Interview with Joe Scavone

Narrator: Joe Scavone
Interviewer: Nancy Solomon
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Project Description: Folklorist Nancy Solomon has documented the maritime culture of Long Island through these interviews spanning the years 1987 – 2016. The collection includes baymen, fishermen, boat builders and other maritime tradition bearers.
Principal Investigators: Nancy Solomon
Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting

Abstract: On June 8, 2011, Nancy Solomon interviewed Joe Scavone as part of the *Long Island Traditions* oral history project. Joe developed a passion for the water early on, often fishing with his father and other local fishermen. Joe recounts his early memories of fishing and clamming, starting with small-scale clamming in rowboats before working on larger boats as a teenager. He discusses his experiences working on clamming boats, handling dredges, shoveling clams, and selling to major buyers and local markets. Throughout the interview, Scavone shares stories of learning the trade, the camaraderie with fellow fishermen, and the evolving nature of clamming and fishing over the years. He also reflects on the importance of safety on the water and his early introduction to gillnetting.

Nancy Solomon: Okay, this is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions talking with fisherman Joe Scavone of Freeport. Today is June 8, 2011. Can you tell me where you were born and how you got into fishing? What your earliest memories are?

Joe Scavone: I was born in Freeport, New York. I used to come right out here and fish with my dad. I remember catching [inaudible]. I would come out here with six or seven guys on a weekend. We was born on the water, we had the water in our backyard. Started on clamming with a rowboat. My dad would come home from work, help me sell my clams. When I started seeing money signs, I haven't stopped since. [laughter]. That's what started it all. My dad's what started it all. He used to bring me out. He didn't want me to be a fisherman. I said, "Well, you shouldn't have taught me." It's something you get started with, and you can't stop. You wonder what's going to happen the next day. You can't wait to get out there. You got to get out there and see. Tomorrow til today [inaudible]. You just got to come – if you stay home, you're wondering what you missed. So, you have to go.

NS: Can you tell me your father's name and how he got into this?

JS: Well, my father's name is also Joe Scavone. He used to go fishing on the weekends when he wasn't working. He's from Brooklyn. He used to [drive?] boats when he was a kid. He even left his own grandfather at the dock as a deposit on a rowboat. They came back to the dock, and his grandfather had [buckets?] of fish and they went out on the rental boat and they had nothing. They guy said there's only way they're taking the boat and that's if someone stays behind. That's where his grandfather stayed all day – fishing off the dock. I can remember stories dad used to tell me along these beaches here and Coney Island after I [inaudible]. All you had to do is come down to the beach with a bucket and whiting would just wash right up on the beach. You didn't need a boat or a fishing net. You could just walk along the beach and fish were hopping around right in the bucket. That's how good it was. After a storm – the storm would make the fish wash right up.

NS: You mentioned clamming. Where did you go clamming and what kind of clamming did you do?

JS: I started out as clamming in the bay. Little Necks and Cherrystones. Then when I was a kid, I had a paper route. During my paper route, I got a job on a big 78-foot clamming boat that comes out here in the ocean. After one week working on that clamming boat right out off Jones Beach, I gave up my paper route. The guy owned three boats.

NS: What was his name?

JS: The guy's name was, his nickname was Billy [Bosch?]. He was also from Freeport. He had two big boats and a smaller boat about 45-50 feet. There was only one captain that would take me and my friend out because we were little kids. The other captains wouldn't take us on their

boat. Only one guy would. Each guy on deck would give you $10 out of their pocket for the day. [inaudible]. $40 in your pocket. Plus whatever you shucked. We used to shuck for a dollar a bushel back then. It was great.

NS: What were some of the things you did on the [inaudible] boat?

JS: I used to shovel clams. You always didn't always catch just straight clams. You'd have to pick out the crabs and the seaweed, stuff like that, shells, empty shells. So you'd shovel clams into a basket. Then drag the baskets to the back of the boat and dump them into a cage.

