frank Rizzo**

**Narrator:** Frank Rizzo

**Interviewer:** Nancy Solomon

**Date:** January 1, 1987

**Location:** Freeport, NY

**Project Name:** Long Island Traditions

**Project Description:** Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders and other maritime tradition bearers.

**Principal Investigators:** Nancy Solomon

**Transcript Team:** National Capital Contracting

**Abstract:** On January 1, 1987, Nancy Solomon interviewed Frank Rizzo as part of the Long Island Traditions Oral History Collection. Frank is an experienced fisherman and captain who has spent many years navigating the waters off Long Island. Frank discusses various topics, including a memorable encounter with an American submarine and fighter ship, the process of becoming a captain, and the dynamics of the fishing community. He shares his views on the qualities that make a good fisherman, emphasizing the importance of a positive attitude and thoughtful approach to the craft. The interview concludes with Rizzo expressing his concerns about the future of the fishing industry and the environment, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable practices. This interview provides valuable insights into the life and perspectives of a seasoned fisherman, as well as the broader issues facing the fishing industry.

Nancy Solomon: No. No, this is just for the Freeport Arts Council. It's a documentation project to maritime traditions.

Michael Fornari: About what?

NS: It's about the maritime traditions.

MF: Maritime?

NS: Yes. Things about the sea.

MF: All things about the sea. Is that what maritime is?

NS: Yes.

MF: I never knew that.

NS: Yes, marine. It's the same.

MF: Maritime.

NS: Yes. It comes out of the same –

MF: Marine, I knew. But maritime, I didn't know what that meant.

NS: Yeah.

MF: That's nice. Well, you see, you learn something every day.

NS: I am talking with – your name is?

Frank Rizzo: Captain Frank Rizzo.

NS: Frank Rizzo.

FR: Captain Frank Rizzo.

NS: Captain Frank Rizzo of *Jennifer B*?

FR: Right.

NS: What's your name?

MF: Michael Fornari.

NS: Michael Fornar –

MF: Fornari.

NS: Fornari.

MF: It's Italian. Fornari.

NS: So, what do you have to do to take care of that boat, since it's an old wooden boat here?

FR: Well, mechanical maintenance consists of oil changes, which are very crucial to moving machinery within the engines. Periodic changes of the impellers to keep the water flowing through the engines, saltwater cooling system. Daily maintenance checks with reference to leaking hoses, leaking o-rings, or seals.

NS: What are some of the things you have to deal with on a wooden boat rather than a fiberglass boat?

FR: Caulking, packing.

NS: How often do you have to caulk and seal?

FR: Well, not every joint gets done yearly or seasonally. It's the ones that go bad over the course of the year.

NS: Which ones are those usually?

FR: Generally the ones in the stern area.

NS: Because it's always putting the nose in the water?

FR: Well, the stern is the back of the boat. The bow is in the front.

NS: I always get the bow and the stern mixed up.

FR: It's okay. The port side is the left side. The starboard side is on the right side.

NS: Starboard is the right side.

FR: Reason for that is the excessive vibration of your shafts where your propellers are in the back with the struts. Zincs are very common things that have to be changed because the wood bolts have bolts screwed on the screws. There's a tremendous amount of electricity in the water called electrolysis. The electrolysis eats away the screws with the bolts. So, what you have to do is you have to put zincs underneath the boat to more or less deter it from happening to the screws and the bolts. It will eat away at the zinc plates. It'll cut down phenomenally on the amount of electrolysis at the hull of the boat. The ribs of the boat, by way of the bolts, will be exposed, too. In other words, you have the ribs of the boat, then you have all of your planking, and then you have all of your screws and your bolts [molded into planks for the ribs?].

NS: So, the planks are on the inside and the ribs are on the outside?

FR: The ribs are on the inside. The planks are on the outside.

NS: So, planks are the vertical and the ribs are the horizontal?

FR: Correct.

NS: Those are joined together by these rivets and screws?

FR: That's right.

NS: So, you always have to...

FR: No rivets. Bolts and screws. Nuts, bolts, and screws. The biggest thing that a fiberglass boat doesn't have to do, that's sanding, scraping –

NS: How often do you have to sand and scrape the boat?

FR: – wiping, painting. Well, what you do is if you do it really good in the beginning of the season, mid-season, you can go around and touch up.

NS: So, that would be March?

FR: Right.

NS: That would be March, you would be doing all of your woodwork.

FR: March 1st, we sail. So, you would actually be doing the work, December through February. The boat gets covered up in canvas or plastic tarps with furring strips framed out around it. You would have electric kerosene heaters on the inside keeping everything at about 65, 70 degrees so that you're able to do this work. Because most paints and thinners won't cure on 60 degrees, you have to do this maintenance in warm weather. You can't do it now because the people...

NS: Because they got to be out.

FR: – want to go fishing and sailing. Right.

NS: So, how long does it take? I mean, it must take at least a month to do all of that.

FR: It takes a good six weeks.

NS: So, when would you typically start?

FR: December and you finish up the end of February.

NS: You be doing this while it was in storage or...?

FR: While at the dock.

NS: You would take it out of the water, right?

