Interview with Jim Rose

Narrator: Jim Rose
Interviewer: Steve Warrick
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Project Description: Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders and other maritime tradition bearers.
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Abstract: On July 15, 2000, Steve Warrick interviewed James Malan "Jim" Rose as part of the Long Island Traditions oral history collection. Rose is a seasoned clammer and gillnetter from Long Island, New York. He was born in Southampton in 1954 and grew up in Blue Point until moving to the East Patchogue area in the 1980s. Rose began his career in clamming at the age of twelve, working part time after school and over the summers. He started out on an old boat that he fixed up himself and learned the art of digging for clams from an experienced friend. Rose practiced long handle raking, and he explains the science of making precise adjustments in the water and finding the best location for digging at a particular time of year. When clamming slowed down in the '80s, Rose worked in construction until shifting to gillnet fishing in the 1990s. He provides an in depth discussion of net making and the process of spacing the webbing for different sizes of fish. Over the years, Rose also became skilled in carpentry, which he has put to use building various types of boats. The interview concludes with Rose's reflections on negotiating fishing territory in the bays and the enjoyment of having a career out on the water.

Steve Warrick: This is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. Today's date is July 15th, 2000. This is tape 009, side A. I'll be speaking with Jim Rose about gillnetting in the Great South Bay. We'll be at Jim's home in East Patchogue. [RECORDING PAUSED] Could you tell me your full name?

Jim Rose: James Malan Rose.

SW: When and where were you born?

JR: I was born in Southampton on March 17th, 1954.

SW: When did you move to the Patchogue area of Long Island?

JR: We moved to Blue Point. That's where my parents moved to in about 1960. That's where I lived most of my life until 1982 when I moved out in East Patchogue.

SW: What type of work were you doing?

JR: At what time? Somebody's got to answer that phone, sorry. [RECORDING PAUSED]

SW: Specifically, what type of work were you doing—your first work in the bay?

JR: I guess, when I was around twelve years old, my older brother—he's about three years older than me. He was clamming part time after school, which a lot of kids did back then in high school. I started clamming and there was an old boat in my backyard, and I fixed it up and my father got me an engine. I went out and I clammed. And I clammed through junior high and high school after school and summers, but never really thinking I was going to get into it. We weren't really a bay family. I just did it, made a couple of dollars and learned how to clam a little bit.

SW: What type of cleaning were you doing? Were you doing raking or [inaudible]?

JR: Yes, it was long handle raking.

SW: What type of procedure do you need to do the raking? How would you go about doing it?

JR: Well, first, you need a license from the town, in the Brookhaven town and the New York State. Then what you need is—well, you can use a boat or you can work in the water. What commercial guys usually do is they use a—they call it a jerk rake or John German rake, the guy that invented this certain style rake. It has a basket and teeth on it and has a collapsible telescoping aluminum handle with a "T" on the end. You take it off the boat and you throw it in the water and the wind pushes you along. You kind of jerk on the rake and pull it through the bottom. When you think you have a few clams in there, you pull it up and into the boat, you dump it out, you throw it back in. You do it about a couple hundred times a day. Hopefully, you have a day's pay.

SW: Now, did this evolve into working in the bay full time from during the summer—?

JR: Yes. I went away to school for a year. That summer, I worked construction. Then I stayed in construction and went to school nights. I got laid off, I guess around Christmas time or something. My guess is like 1973. So, I was home from school so I said, "I might as well start clamming." So, I picked up a different boat and then it was really to start on my working full time on the bay in 1973.

SW: How long did you continue to do clamming full time?

JR: Clamming full time from '73 to 1985. I worked Patchogue bays and Bay Shore and Babylon in the winter. A lot of times, guys went down there in the wintertime. The '70s were really good. The beginning of '80s were pretty good. Then in '85, it was starting to slow down, and a lot of guys were getting out and I got into construction. In '85, I worked with a friend of mine for two years and then went on my own. I was doing construction for two or three years. Two or three years on my own and construction slowed down with the recession. Then I started getting into fishing, which I had done sporadically through the years. I wasn't full bore into fishing, but I just did a little bit of it. Then in, I guess, in 1989, 1990, I really started getting a lot of nets and a bigger boat and things.

SW: When you were clamming, what type of boat were you using?

JR: I guess, my first boat was a fifteen-foot (aqua glass?). Well no my first boat, very first boat, I guess, was a fourteen-foot like bay skiff and wooden, and I had to caulk all the seams and everything. That was the first boat I was telling you about. It had a ten-horsepower. It probably took about a half an hour to get to where I wanted to go and a half an hour to get back. But a small little boat, but it was good enough. Then when I started full time, it was a fifteen-foot (aqua glass?), which really wasn't good enough. It's like an open—sort of like a Boston Whaler type boat. I used that for, I guess, a year. Then when I realized, hey, this is pretty good, I kind of like it. A friend of mine, the one that got me into the clamming, he was a wintertime carpenter. He said, "Well, you want to build a boat?" So, we built a Garvey, a plywood Garvey and fiberglassed it. It was pretty nice boat. I used that, I think, up until 1976. No, in '76, I built it. Had it built. Then in 1980, I went to a fiberglass hull, a stagger boat. And the same guy, I just bought the fiberglass hull from the guy. Then because the boats were built a little on the flimsy side and not really good for commercial purposes, I had the same guy build the inside of the boat and built it more heavy duty. It turned out great. It was a real good clam boat, and I used that up until '85 and then I used it part time for another five years.