NS: You mentioned you shovel them. How were the clams getting from the ocean onto the boat? Can you describe how this boat worked?

JS: It was a boat with a big dredge. It had water power to help loosen the bottom. It would pull this dredge. It was a big steel, looked like a big steel cage, and you would pull it along at probably about one mile an hour. The clams would go into it. When you lifted it up, at the back of the dredge was a big bag made out of steel rings. And I used to pull this line called the pupa. It was kind of like a [zipper?] The pupa [inaudible] all the calms would fall out onto the deck into a pile. In fact, we had clams so thick back then, we couldn't even stay up with the pile. The captain would have to drift for a few minutes sometimes so we could clear the deck because the pile would get big. As a matter of fact, back then we used to sell them to Campbell's soup company – clam chowder. Till they got [wise?] and bought their own boats. I think that's what happened. [inaudible]. We used to fill up two trailers a day for them. Oh, it was great.

NS: So, there would be this big pile of clams, and you mentioned that there would be other things that were caught in the dredges.

JS: We used to catch a lot of [fluke, blue dredge?] and we would take the fluke over to [Woodcleft?] and sell it. We'd have money to put food on the boat and coffee and stuff. We used to catch big knuckleheads. Some people know them as anglerfish. Some people see them on the fish market stand, they're called ocean blowfish. What else do they call them? They call them monkfish. We used to catch big 25 pounders. You'd only catch two or three for the day, they're big. Definitely [inaudible]. We caught a torpedo once off of John's Beach. It was about four feet long. That was kind of scary because we knew that [it never hit a ship?] [inaudible] [it was just a full torpedo?] Every now and then you'll catch a stray bass in the traps. It was mostly flat fish on the bottom that you would catch. The angler fish stay on the bottom, the fluke stay on the bottom. So, we would catch those. The rest was mainly clams. We'd catch other things like claw fish. Sometimes those pufferfish.

NS: [inaudible] Young boy. How old were you when you first went out on the ocean?

JS: When I first went on that boat, I was about 13. But when I used to go out with my dad – I used to go out with my dad since I was one or two years old. He used to take me all the time.

NS: How was he catching the fish? What methods was he using?

JS: My father? When we clammed in the bay, we used to just jump overboard in the [summertime?], and go with our feet and our hands. Catch three buckets, four buckets. We could've caught a lot, but we

just took what we needed. He started me with that when I was probably about seven or eight years old, and I haven't stopped since. Been clamming ever since. As a matter of fact, my first captain on that 78-foot boat – today is his first day back out after a year. [inaudible]. Pretty sure he'll be coming out of that inlet on a big boat –

NS: What's his name?

JS: His name is John. We call him Captain John. He should be coming out that inlet real soon on an 83-foot boat. The man is 74 years old now and still a captain of a clam boat.

NS: Do you know his last name?

JS: His last name is Dempsey. John Dempsey. He don't want to give up. He's still going [strong?].

NS: Where was his boat docked?

JS: The boat he's on is docked at [inaudible]. He should be sailing on in today. If it's not today, it's going to be tomorrow.

NS: Now, is that where he was when you started working on his boat?

JS: When I started working for him, he was with a different company. He was with the Freeport Sea Clam. It was only about three, four blocks from my house. I used to pass it on the way to the candy store. So, that's how I kind of got the job. I got started by always wondering what was going on down that driveway with the big boat. After talking with them, they told me I could go out with them if I wanted. Started going out with them. 15 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a bottle of soda, and away I was 4:30 every morning. All summer long. Yes, [it was crazy?].

NS: What were some of the most important things you learned from him?

JS: Safety. Safety always came first before [the catch?]. Always safety first, no matter what.

NS: What were some of the precautions you had to take?