FR: You take it out of the water to do the bottom and check the bottom out. That's a two-day or one-day deal.

NS: Yes, right there.

FR: Right. Well, with the wood boat, it has a problem with swelling when it goes in the water. Drying out when it's out of the water, you don't want to walk the boards or twist them too much. You don't want to leave it out too warm.

NS: How did you learn how long it could be out of water? Did somebody tell you, "Well, wooden boats can only be out of water for a few days?"

FR: Yes.

NS: Was that somebody who had worked with wooden boats?

FR: Al, the carpenter.

NS: Al Grover?

FR: No.

NS: Who is Al, the carpenter?

FR: Obie's Marine.

NS: Obie's Marine?

FR: Obie's Marine. His name is Al.

NS: And he's always worked with wooden boats? He's the person who knows about wooden boats?

FR: I think he's the best in the business next to Vidas Marina. Vidas is superior in custom woodworking. They have a tremendous shop.

MF: Tell us about the fish.

FR: Tell us about the fish? I will get to that next. [laughter] Vidas is a tremendous shop and employs a lot of people. Al works by himself and with those custom carpentry.

NS: So, was he more helpful? Is that what he has been?

NS: Like Willie, the netter?

FR: Yes, right. You know Willie?

NS: I don't know him. I've heard about him.

FR: Willie does my nets.

NS: Yeah?

FR: Yes. Willie does [Richard Kissinger?] on a [inaudible] nets. Willie has been around a long time.

NS: Yeah, I want to talk with him a little bit. So, basically, you have to sand and varnish.

FR: Sand, Bondo, sand, varnish, sand, Bondo, sand...

NS: What is Bondo?

FR: Bondo is a fiberglass two-part epoxy that you fill in the bad woodwork with.

NS: Does that work well?

FR: Very good. Excellent.

NS: What did they use before that stuff came out? Do you know?

FR: Yeah, they used to change the planks, used to change the planks.

NS: Every year?

FR: Well, just the bad ones. If you have a little hole, they cut the piece out and put a new piece in.

NS: How big are the planks?

FR: My boat's constructed of two-inch planks, two-inch thick.

NS: So, they are about six feet long?

FR: My planks are anywhere from eight to twelve feet long. The timbers in the boat, which run the length of the boat, we call timbers because they're eight inches by eight inches.

NS: Whoa. So, they really are?

FR: Yes.

NS: Those are the ribs?

FR: Those are the chines.

NS: The trines?

FR: The chines.

NS: Chines.

FR: C-H-I-N-E-S, chines.

NS: What are chines?

FR: Chines are the main structure of the bottom of the boat where the side of the boat and the bottom of the boat meet.

NS: Meet. How would they join those two? Again, nuts and bolts or would they not...

FR: Bolts, mostly bolts. It's notched and bolted throughout.

NS: Are there particular kinds of notches that they use?

FR: Several kinds, and that you'll have to get it from Al, the carpenter, or George Schmidt.

NS: I study houses, so I am used to the different kinds of notches that you use in houses.

FR: That's very good.

NS: But I did not know that they notched the boats.

FR: George Schmidt can tell you a lot about it. George is very knowledgeable.

NS: I was talking with George this morning and...

FR: Very well respected in the industry on my behalf as well as many of the old-timers. Al is another authority on the wood. Tape's running. [laughter]

NS: I got five more in the car.

FR: Okay. [laughter]

NS: About how long would it take you to sand and caulk one section?

FR: One section?

NS: Yes. Or would you do one side and then the stern and then the other side?

FR: No, typically, I would sand the whole boat down. Then you go around with the Bondo. It fixed the bad spots. If there was any woodwork that needed replacement, we would replace the wood.

NS: I know what I wanted to ask. What kind of wood? Would they use the same kind of wood throughout the whole boat?

FR: My boat's solid mahogany.

NS: Is that typical of the old wooden boats?

FR: Yeah, well, either mahogany or oak. But my boat's all mahogany. You couldn't duplicate that boat today for less than three quarters of a million dollars because you pay the amount of wood that's in the boat. It's sixty-five feet by twenty feet wide. The eight by eight, six by four, four by four construction of the boat. Two-inch thick planks, six high, twelve feet, eighty-eight feet long. The labor of the carpentry today included...

NS: Is outrageous.

FR: Yeah, included –

NS: So, how much with the materials cost, like, \$20,000?

FR: More.

NS: More?

FR: I don't think you could touch the materials for less than \$100,000.

NS: Wow, that is a lot.

FR: Phenomenal amount of mahogany.

NS: Does anybody ever asked you to build them a wooden boat?

FR: Build a boat with them?

NS: Build a wooden boat?

FR: No.

NS: I have to ask Al, I guess.

FR: Al, the carpenter?

NS: Yeah.



FR: There's no new boats being produced on the market that are wood. Today's a fiberglass world or an aluminum world. It's aluminum, steel, fiberglass. That's the mid to late 70s til 1987.

NS: How do you think that boat will last?

FR: That boat's got another thirty, maybe thirty-five years left on it if it's maintained properly. No injustice to the prior owners of this boat but there were things that could have been taken care of much better than they are. I met the best in the business. I've only been doing this for ten years. But you learn fast. When you're spending a lot of money fixing things, you know that there was either a tremendous amount of neglect or things weren't being done properly.