SW: During this time, did you sort of learn on your own or did you have some help—?

JR: Well like I said, this friend of mine got me out there. I kind of followed him around for the first couple years. He was older than me and a friend of mine and he didn't mind. Because a lot of times, guys in the bay are a little territorial, especially if you have a good spot, you really don't want to share it. So, I guess he kind of took me under his wing and we bounced around stuff. I guess it was good that I could hardly ever beat him so because if I caught more clams than him, he'd probably tell me to leave. So, he kind of showed me the way around. But then really when you're digging clams, you got to get a feel for it. Nobody can actually tell you how

to do it. You got to feel it and make the adjustments. Believe it or not, there is a lot more involved than just throwing a rake in the water and pulling on it. You work the rake at different speeds. You work the handles at different angles. You adjust the skids on the rake to just the depth of the rake in the water. You have the teeth too long, you don't cover enough bottom, it's too hard to pull. So, you shorten up so the teeth are shorter. Then you can cover bottom. But sometimes the clams are too deep, so you skip over the top of them. So, believe it or not, it's quite a science. A lot of times, you're thinking about how to catch the clams and what feels the best and stuff. So, to be good, you're constantly on top of your adjustments.

SW: You have to make a lot of adjustments, say, where you're clamming in the bay to find a set or to find a good spot?

JR: Usually from past experiences, because I worked in the water for twelve years, you knew where the better spots were, you knew where the clams would come up. They'd come up in the springtime in the shallow waters where that water warmed up first. Then as it got hotter, those areas weren't that good because they have a warmer water, so you'd move out to the cooler waters in a deeper bottom. So, you moved around and if you'd stayed on spot, you were doing good. Then all of a sudden, you hear other guys are doing really well, and you say, "Well geez I better move from my spot, maybe there's someplace better," and you poke around a little bit more. But you get a feel for what's good and what wasn't. I guess, seeing what everybody else is doing or hearing what everybody else is doing, you kind of stay on top of things.

SW: How many people were out there clamming when it was good clamming?

JR: In the late '70s, hundreds of boats just in the Patchogue Bay area, I'd say, from Howells Point in Bellport to the east line of Bluepoints company a hundreds of boats. Then Babylon, Bay Shore, there was hundreds down there. It could have been about three hundred, four hundred boats, maybe. There was lots, lots of boats. Now, you go out there, there's probably, if you stretch, maybe say twenty-five boats a day that you'd see on a regular basis.

SW: So, from clamming, you have progressed into fishing, particularly gillnetting?

JR: Right.

SW: How did that come about?

JR: Well, when you're out there clamming and it's a slow day and you look around and you see somebody else driving by in a boat and their boat's sitting a little bit low, and you go, "What's that guy doing here?" You hear that he's netting fish or something like that, and you go "oh, that might be interesting." There was another friend of mine who had done it a little bit and I kind of teamed up with him. He took me under his wing. They taught me how to build nets. We'd go out in the springtime. Mostly, it's a springtime fishery from beginning of April until beginning of July. That's when there was a lot of fish around. So, with a little bit of net, you could make a decent day's pay better than clamming so that's why a few guys did it. But it's a lot of preparation to build the nets. Then 1990, after I was doing the carpentry and then the carpentry slowed down because of recession, fishing was good. Because you can set the net at night, pick it

up in the morning. If you didn't have a job or work was a little slow, it's something you could do as a filler. So, in 1990 until now, I started fishing regularly. But now, I built a bigger boat, got more net, different kinds of net different kinds of fish, different size mesh. So, I carry a lot of net on the boat. Normally, like I said, it's a springtime occupation, but with a lot of net and different kinds of net, I made it so I could fish through the summer and then the fall also. So, I fish from April until the end of October.

SW: Could you sort of describe to me what gillnetting is?

JR: Gillnetting is a wall of monofilament. Well, I use monofilament. You can also use nylon netting. It's a wall of netting that's placed out in a straight line in the bay. The webbing is tied between a lead line which is on the bottom and has leads in it, so it sinks to the bottom. On the top, there's a cork line which has corks every four or five feet or so. That holds the wall upright. So, what you do is you have an anchor and anchors on either ends of the wall and you have flags on either ends of the wall. To start, you take out an anchor and your flag and you throw it over the side, and I usually work out of plastic tubs which holds the lengths of netting. You run the net out in a straight line, like I said. When you get to the other end, you throw the anchor and the flag, and you let the net sit. Usually, what I did was overnight setting. You set a couple hours before sunset, that's when the fish are most active. Then you pick it up early in the morning and pull the fish out.

SW: What do you need to do to make your net and how big do you make your nets?

JR: You can buy a net completely made, but they're kind of expensive. But I think I bought mine. A lot of my net was used net from other fishermen that got out or something. But after a while, the monofilament breaks, and it gets old and brittle and it doesn't catch as well so you replace it. Every two years at the most or sometimes yearly, what I do was you cut the monofilament off the lead line and the cork line and you re-tie the monofilament again to those lines to remake the nets. You use the same lead line and corks lines until the line rots, but in fifteen years (I haven't had a line rot on me yet?). It takes a while building a net. That's the decent part of the job. It takes a while. It's fairly expensive, not as much as some other fisheries, but it's pretty expensive.

SW: Obviously, then that's an important component of what you do. When are you exactly building your nets? Are you doing it in your off time? Are you doing it as you go along the fishing season?

JR: Yes. What you should do is you should be doing it all winter long and having all your gear ready. But because I also work in the wintertime as a carpenter, my spare time, I re-build nets. I try to have the majority, let's say, at least half my gear ready for the beginning of the year, in the beginning of spring. Then in my spare time, I'd be building nets along maybe through the summertime and the fall. So, it's a constant process. I always have to go out to my garage. Now, I have lead line and cork line out there and webbing and being in the middle of tying another piece of net to replace an old piece of net. You pull a piece out, you throw a new piece in, and you just keep working along.

SW: Are you using certain tools, net making tools?

JR: Yes. It's just a needle, just a line, a twine needle that you use. You just load the needle with the twine for tying the monofilament on. Then you just work your way along the net tying the mono on. You work your way down the net with the leads and the corks and you work your way down the net together with the two lines.

SW: How often are you knotting along the line then?

JR: Usually, around every six to seven inches, you tie a knot. So, it's a lot of knots. A lot of guys tie six-hundred-foot lengths. The lead lines come in six hundred-foot lengths, I think. I guess a lot of top lines come in twelve-hundred-foot lengths. But what I do is I break them into three hundred-foot lengths so I can have more of a variety in the length of line that I use. The length of the wall of the net, I break them up. So, I tie like three-hundred-foot lengths. So, that's three hundred, six hundred, twelve hundred knots for a three-hundred-foot piece of net. And I have probably six or seven thousand feet of net. I don't use it all at once. Like I said, different nets for different times of the year. So, it's a lot of knots, it's a lot of time, but it doesn't bother me. It only bothers me when I don't have it done in time. When I'm looking at a piece of net and I'm going, "This isn't catching. I wish I had some more net." I also heard stories that all fishermen say, well a ratty net—because a lot of times like a bluefish might blow a big hole in it or something. The net looks pretty ragged, you have like cannonball holes in them at times. If the net really gets bad, then a fisherman will say, "Well, a rag sometimes catches better because it doesn't sit as tight in the water," which is kind of true. A lot of times, if you have a real stiff wall of net, when the fish hits it, it'll bounce off. But if the wall gives a little bit more, the fish has more of a chance to get tangled up in it. In some cases, a raggy net does catch a little bit better, but I don't like seeing it. I like to be on top of my gear.

SW: What particular type of knots are you tying on?

JR: Just half hitches, just a combination of three half hitches that you slide along. Like I said, you load a needle, and you tie three half hitches in a row, then you take the needle, and you pass it through three or four loops in the monofilament. Then you make another three half hitch knot. Then you move along, and you take three more loops of webbing. You tie it off about six inches away or so and with the knots. Then you just keep working your way down the net. So, you're grabbing the webbing with the twine and tying it on to the lead line and cork line.

SW: Do the other fishermen tie their knots every six to seven inches? Do they do bigger spacing?

JR: Some do bigger spacing. But if you get the spacing too far, when the nets pay out of the boat, the corks might go between the lead line and your twine line. So, you don't want too big a space. Because you have the open loops, so if something gets through that open loop, it makes a snag and then a lot of net comes out in a clump. Then you got to back the boat up and clear the clump. So, you try to put your knots pretty close together. Also, if you have your knots too far apart, then you'd be carrying too much weight on that section. So, you try to have, like I said, six or seven inches apart is where I put mine. I've seen guys run them twelve inches apart. If you're buying from a catalog, they might be twelve, fourteen inches apart. I guess, some fishermen somewhere might do it that way. But it's a quick way to build your net. If you do it twelve inches

instead of six, it takes you half the amount of time to build the net. But I rather do it what I feel is the right way.

SW: How long does it take you to build a net?

JR: I can tie, I guess, around fifty feet of net in an hour, the top and the bottom line. So, that's what I say. [laughter] But it never seems like you work it out. It's probably maybe a little less than that. So that's about how long it takes.

SW: Is there any difference when you're tying the net from the different size mesh?