NS: I guess it takes somebody who really cares about boats and who really needs it for their livelihood with that kind of...

FR: Well, yeah, a lot of people just keep draining the well dry and then they get rid of the boat. They just get out of it what they can get out of it and leave their headache to somebody else.

NS: So, you are the fourth owner of this boat now?

FR: The fourth owner but the boat was only sailed on two previous owners.

NS: One of them just let it sit?

FR: Well, the boat was being constructed out of the water. It was put into the water to be finished off. I believe that the person that was building the boat had passed away. There were two partners building the boat. The other partner sold it, I believe, to George Schmidt and his son. So, George and Paul Schmidt were the first business owners for this boat.

NS: Do you know when it was built?

FR: 1972

NS: So, it is a new boat. I wonder why they made it a wooden boat considering at that time...

FR: Well, like I said, the trend had changed mid to late 70s. That's when they started having fiberglass.

NS: I thought it was a lot earlier than that that wooden boats.

FR: Well, yes, wood boats are from the beginning of time. Fiberglass just started in the 70s.

NS: I thought it was earlier.

FR: As far as our knowledge to that. Al Grover may be able to give you a little more insight on that. Al Grover is a world renowned boatbuilder. Has his own boat.

NS: I have been talking with him quite a bit.

FR: [His?] Grover built boats that are produced singularly, not mass produced.

NS: Custom built.

FR: Custom, hand laid boats.

NS: Have you ever thought about becoming a boat builder?

FR: No. I have no patience for that.

NS: Got to have patience to go fishing though?

FR: My nature is a bit on the – how would you say it?

NS: I am not going to put words in your mouth. [laughter]

FR: I don't want to say on the rough side but more of the...

NS: Impatient?

FR: No, I mean my character itself. I'm not a gentle person. I'm gentle hearted. But I'm a little hard, you know what I mean?

NS: Yes.

FR: I'm a little hard. Besides the patience, I just don't have that light touch, you know what I mean? Mechanical, I like mechanical. Lift that engine up, lift the heads off, take the wrench, take the bolts off, real hard to do, that's more my thing.

NS: What's your favorite part of this business?

FR: Watching the people catch the fish.

NS: How come?

FR: Because their attitude is phenomenally perfect when they're catching fish. Their attitude when they're not catching fish is very poor. People come out. They want to catch fish. The best thing that the Environmental Conservation Department ever did was come back with an eight-inch...

NS: Is [inaudible].

FR: No, an eight-inch fish on the flounders. Flounder must be eight inches or more to keep. Fluke fourteen inches or more to keep. The best thing they could have ever done was to allow one striped bass to be taken per fishermen.

NS: How come?

FR: They would...

NS: Captain Frank Rizzo of the *Jennifer B*. We were talking about D-E-R, not D-E-R-A that we stated earlier.

FR: Depletion of the population of the fish. People don't realize, they want to catch fish, that's great. But there's got to be a size limit. There's got to be a restriction somewhere, somehow that says either you can't take more than or you can't take anything smaller than.

NS: Do you find that the good fishermen catch fish and the inexperienced ones...?

FR: Absolutely, absolutely. But I think the major part of that question is secondary to the fact that people were depleting the population of the fish. We had our sister countries coming here, coming inside their limits, taking our fish. Years ago, the fishing was poor, terrible. They had to move the limitations further off the shore so that these fish could rejuvenate. Blowfish was one of the best-eating fish in the world. People thought they were poisonous. People threw them back. There's a lot in Milwaukee. One of the best-eating fish in the world. They're call it the "Chicken of the Sea." It's the blowfish. Just recently in the last three years, people started to catch blowfish. It is a fantastic-eating fish.

NS: Is that something that the locals would know better than these people who just go out on their boats?

FR: Yes. Well, it's not the locals. It's the fishermen. Now, that secondary question. Yes, it's easier for a seasoned fishermen to catch fish than it is for the beginner.

NS: How come?

FR: There's different techniques in fishing. A flounder is not an easy fish to catch, especially in the springtime because they have to be coaxed up. The success of the catch relies a lot on the captain and the crew, the instructions that the beginners are being given, how the fish are [hitting?], what to do to catch the fish or coax the fish, also chumming. Chumming is a way to coax the fish to bring the fish closer to the boat.

NS: Well, how would you do that, say, versus somebody who didn't know what they were doing?

FR: Well, the person that doesn't know what they're doing would go out and take a fishing rod and anchor the boat somewhere and fish. Then there's certain bottom types to fish, mud, sand, mud and sand combinations, rock bottom. Then there's wrecks for wreck fishing. Then there's an application of bait for each species of fish. Flounder could be mussels, sandworms, bloodworms, clams, certain times a year it can strictly be clam, clam worm combinations.

NS: Somebody who didn't know what they were doing, what would they put for bait?