JR: Yes. You adjust the knots and then how many pieces of webbing are in between those knots. Because when the webbing is attached to the lead and the cork, what it does is it when you stand it up, it looks like a diamond. It's diamond shaped because that's pretty much the shape of a fish if you look at a fish head on. What you want to do is adjust the knots far enough apart or close enough together to get that diamond shape. So, it's pretty much open enough to catch a fish but not too far open. So, that when the fish hits it, it won't have a tendency to fall out. You want some sideward pressure on it too. But you also don't want the webbing so close together that there's so much webbing close together that it looks like a wall instead of like fish are looking through the water. If you have your webbing too close, they see a wall of webbing and they're not going to hit the net. For fifteen, twenty years, I've been playing with how far apart to stretch your webbing to catch what kind of fish. That's what each fisherman does is try to figure out how they want to do it. A lot of guys say hang it on the half, which is when the webbing is stretched out completely, you push it back so it's only half that distance. So, you adjust your knots so that the webbing would be on the half. But some guys put it closer together, some guys go further apart. I've heard different stories.

SW: Are you looking for perfect diamond shape or do you have—?

JR: Well that's just it, you just play with it. Other times, you just say—you might even (change?) on the same size mesh on the same piece of net. You might change it a little bit to, say, if this piece right here catches really good, I'm going to change to this way, and it never really sticks out that much. But I do change a few things around sometimes. I used to hold the webbing closer together, but then it seemed like the fish got caught so well it was so hard to take it out of the net. So I would stretch them out a little bit more and then it's easier to pick the fish out. If you want to catch fish, but you also want to be able to go through the net faster, you can get to the next piece of net before the crabs get it or whatever. So, you want to be able to catch them and handle it quickly.

SW: Now, with a different size mesh, what types of different fish would you be catching?

JR: You mean specifically the size of the mesh?

SW: Yes, related to the fish.

JR: A small size mesh will catch a small fish because what the gillnet does is the fish hits the net. The fish can't back up, so they swim into the net and they try to swim harder to get through it once they have resistance. What they do is they go past their head and the narrower part is right around the gills and they get caught on the gills. So that's the name, gillnet. You can also catch a fish on the nose if the webbing is smaller so the fish's head can't go in there. So, with a smaller size mesh that you would normally catch *Gila* fish in, you can catch bigger fish in it because they might get caught on their nose. Also, there's a variable in the monofilament on the thickness of the mono. Thinner mono might stretch more. With the webbing itself, from the fish's head goes into the diamond, if it stretches a little bit more, it can hold tight, it'll hold that fish better. So, there's different feelings about that, too—how the different diameter monofilament you're supposed to use to catch the fish. So, what I do is in the springtime, the fish are usually bigger, you use a bigger mesh to catch the bunker, weakfish, bluefish. Then in the summertime, things get a little bit smaller because the bigger fish go out in the ocean. The smaller fishes stay in the bag, so I like to bring it down to a smaller size mesh.

SW: You said earlier about the net giving some. It's a little bit easier to catch the fish than a taut net. How can you place it down or does that have to do with how you knot it or is there a certain technique in making it have a little give?

JR: The give was, what I was talking about before, was how the wall of net stands in the water. If the wall is like a rigid wall—they say that in front of a fish, I guess, they have like a feeling on front of their nose. They can feel the water passing in front of them. I guess, as they approach a net or an object, they can feel like a rebound coming back at them. So, if you have a stiff wall of net, they'll feel a little rebound and might turn away. But if the net is a little bit more loose in the water, they won't feel the rebound as bad and they'll get stuck. Now, this is what I've read in other books and stuff. So, I've tried a little bit. It definitely helps. The tightness of the wall would be having more or less corks on the net so that you can have a net that has just enough corks to float it. I mean, just enough corks so that the lead line will sink it. So, that wall might stand a little bit loose. What am I thinking here. See it's so technical, I can't even figure it out. [laughter] Part of it is the weight of the lead line on the bottom. If you have a really heavy lead line, you could put a lot heavier cork on it and then your wall would stand taller—I mean, stand more taut. You can put on a lighter lead line, you could put lighter corks, which is cheaper, which a lot of guys do. But also, you can put the less corks and the wall won't stand as tight and it might catch the fish a little bit better. But at the same time, if your net is a little bit too loose, you're going to catch a lot more crabs also. Because the crabs, when they walk along and they hit a net, if the net starts kind of loose in the water the crabs will climb up the net easier and get tangled easier. It's harder to get the crabs out of the net on a wall that doesn't stand as stiff. So, there's a lot of variables and you just keep playing, I'm sure. The old timers have all the answers, but I only have a couple. I don't even know if they're answers, they're just suggestions.

SW: How about the placement of the net in the water itself, about what depth are you placing the nets?

JR: I place them all over anywhere in the bay. I don't usually go shallow within like two feet of water. In the springtime, the fish seem to be up in the flats more because the water is cool. There's a lot of activity on the flats because the fish will run into the warm water. So, I'm in a

few feet of water. Then like I was talking about with clamming, the same thing. As the water gets hotter, fish don't want to be up in that ninety-degree water on the flats. They want to get into the cooler water, so I move off and go down into the longer channel ledges and stuff like that and fish deeper water. It seems like most fish want to be in like fifty-five to sixty-five-degree water. That's kind of what you look for. Unfortunately, in the bay, come summertime, the water would be like you know seventy-five, eighty. It's probably even been ninety at times. A lot of times, you don't get a lot of fish in the bay in the summertime.

SW: Are you setting on different types of bottom then, rock bottom, gravel?

JR: Yes. I've always been told, and it seems to work for like weakfish, you might want to sit over shells that have worms in it and a corally bottom. It's like dead biomes like in the middle of a channel where there really isn't anything to feed on. Also, because of boat traffic, I don't usually want to set over that. You usually look for edges in the bottom because I kind of feel like it's like a trafficking area. It's almost like an extension of your net because you have a little bit more of a wall to guide the fish along. So, any natural area that kind of corrals the fish up is where I like settling in and most marine activity is along an edge. So, that's where you want to be.
[RECORDING PAUSED]

SW: This is Steve Warrick interviewing Jim Rose. Today's date is July 15th, year 2000. This is for the Long Island Traditions, Bay Shore to Patchogue project. This is side B of tape 009. We were speaking about gillnetting and you said that you have done experimenting. Have you found a technique that you like out there through experimentation or through other people maybe you've heard or what they've taught you?

JR: Yes. I guess, there's a basic way that I that I do it. I guess, when I was talking before about hanging the net on the half, which is half stretched out. I like to stretch it out a little bit more than that so it's easier to pick the fish out. Like I said, you don't want to go with a size monofilament that's too thick. Because when the fish actually hits one of the diamonds, if it's too thick, it might not hold him. It doesn't have enough elasticity, the thicker mono. It lasts longer, but it doesn't have enough elasticity and it doesn't break as easily. So, you want something that'll catch and hold the fish and still not break. You also don't want one that's too thin because that'll stretch too much and then some of the fish that you're trying to catch will slip through the net. Also, they might break the mesh. So, they call it a number twelve-size mono and that's usually what I use. I hear we got a lot of guys using number eight or number ten which is a little bit thinner. But I kind of liked the number twelve, which is like a point fifty-seven millimeters monofilament. I think that sticks the fish and then lasts pretty good. Also, when I was talking before about the walls, having a stiff wall. I failed to mention that sometimes they make tie down nets. I always wanted to try that, but I never did. That's every ten-feet, twenty-feet or so, fifty-feet. They put a line going from the lead line to cork line. So, that'll bring down the cork so that you have like a belly in the webbing. So, then the webbing won't be a stiff wall, but I never tried, like I said. But I think, because all the crabs and everything and the difficulty of that other line in between the lead and the cork, it might cause problems. But as far as the technique, like I said, I open it up a little bit more than a half, I use number twelve. Like I said, I like to fish the flats more in the springtime when the water's cool and the deep water when it gets hot. I guess that's pretty much it.

SW: You mentioned it's called the belly for this type of trap? Do you have any idea for what you were talking about here?

JR: The belly in the net?

SW: Yes, the belly in the net.

JR: That's just talking about with the tie downs that line that you would put between the cork line and the lead line to hold it down. Because the wall isn't standing up straight anymore, you have webbing that's slack so that would be the belly. But because all the crabs and stuff, I think it would just get too caught up with crabs. I haven't done that.

SW: When you go out there, can you tell right away if you've got a lot of fish in your net?

JR: Well, the ends of the net, because I was mentioning before, it seems like a slack net catches better. So, the ends of the net are looser because you don't have that run of corks going past it, there's going to be two ends to the net. So, at the end of the net, you sometimes really catch a decent amount of fish. That's one of the few things that I have noticed, that the ends of the nets always catch better. So, you might pull a net up and you go, "Wow, I got a good day here." Let's say, in (a matter?) of ten-feet, you might have five nice size fish and you go, "Wow today's a big day." Then you go along (that area?) a little bit more and you go, "Oh, it's just because it's the end of the net." And then you'd have like normal spacing. But the ends of the net do catch better.

SW: How about the middles?

JR: The middle in it?

SW: Yes.

JR: Well after you get past like the first fifteen feet, then you don't get that flap anymore. It's more than like a wall. It's like a screen door blowing in the wind on the end so it flips around and the net will collapse around them more. But once you close that door, now it's a wall and it's tougher for the fish to get stuck. So, after fifteen feet on the net, it's pretty much just a solid wall again.

SW: You had mentioned earlier on about the clammers sort of being territorial at a point, do you have to worry about territorial issues with gillnetting?