FR: Well, they would ask their local bait store. They would tell them, "Your best bait is to use worms." Worms is an expensive yield today. A dozen worms is \$3.50, half a dozen is \$2. Worms are very expensive to buy today. Years ago, worms used to be 50 cents a dozen. I remember my mother used to scream at me, "What do you mean you need two dozen worms?" That was a dollar when I was a kid, the two dozen worms. Today, they're paying \$2 half a dozen, \$3.50 for a dozen.

NS: Are there particular kinds of worms that you got to use?

FR: Yes, sandworms or bloodworms. Some of the real sharp anglers used tapeworms, which they dig themselves on the North Shore. They also dig the sandworms up there.

NS: Where would they get the bloodworms from?

FR: The bloodworms are either bred or they're picked off the beaches.

NS: So, that is what they would have used before you could bring things in?

FR: What do you mean? Prehistoric man?

NS: No. No, before there were trucks to ship the different kinds of worms to the area.

FR: No, there was always clam here. I guess the primary bait used to be clams and mussels. Over the years, worms became a more frequent bait.

NS: Do you know why?

FR: I'm sure there's worms in the water. I'm sure there was worms in the water then.

NS: Now, you get washed up on shore and people will go down.

FR: Well, the fish themselves would feed on the worm. When you filet ate the fish, you would see what was in the belly and they would see worms. So, somebody got the idea, worms for bait. I guess that's how it all started. Even the cartoons from the 40s, when TV first came out, you saw a bobby pin with a worm on it.

NS: That is right.

FR: Right?

NS: Now, they make those plastic worms.

FR: Yes, but you never saw...

NS: Are those any good?

FR: You never saw in a cartoon a clam on a hook. That may be a little contradictory to what I'm telling you, but it's true.

NS: No. No, I am sure. I mean, a lot of other people have said they used clams.

FR: Clams, mussels.

NS: There are different kinds of clams you would use like the steamers and the skimmers?

FR: No, just skimmers.

NS: Just skimmers?

FR: Skimmers, yes. It's called a skimmer or a chowder clam. Actually, there's a difference between the two of them. One is much larger than the other one. So, you would basically use the chowder clam. It is a much bigger clam.

NS: How much would those cost compared to worms?

FR: Well, I'm not going to quote commercial rates.

NS: What you would pay for it?

FR: A bushel of clam for the average fisherman to go out and buy would probably cost them \$12 to \$14 a bushel. Shucked, it would probably be somewhere around sixteen to \$17.

NS: But most of them shucked their own clams?

FR: Yes.

NS: So, that was a whole time consuming...

FR: Well, the shell itself plays a major role in catching fish, the clam shell...

NS: How would you use that?

FR: And the mussel shell.

NS: How would you use the shell?

FR: Well, you would take a bat or you would take a pipe approximately 18 to 20 inches long. You would put the pipe on one hand.

NS: Smash them up?

FR: The clams or the mussels in the other and...

NS: Smash it.

FR: Smash it. The crystal will attract the flounder as it was falling because the flounders see upward.

NS: I'm absolutely confused. Would this be out on the boat, you would do that?

FR: Yes.

NS: You would just drop them in the water?

FR: Yes.

NS: Then you'd put your rod right near there?

FR: Well, this is done as the rods are in the water with bait on hooks. So, if you're using clams for bait, take the clam shell and break it all down, and the little crystal attracts fish. As it's falling, they see...

NS: And so, the clam meat should be on the hook? The clam meat?

FR: Yes, the clam meat or the mussel meat or you could be using worm and still chum that way – or mussel – still chum that way and still catch fish and have that way of chumming be very successful [for your?] catch.

NS: Would people shuck and smash the shell before they would go out or would they always do that on the boat?

FR: The shell was smashed on the boat. As far as shucking the clam, shucking a day ahead of time is fine, a day and a half ahead of time is fine. A lot us salt the bait, that will help preserve it for maybe a two days span. Most of the anglers like fresh mussel, which I can't blame them. Fresh mussel over a three-day old mussel is better.

NS: So, there would be a whole preparation time, I guess, before they would actually get out fishing.

FR: Well, that's why I always have fresh bait on the boat. I always have extra nets on the boat to shuck fresh stuff. The leftover stuff from the day before that's still in the container intact will be used the next day first.

NS: Would you put them in salt water if nobody used it or freshwater?

FR: No, only the juice that comes and then some Kosher salt.

NS: How come Kosher salt?

FR: It's the heaviest salt.

NS: I didn't know if there is a difference in salt.

FR: There is.

NS: We learn something new every day.

FR: Kosher salt is the heaviest salt. Ask George.

NS: I believe you.

FR: Ask George. He'll tell you.

NS: I'm Jewish, I should know these things.

FR: He salts fish. He's got some upstairs, plus he smokes them.

NS: Well, he's smoking. I was looking at that.

FR: Did you ever see a guy take a fish and roll it in a piece of paper and smoke it? No, I'm teasing. [laughter]

NS: I've seen people do it with corn.

FR: You'd have to have some big lips to smoke the fish.

NS: Oh, that kind of smoking. Are you kidding? [laughter] No, I thought maybe you meant rolling the paper then putting it on the fire.

FR: No, I'm teasing you.

NS: I've seen some people do that.