JR: Well, yes, you don't want to sit on top of anybody. I spread my nets out. I feel that, like I said, the ends of the nets catch the best, so I put nine hundred feet of net together and try to space them at least a half a mile apart. Sometimes unless the fish are real thick and I'm not using all my net because there's so many fish, I might keep the nets closer together. But when things slow down, I spread my nets out because it seems to make sense. If you have less webbing around, you're going to catch more fish in that area. It seems the ends not only because they're hanging looser in the water, but if you draw a circle around your net, you're going to catch more fish at

the end of the net than you are in the middle of the net. So, I feel if I spread them out, I take less away from each piece of net just like crabbers might space their pots further apart. There's a point, I guess, where they feel they're getting their pots too close together so they're hurting themselves too much. So, we were talking about territoriality, if that's a word. You really don't want anybody sitting on top of you, not only because you figure, I need a little bit of room here. I don't want them catching them—they're hurting you there. The fish that might go in your net are possibly going in their net. So, I'm spreading my nets out, like I said, certain times a year to catch more fish and I don't want somebody, if I'm spreading them out, to put something right alongside of me. So, it can be a problem. There's times that I've discussed it with other fishermen. You go up to him, and you go "Hey [inaudible] where my line is. What, are we partners here? Can you give me a little bit of room?" Their response is usually, "What's the problem?" [laughter] And I go, "Well, you're right on top of me. Give me some room. Move down the edge a little more or move somewhere else." Then usually, guys will say, "Yeah, yeah, no problem." But you still might have a problem. They might be a little bit close. But in the summertime—because I'm one of the few that are out there and fishes in the summertime—that I don't have to worry about. This year, because there was a lot of weakfish, guys were working the edges for the weakfish, and it was a problem. I don't know if they felt there was a problem, but it was a problem for me because guys that aren't usually out there were fishing on the same place I was. I felt it hurt me. A lot of times, I couldn't fish where I wanted to fish. So, a couple of these guys I'm friends with, but at the same time, I want to go out there and catch fish. I don't want to go out there and make friends. There's one guy this year that was his first year netting, and he's always seemed—he crabs all around the places that I net. He's been watching me for ten years net. It seems now where he set his net is the place where I usually set my net. So, it's a little aggravating. Towards the end of the spring run of fish, I said a few words with him, and he apologized. But I think he was just apologizing to appease me not because he actually cared whether I wanted him near me or not. He was just trying to push blow me off I think. But he knows where I always fish because he always sees me and that's where he was setting. It bothered me. I had malicious thoughts, but I didn't do anything. But if it persists, I might have to do something.

SW: How many other people are out there doing the type of gillnetting you are doing? Is there anyone?

JR: In how big an area?

SW: Within, let us say, this area, the Great South Bay.

JR: So, this area meaning?

SW: Say, towards Bay Shore. Anyone towards Bay Shore?

JR: The guys up in Bay Shore, I don't really know. I know at least two or three of them, but there could be more. Down by me here in Patchogue—there's more than two or three up in Bay shore. There's like five or six, I guess. Up on me here, there's one, two, three, four, five, six. At least six, seven guys. When you first look at the bay, it looks big. But when you think—a lot of it is boat traffic areas. You can't set in certain boat traffic areas and areas you think are good and

areas you don't think are good. A lot of the bay is flat so you don't want to set your net up on a flat. You like to set your net on a flat in the springtime, but as the season goes on, there's heavy boat traffic and the fish move to the deeper water. There's not really that many deep spots where the fish go. So, the six or seven guys in this area, there's not that many spots you can set.

SW: You do it all by hand? You don't have any mechanical devices there?

JR: Right yes. Well, there's two reasons. One, you'd be changing your whole game. Ocean fishermen use fishing reels, which sounds great to me. But they use inboards because what they do is the reels is in the middle of the boat and they set and retrieve it over the transom. So, they have inboards with the props under the boat. So, I have an outboard so I can't use a reel because it'd be pulling that in over the outboard and you can't do that. They do have power haulers, which you could set up towards the bow of your boat on the side, which you put the net over it and it powers it into the boat and you pull it and you pick the fish out of it as it comes in over the side. I kind of feel that just using the power of the motor and pulling it along doesn't really hurt that much. It kind of keeps me in shape a little bit. I don't think it's that much of a problem. Nothing really hurts that bad on me and I lose that winter weight and it's not that bad.

SW: Do you get any type of satisfaction from doing it with your hands as opposed to a motor or wench or anything like that?

JR: Yes, I guess so. I enjoy working with my hands. You still got to pull the fish out of the net with your hand no matter what you do. You can shake them a little bit, but some fish fall out. A lot of them you have to pick. But if I went to power, I'd probably have to get a bigger boat then. It seems like in any fishery now, you really don't want to put much money, more money into the fishery because you don't know what the government's going to do. We're always the bad guys. We're catching too many fish, and they want us out. So, you really don't want to put too much more money for me to switch from a twenty-four-foot outboard to something with an inboard and a reel or a haul or something like that. It would be a lot of money. I stay away from it. I don't feel that it's costing me any money. I don't feel I'm losing money by not having power in the bay. So, if it doesn't hurt me that much and I can do it. If it does hurt me a little bit, I could always pick up a helper. At times I've had helpers. I don't really feel like it costs me anything.

SW: Talk a little bit about your boat. Now, this is a boat you've built yourself?

JR: Yes. The friend of mine that I was telling you about that got me into the clamming, he was a winter carpenter. Like I said, he built a garvey for me and I helped him. I fiberglassed and I was there cutting the wood. He showed me how. I worked along with him. Then when I had that twenty-one-foot other clam boat, staggered boat, he built that. He put the ribs in it and fiberglassed it and stuff. I was working along with him on that. I helped other people work with fiberglass. It's not brain surgery at all, but you just have to get a feel for it. Because I'm also a carpenter now, and on this interview that I didn't mention that, but in '85, I started doing the carpentry. So, I got pretty handy. Hopefully, my customers think so. [laughter] But I built a duck boat I guess about fifteen years ago or so. That turned out alright, it's still floating. So, I picked up a hull because I needed a bigger boat. So, I picked up an old (Luhrs?), twenty-four-foot (Luhrs?) that a friend of mine was throwing out. I cut it down to the shape I wanted and gutted

out all the old ribs that were in it and put new ribs in it, new floor, new gunwales, a little bit of cabin forward. I designed the boat and set it up the way that I felt that I could work the boat and work it alone. Because a lot of times, a lot of gillnetters work with two guys in a boat. I set it up so I can work alone, and it's worked out very well. I don't really feel I made too many mistakes on it. That was really my first big adventure. I swore after doing it, I'd never do it again. For two months straight, I worked in that boat in the backyard. My wife was pregnant. Screaming outside at me all the time. Then for one month and every minute of my spare time to build the boat. I swore I'd never do it again. [laughter] But I really liked the boat. It's really nice. It's solid. I think it's kind of pretty. So, I'm pleased with it. Right now, I have a boat as a matter of fact. I picked up a hull and I'm having somebody else do it because I just don't even want to get involved in it. [laughter]

SW: You said you think the boat's pretty. Why do you think that?

JR: Why is the boat pretty?

SW: Do you have a certain aesthetic, a certain look?

JR: Yes. You just see a line that you like. I guess it's crossed between a stagger boat and a privateer. You look at the sheer of the boat and I cut that sheer in it. I wanted my console slash cabin up forward so I could control the boat up forward and power the boat from up forward. I think you look at the boat and you can tell whether you think it's a good-looking boat or it's an ugly-looking boat. [laughter] I think it's a good-looking boat, but I don't know what other people think.

SW: You said you built a duck boat as well?

JR: A duck boat, yes. As a matter of fact, I was working for that friend that got me into the clamming. He also got me into the carpentry. I was working for him one day and he wanted me to bring a load of junk to the dumps. So, I go to the dumps and see a couple guys throwing out a little speedboat. I said, "You throwing that out?" And they go, "Yeah." And I said, "Well give me a hand getting it on the back of this truck." So, I dumped the junk off the back of the truck. Put this little thirteen-foot boat in the back of the truck and brought it back to the job. This friend of mine was screaming at me, "What are you doing? What did you do? What took you so long?" He said, "I need you here." I go, "I saw this boat, I had to get it." He was mad, and I said, "Look, what would you have done if you were with me? You would have said, 'Yes, Jim, let's get it.'" He goes, "Yes, you're right." So, I got this boat out of the dumps, and I cut it down to the height of the sides that I wanted and put a nice little crown on the top of the deck and built a little cockpit and a new floor and stuff and made a duck boat out of it.

SW: Was duck hunting a big pastime of yours?

JR: No, it was another friend of mine who's been a bayman all his life. His father got him started, I guess. They lived in Bayport. His father was from Amityville. I guess, Amityville was big duck hunting years ago. He went duck hunting with his father, and he went duck hunting with other friends of his. I'm not sure. I guess he might have built a duck boat because he was going to go

or his father had a duck boat. I wanted to go along and so, I got an inkling to build the boat and then I started hunting with him. We hunted together for quite a few years. It was fun.

SW: Is there a particular duck you like to hunt?

JR: I don't know. I wasn't a big duck hunter. It's just something else to do on the water. You just enjoy being out there and stuff. They always used to say, the black ducks—anything that's scarce is more fun to shoot it. Geese, I always want to shoot a geese and I never shot a goose. I haven't been out that much. [laughter] But yes, I enjoyed going out there. I guess, it was the camaraderie and being on the flats early in the morning and sunset and things like that. A friend of mine had a dog and it was enjoyable. I guess, sort of like fishing too, you built the boat. The friend of mine built the decoys, beautiful decoys that he built and you build it. The birds come in. It's just the whole adventure of it. That's, I guess, the whole adventure of fishing too. You figure, I built the boat and built it, I built the nets, making a living. Just like I mentioned to you before, I feel like you kind of beat the system. You just did it all on your own and you're making it work. Then also, back to the fishing, you're in control of everything. People when they work for other people, they're not in control. Somebody else is telling them what to do and you're always talking about the person behind their back and getting mad and things like that. But when you're your own boss, you're in control when you're in a nice environment. The work is difficult, but you do it and you enjoy it.