FR: No, I'm teasing you. Yeah, sure, you put in aluminum foil and put it on the grills. It's excellent. Oh, very good, barbecue sauce. I love eating fresh [too?].

MF: We made duck last night.

FR: Duck?

MF: Quack, quack? Yeah.

FR: Good?

MF: Yeah, succulent, man.

FR: I like duck and rabbits.

MF: You don't like duck?

FR: I love duck, pheasant, rabbit, duck, goose.

NS: You ever go duck hunting?

FR: No.

NS: You know anybody who does?

FR: Yes.

NS: Who?

FR: Quite a few of the old-timers here. As a matter of fact, when you come on the boat...

MF: Where the hell did you get a green apple?

NS: The grocery store. It's a granny apple.

MF: It's a what?

NS: A Granny Smith apple. They're naturally in this color. You want to try a little bit?

MF: Yeah.

NS: There's not much left, so finish it.

MF: Holy shit.

NS: You do not like it, do you?

MF: It's too sour.

NS: Yeah, it is tart.

MF: Yeah.

NS: But they're always crisp and juicy, that's why I like them. I hate mushy apples. It's called a Granny Smith apple.

MF: A what?

NS: A Granny Smith.

MF: Granny Smith.

NS: Smith. Spelled just the way it sounds. They raise –

MF: Do you want to taste this, [Frank?]? Want this? [I don't want it?].



NS: [laughter] They grow them in New Zealand, South Africa, some in Florida these days, California. Let's talk about fishing instead. [laughter]

FR: When you meet Spencer on the boat, his name is [(Spencer Thomas?)]. He's an old-timer fisherman from Freeport, he does duck hunting. He could tell you the difference from 150 yards away, which ones are the males and which ones are the females.

NS: What kinds of ducks are around here? Do you know?

FR: I'm not a hunter. I'm a fisherman.

NS: Okay, I'll ask Spencer.

FR: Ask George. He's a hunter.

NS: I'll have to ask him. There're a lot of things I don't know about.

FR: George is a nature man. Fishing, hunting. I've only had the pleasure of knowing George for the last six months, but...

NS: You've lived around here all these years?

FR: Yes.

NS: How come you only knew him last year?

FR: I knew his son for the last six years. But the father, I recently had the pleasure of meeting.

NS: You didn't know he was the owner of your boat?

FR: I knew when I was getting ready to buy it that he had owned the boat at one time. I thought the son had owned it himself. But live and learn...

NS: Well, when he owned it, it was called [inaudible]. Do you know anything about why it was called [inaudible]

FR: No, I don't.

NS: Why'd you call it the *Jennifer B*?

FR: It's after my daughter. My daughter's name is *Jennifer B*.

NS: Do a lot of people name their boats after their kids?

FR: I don't think Captain [Luke?] did. [laughter]

NS: I hope not. For a kid, [she shouldn't be born a captain?]

FR: Well, there's the *Lady J* and there's...

NS: So, named it after women sometimes?

FR: There's the *Lady J*, there's [*Lady 80?*], which is a boat and a bar/restaurant. I guess, historic names, Greek names, the Apus. I don't even know what that means but it means something. Apus, A-P- U-S, could be something you want to research. That's Mike Miller's boats, Mike Miller and Joel Ackerman. Mike is a freight [inaudible] Freeport, shark, tuna, mostly big game.

NS: What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you when you were out on the water?

FR: Scariest thing that ever happened to me when I was out on the water?

NS: Yes. Think about this for a while. Something that you think you've lived through.

FR: There are far and few between, so it's right off the top of my head. I was out one day with a friend of mine. We were about twenty-five miles offshore.

NS: In the ocean?

FR: In The ocean.

NS: Twenty-five miles, that is really far, isn't it?

FR: No, typically, in the [fall?], we go 100, 110 miles offshore.

NS: Ever see any Russian tankers out there?

FR: Well, that's what I was going to tell you.

NS: Oh, really? [laughter]

FR: We heard – The fog was tremendous. We couldn't see any more than 150 feet in front of us.

NS: What time of the year was this?

FR: This was in the latter part of the summer, September maybe.

NS: About a year ago?

FR: Late August about three years ago. We were blue fish trawling. We heard this tremendous rumble. It was cloudy, rainy, and foggy. This rumble sounded like a Concorde but close. Then it got closer and closer, closer. All of a sudden, the water started to ripple for about 75 feet long. All of a sudden, this submarine appeared right out of nowhere. Within three minutes, that submarine was up. There was an American fighter ship and the submarine together within three minutes. As one came up, the other one zeroed in right on it, twenty-five miles off the beach.

NS: Oh, God.

FR: We said, "Let's get out of here." [laughter] We [knew?] no part or whatever was going on, we just wanted out. We didn't know what was happening. An earthquake? The rumble was so tremendous. The disturbance of the water was so phenomenal. I didn't know what was going on. But sure as hell, it was a submarine and a fighter ship. That was incredible. I guess that was the scariest thing.

NS: Do you know if it was Russian or not? [laughter]

FR: No, it was American.

NS: The submarine was American?

FR: American, yes. Both of them were American.

NS: So, they were both American. At least you didn't have to worry about dying in a nuclear accident. [laughter]

FR: Captain [Al Lim?] from off of Point Lookout has got to be – well, he's one of the old-timers that have been around. One of the better old-timers that have been around as far as fishing goes. Very, very good at fishing. He's just excellent in every aspect of the word fishing, navigating, he's very good. That's where I have some of my experience from. A captain that just passed away that worked for Al for many, many, many years and Al's son, Billy [Lim-Dorf?]. Phenomenal family with respect to fishing.

NS: How do you get to be a captain? Just got to own your own boat?

FR: No, you have to put in many hours of sea time, accrue your time, prove your time out to the coast guard. Take a written examination.

NS: So, it's a whole formal process?

FR: Oh, yes. It's very involved. Many years of experience to even qualify to go for a captain's license.

NS: About how long would it take somebody?

FR: Three years full-time. Three years full-time.

NS: How long did it take you?

FR: Seven years, eight years part-time. I passed the test the first shot.

NS: Is it a written test?

FR: Yes.

NS: What kinds of things do they ask?

FR: Rules of the road, inland rules of the road. COLREGS rules of the road, which is the borderline between inland and offshore, first aid, plotting your courses.

NS: Is this the kind of stuff that you would learn more through experience or did you study a book?

FR: Both.

NS: What about some of these old guys? Did they ever go [through that?]?

FR: Working on the boat?

NS: Yeah, so you could do it through experience.

FR: The best experience is experience.

NS: Yes.

FR: What you read in the book and what you do in reality on the water is two different things. Everybody should have experience at it before they do it. Same thing with a car. You take driver's education then you get your license. It should be the same way for a boat. Boat education and then a boat license.

NS: Do you think the best fishermen are the ones who learn through experience?

FR: Yes, yes, I do.

NS: How come?

FR: Well, it's the way that you present the bait to the fish. It's the way that you coax the fish. It's the methods of chumming that you use. It's the area or the bottom that you're choosing to fish. It's the water temperature. It's the barometric changes in the air. It's the wind and the tidal conditions. The bait that comes off a particular type of land or the bait that's in a particular area of the ocean, why it's there? It's a phenomenally involved thing that – contours to the bottom, type of bottom, growth on the bottom. There's some wrecks on the bottom of the ocean that hold fish. There's others that hold nothing. Why?

NS: What kind of wrecks would hold fish? Would they have broader bottoms? Would they always be wood?

FR: No, I just think it's where it goes down. What kind of growth comes on that particular vessel? What kind of bait fish feeds off that growth? What kind of fish eats the fish that's eating the

growth? Like crabs eat the growth. Small baitfish eat the growth. Then the big fish comes in and eats the crabs and eats the bait. You see?

NS: So, you have know, kind of, the territory on the ocean.

FR: Exactly.

NS: What grows where.

FR: Depth of water is important. Ocean water temperature is important. Ocean bottom is important, the quality of the bottom. What kind of bottom it is. Rock and sand, shell and mud. You could look at any chart and you could see what types of bottoms there are: shell, mud, sand, shell and mud, rock and mud, rock and sand. So, it's a chess game.

NS: Well, at the library, I saw these maps, which said what kinds of fish you would find in a certain places. Do you think those maps are any good?

FR: Maps on where to catch the fish?

NS: Yeah.

FR: I 'd have to see it to let you know. I'd have to see it.

NS: Yeah, I don't have it with me.

FR: There's books that are printed...

NS: You've never used those ever?

FR: No.

NS: Most fishermen don't, do they? [laughter]

FR: You learn from the old-timers, like I said. If you're going to try something new, you'd like to buy a boat, let's say you got a lot of money and you decide, "Hey, my wife and I want to have a boat because we like sunrises and sunsets or we just like cruising in a boat." Then all of a sudden, they see all of these giant fish on a dock that these guys are bringing in. Some guys say, "Hey, if they can do it, I can do it."

NS: They can't.

FR: There's a wide gap between I can do it and I can't do it. So, you get a brazen guy with a lot of nerve and says, "I can do that." So, he goes out, and he's got a lot of money. He buys \$3,000 worth of fishing tackle. He buys some bait. He goes out. He catches a tremendous fish. He asked somebody, "Where should I go?" He buys a book. The book tells him this type of bottom, this depth of water, this time of the year, right? Some books even give you latitude and longitude numbers or TDs, which is coordinates to travel by. So, the guy goes out there and he winds up

catching a big fish. Now, we have a saying for the beginners, which is a joke, "The dumber the farmer the bigger the potatoes." [laughter] That's what we refer to as beginners that catch big fish. [laughter] Because the professional angler is there beating his head against the wall, flicking his bait, bouncing his sinker, slowly bouncing the sinker, repetitiously bouncing the sinker, letting it sit, bouncing it twice, raising it, holding it. Where you get the angler [that?] doesn't know any better, that comes, drops it down on the bottom, and five minutes later, he's got the [pool?] fish for the day. [laughter] Very common. Very, very common. They won't catch anything else but that big fish for the day. Now, I don't know if that's fate or if that's just luck. But I think you got to be lucky to begin with to catch fish. You got to have luck.