SW: Is that one of the reasons why you've stayed out on the bay?

JR: Yes. I keep saying one of these days, I'm going to get a real job, but it hasn't happened yet. I kind of feel it's great that I haven't had to. I always felt when I was doing it—matter of fact, years ago, first thing I said, when I was like twenty-five, I said, I can't believe life is so easy because we used to catch a lot of clams and make a lot of money for that time. I said, this is great. Then I said, I know this is going to end. So, when it started slowing down, I said, I hope the bay dies so I have to get off because you knew you might get stuck out there. So, that's one reason why I went to school nights and tried to cover my butt that way. That if anybody said, do you have a college education, I could say, yes, and science was my major. They didn't offer marine biology in the school that I had at nights, but I have a science degree—science emphasis. But I was worried about getting caught and just being a bayman because times are changing. You saw it with the clamming and clamming doesn't last forever. And fishing and now all the regs are coming down. There's not too many fishermen left. I would love to see it lasts forever. If you could guarantee me it lasts forever, I'll never do anything else, but you're always worried.

SW: How do you think working on the bay has shaped your life?

JR: I think it is a major part of my life. It's one of the few times I really feel good, I guess. I guess, it's the sense of accomplishing something. I don't think I'm workaholic. I think I'm a lazy workaholic. I think I'm a pretty lazy guy, I can be. But if I'm not working, I'm miserable. [laughter] So, when you're on the water, you're in a nice environment, you can work hard. If I'm not catching, not only am I frustrated because I'm not making any money, but it's also because there isn't that much work to do. So, the bay has been an important part because it has given me that channel where I can work, and I can work hard. I keep going back to the water, I did the

construction, I went back to the water. I enjoy it. I guess, I spent a lot of hours out there clamming and stuff. It's in your blood. I'm sure a lot of old timers say that, it's in your blood. You just enjoy being out there. A lot of times, you feel the world's passing you by, but I always felt that I tried along the way, school, and I learned a trade—and you know, I'm a pretty good carpenter. I can definitely make a living. If I couldn't fish tomorrow, I could make probably a better living being a contractor and a carpenter. But I enjoy it, I really do. Hopefully, my sons will get that feeling, too. I also feel that that's probably the reason why people go to the water to be riding real fishermen and just for fun, people go to the beach. My wife loves going to the beach, sitting down the beach. I don't like because I'm out on the water all day. Then people go rod reel fishing and they love it. But I have a rod that I got for Father's Day two years ago, I haven't used it much, but it is nice. But I get to see it every day. There's some amazing things you do see. A lot of it is monotonous and my wife teases me about this. She'll say, "Can you come do this? This is a tedious monotonous job. You're going to love it." [laughter] But, one day I was out there—many times you see a full moon rise, someone that's an ocean fisherman sees them, but a bayman that's usually off the water, at that time. But seeing something like a full moon rise is pretty exciting, and a lot of the sunsets that you see. It was funny one time we were staying over at a beach house and my wife says, "Come on, let's get up. I want to see the sunrise. Come on, let's see the sunrise together." And I go, "Honey." She says, "I've never seen the sun rise." I said, "You're kidding," I said, "not even in high school?" She says, "No, I've never seen the sun rise." I said, "Well, how many sunrises and sunsets you think I've seen this year?" I said, "About two hundred." Other people think it's great. I do, too. I enjoy it, I enjoy it every day. Sometimes it seems amazing how you have a sunset. It always seems like that even on a cloudy day, a lot of times, the sun peaks out under the clouds just at sunset and give you that really beautiful sunset. I've seen seals in Great South Bay, but I scallop out in the Peconic, too, in the fall. I've seen seals on the rocks over there and I've seen morning fog coming off the surface of the water and it's so eerie, tranquil feeling. You know, it's beautiful. It's just a lot of nice things. You feel you're close to nature and you feel alive, I guess. That's what it is. I guess, you feel alive. When I'm not on the water, not near the water, I feel bad. So, I guess, it's in my blood, I need it. My blood's life. My life's blood.

SW: What would you like people to know about people such as yourself and other people who have worked in the bays? What would you tell them?

JR: What would I tell them about myself or about bayman in general?

SW: Yes.

JR: They're definitely hardworking people. A lot of them have good morals and they enjoy what they do. They might at times appear gruff and angry, but it seems like everybody's beating down on them a lot and you get to know them. Some of my best friends are baymen. I have a lot of friends, a lot of friends are contractors and stockbrokers and teachers and things like that. They're usually nice good-hearted people. I think that's what matters. A lot of times, people on the water, I guess, because at times, if you're in trouble and you need help, you need help. People on the water are pretty kind and try to help people out. Unfortunately, we have this wall between people that work on the water and the real world. But I wish that that could be overcome and people could just say, they just want to make a living and be able to do what we do. That's all.

SW: Okay well, I'd like to thank you for your time today.

JR: You are welcome.

SW: I appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------
Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 07/23/2024