NS: I mean, that's the way I would think. You got to know and you got to have that sixth sense –

NS: What's the funniest fish story you ever heard? [laughter]

FR: The funniest fish story that I've ever heard, and I was there to witness it, was my cousin and I one late September night fishing off [Ronnie Baverstock?] Hudson Point Marina, who's another superior fishermen, who was just recently written up in The Long Island Fishermen, who [inaudible] Hudson anglers. [Ronnie?] let's my cousin and I fish there at night in September for the snappers. We go for snapper fish and some baby blowfish. Well, my cousin and I are fishermen. We're catching nice-sized snappers. Snappers have little teeth on them but they're like razor blades.

Once they clamp on, they don't let go, the snappers. Same thing like a big blue fish, right?

NS: If it doesn't break their eye.

FR: Well, we used very light tackles for these. They're about eight, ten inches long. Some of them get up to about twelve inches long, nice-sized snappers. My cousin and I are there fishing. [Ronnie?] left the lights on for us. There's killeys there. We used killeys – we used live bait to catch fish.

NS: Is that what killeys are, live bait?

FR: Live bait, little fish. We use the little fish to catch the big fish. Just like Abbott and Costello, they used an apple. They put it on a hook on the bamboo pole. They put it in the water. They caught a fish, but it was a small fish. So, Costello hooks the fish back on his hook. He drops it back down and catches a bigger fish until he got one so big that it pulled him in the water.

NS: Getting back to you and your cousin.

FR: So, you use the little bait fish to catch the bigger fish. So, my cousin picks this big snapper off, about twelve inches long. He says, "Frank, look at this beauty I got." As he was holding it up to show it to me, it actually pushed itself out of his right hand and grabbed him between his thumb and his forefinger.

NS: Ow.

FR: The very soft meat there, and it wouldn't let go. [laughter] He's standing there with this thing hanging off his hand, going, "Get it off, get it off. It's got me. It's got me." So, I come running over. I'm just hysterical. I'm crying. He's screaming at me, "Get it off, get it off." So, I was crying. My stomach hurt. It was hysterical.

NS: Did you finally get it off?

FR: Yeah, a couple of puncture holes, that's all. But that was the funniest story. That was the funniest story.

NS: What's the scariest story you've ever heard?

FR: The scariest story?

NS: Yeah.

FR: I don't think we want to get into those.

NS: Why not?

FR: No.

NS: I don't get scared. We're here on dry land. I mean, what's going to happen? [laughter]

FR: The scariest fish story?

NS: Yes.

FR: Alright. The scariest fish story of my own experience or one that I've heard?

NS: It doesn't matter.

FR: Eight-to-ten-foot seas, approximately fifty miles offshore.

NS: What time of year?

FR: August.

NS: Was this is recently?

FR: Three years ago. A tremendous mako shark on the rod and reel. The captain comes down to the deck. The boat gets rolled sideways. As the boat gets rolled sideways, the wave comes onto the boat. Along with the wave coming into the boat...

NS: It was a shark.

FR: — comes this 400-plus pounds shark.

NS: Oh, Jesus.

FR: – chopping away. Grabs the arm of the fighting chair on the one side. The captain of the boat, who came down on the deck, has the arm of the chair on the other side. The shark in one motion grabs the arm from the chair and whips it right off the chair.

NS: Oh, my God.

FR: That's the scariest story I've ever heard of.

NS: Did the shark leave?

FR: No, they finally landed the shark.

NS: They harpooned it?

FR: No, they gaffed it with a flying gaff. This person happens to be extremely experienced that – [audio cuts]

FR: Somebody did.

NS: What's the scariest thing that ever happened to you?

FR: Scariest thing that ever happened to me. Scariest thing that ever happened to me.

NS: Ever seen any ghost out there?

FR: No.

NS: Ever had a whale come visit you? [laughter]

FR: Many whales. That doesn't scare me though. It's a thing of beauty. Typically, in the wintertime, December, January, you get black whales, porpoises in the fall.

NS: Dolphins?

FR: Dolphins, absolutely, offshore anywhere from 20 miles offshore to 110 miles offshore. That's as far as I've been. It's 110 miles. Beautiful whales in the wintertime. It's a phenomenal sight.

NS: What would happen when a whale would come near the boat?

FR: They just come around lazily and blow, “Pshhhhh.” They just cruise around the boat and leave. Sometimes they come, they rub their back up against the bottom of the boat. [laughter] It does. It's true.

NS: What would happen? Would the boat rock or...?



FR: I've never been on a boat where the whale has moved the boat. They're pretty docile animals or mammals actually.

NS: They are like dolphins. They're just curious.

FR: The dolphins like to play in the wave of the boat. As you're going out to sea or coming in from sea, they like to jump in the waves. [laughter] It's a pretty wild scene. I guess the scariest thing that ever happened to me was we were out cod fishing this past winter in February and...

NS: This is in the ocean?

FR: This is in the ocean. About 22 miles offshore. This plane, out of nowhere, circles a boat, comes over and circles our boat. Then –

NS: Was it a big airplane or a helicopter?

FR: Not big.

NS: Like a 747?

FR: Not a 747. A private plane.

NS: Like a D, C, one of those.

FR: One of those...

NS: C planes or...?

FR: Messerschmitt or something like that.

NS: Twin engine types?

FR: Yes, private plane. After circling the boat, it comes right at the boat like it's going to crash into the boat. [laughter] So, everybody looks and ducks. We think it was a boat looking to make some kind of drop off or pickup of some sort.

NS: A drug boat?

FR: Yes, possibly. But I guess that was the scariest thing. But it's more a question of what is this idiot doing as opposed to being scared. Because you duck and you say, "What's this ass doing?"

NS: There's a lot of people that said that a lot of the fishermen a long time ago used to work for the rum runners. Do you ever meet any fishermen you know who are running drugs in place?

FR: No, I don't. If I do, it goes in one ear and out the other because there's nothing you can do to stop it. That's why we pay taxes. We pay taxes for the coast guard, the police. I mean, it's just like anything else on land or on sea.

NS: Is there much drinking that goes on out on these fishing boats?

FR: Yeah, there is. But the captains and the mates try to control it.

NS: The serious fishermen, do they drink much or...

FR: No, no.

NS: Is it mostly like the weekenders?

FR: Yes. There're signs posted that excessive alcohol will not be tolerated. I'll turn the boat around if I get a bunch of clowns. I'll keep their money and let them get off at the dock. If they're more trouble, I'll call the coast guard or the police department.

NS: Most of the other captains do what you do?

FR: Yes, absolutely. It's advantageous for us to do it because you get so many that decides to jump in the water, which happened to one of our captains last year. Some idiot jumped in the water. It took them fifteen, twenty minutes to find the guy. Then the guy made a joke out of it and jumped off the life ring.

NS: Oh, my God.

FR: Now, if you don't find this guy, he could die of hypothermia, he could drown, he could get washed up on the beach. If the guy lives after he gets washed up on the beach, then the guy is going to sue you because you left them in the water. Meanwhile, you couldn't find him. So, yes, there's a lot of stupidity that goes on with alcohol.

NS: I'm just trying to think [inaudible] in one ear and out the other right now.

FR: I think the greatest thing in fishing is to see the people catch the fish. The reaction to catching a fish. Not the old-timers, the beginners. The old-timers got it all down pat. [laughter]

NS: Not as exciting to watch?

FR: They're after one thing; they're after the meat. The beginner is after the excitement, the thrill of catching the fish. I think a good captain has to remember to differentiate the two. One has to be treated with kid gloves and the other one has to be treated with the old fisherman's –

NS: Leave him alone.

FR: Hardcore attitude.

NS: What's that?

FR: It's just a different world. You have to see it on the boat. I try to keep as consistent as possible with myself and my customers. But there's still the old-timers that get on the boat that are hardcore meat pickers. They want to catch a lot of flounders. They get crabby and cranky when

they don't. Where a beginner will say, "Welp, I'll try again next time." Some of the old-timers will hold it against you, go on another boat for two or three weeks. Then when it goes sour over there, come back to your boat when they hear that you're catching fish. So, this is a reality.

NS: How many active captains are there on Long Island?

FR: Active captains?

NS: Yeah.

FR: How many active captains?

NS: Yeah.

MF: Active?

FR: Active?

NS: Yeah.

FR: 200-plus.

NS: Whoa. It's coming back in style these days.

FR: I don't think it ever left.

NS: In the 40s and 50s, I heard it was kind of rough.

FR: Money was a problem. Boats were a problem.

NS: Nobody was into water back then.

FR: Your best catches were forty years ago, thirty years ago.

NS: Well, there are a lot more fish.

FR: Twenty years ago. Right.

NS: No pollution.

FR: That makes my first statement true about depleting the population of the fish.

NS: Oh, I know that.

FR: People polluting the water. Every day, people pollute the water, and it's killing the fish. So, today, you got beef and you have no fish tomorrow. Well, tomorrow you have no beef and you have no fish, so what do you eat? What do you eat? Nothing, you starve to death.

NS: Become a vegetarian?

FR: Yes. [laughter] What're you going to do with nuclear waste?

NS: Except all the farmers in the Midwest are going bankrupt.

FR: What are you going to do with nuclear waste? They're burying it in the deserts. Nuclear waste has got to travel with water tables. So, before you know it, your soil is going to be bad.

NS: What kinds of personal qualities make a good fisherman?

FR: Personal qualities make a good fisherman? Attitude.

NS: What's a good attitude?

FR: A good attitude is a happy face, a kind word, and a person that studies and contemplates what he's doing or what he's about to do with fishing.

NS: Is thoughtful?

FR: Yes. I think if you have a positive attitude about what you're about to do, you're going to catch fish. I think that's why most beginners catch fish. Because they're excited, there's a lot of electric, a lot of vibration in the air that you feel. Who knows, maybe the fish feel it too?

NS: I can go now. What do you think? What else [did you?] do? Any burning thoughts you want to tell me?

FR: Yes.

NS: What?

FR: Fish on the *Jennifer B* and have a nice time and catch fish. [laughter]

NS: Well, I will.

FR: Monday through Sunday...

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

Reviewed by Nicole Zador on 7/3/2024