JS: Never leave lines out on the deck or you can trip on them. Always make sure the deck was clean so you don't slip on the [inaudible] overboard. If it was nasty out, never go out on the deck by yourself – always make sure someone knew you were going outside, whether you were on your way out or on your way in. [inaudible]. That went for anybody, not just because we were little kids. He taught me how to steer. When we used to work off of Fire Island, it's like a

three and a half hour ride. He'd stack up two of those wooden milk crates and stand me on top of them and tell me to head west. "Don't go near that white water on the beach." I would steer home. He used to set the egg timer and just like clockwork he'd wake up right as I got to that inlet. He'd wake up and come up the staircase. Those were the good old days.

NS: Was he always a clammer or did he used to fish for other things?

JS: Yes, he fished. He did fish for a while in between clamming.

NS: Okay, can you tell us a little bit about that, how he did that?

JS: I think he used to go porgy fishing offshore in the winter. Another big 83-foot boat. He used to go offshore for three or four days, sometimes five. Stay out until the boat was full. Come home. Could be porgies, could be squid, could be mackerels, could be fluke. But I do know he used to like going porgy fishing.

NS: At this point had you finished high school? Because you said you were out for three or four days.

JS: Well, when he used to go offshore fishing, I never was with him in the [winter?]. I was probably clamming in the bay back then.

NS: Let's get back to your story. What were your teenage years like? You mentioned you [worked on the boat?]. When was that? What time of year?

JS: In the summertime. During the teenage years, it was mostly in the summer and the weekends because we had to go to school. Occasionally, I would slip to go out [inaudible]. Because we were young [inaudible]. I also learned about gillnetting when I was a teenager.

NS: From who?

JS: From a man named [Allan Keller?]. I used to pump gas at the [inaudible] at the end of Woodcleft Canal when I was 15,16,17 years old, and this man used to come in with his kids on a gillnet boat. He started taking me out on his gillnet boat. Then he told me one day, he said, "My son knows how to work this boat, but I just don't want to let him go out on the ocean by himself, he's only 13. But if the two of you guys go together, you can take the boat." I was 15, [Davey?] was 13, and we used to go out on the boat. We used to come right out here, fishing all day. If I wasn't fishing with them, I was in the bay clamming. If I wasn't clamming in the bay or fishing with them, I was on another clam boat. There was always something going on. There definitely was always something going on. If it was too nasty to be in the ocean, you'd stay in the bay.

NS: What kind of clamming boat did you use?

JS: My own clamming boat? I started out with a rowboat. Then I had a 13-foot boat when I was about 11, 18 horsepower. Remember, I worked all summer to get the money up. It was $200 [inaudible].

NS: What kind of boat was it?

JS: That was a Boston Whaler, a 13-foot Boston Whaler. Then after that I got myself a 15-foot Garvey. That was like now, I was really a clammer. That was the best.

NS: Where did you get it?

JS: I got that boat through a friend that I met at another gas station [in front of?] a bait station. I bought that boat off of him. How much did I pay for that boat? I don't even remember what I paid for it. That one was at least $200 or $300 without a motor. So I had to come up with a motor now. But I still had my other little boat. So I fixed up that Garvey. It had 40 horsepower. My uncle gave me a 40 horsepower one. So the motor was [inaudible]. I had that on for [16?] years. I used to do everything in that boat. I even put nets in. I used to come out in the ocean and fish with that 16-foot boat. I used to go out off and catch cod fish in that little 16-footer in the month of February. Caught fish in that, in the fog where you couldn't see past the bow of that little boat. You stand straight into the wind, hoped the wind didn't change, and just come home with the wind directly behind your back. We used manage to find our way back home. It was amazing. I wouldn't do that now. Back then we did it. Back then you weren't afraid of anything. You didn't know bad things could happen. I've taken friends out meteorite hunting. eight miles offshore in the summertime.

NS: What kind of hunting?

JS: We called it meteorite hunting because the further you get off away from land, the more you see the sky. There's no lights. So, we used to take friends way out there looking for meteorites. because there are no lights. When they said there was going to be a meteor shower, we would go way out because it was so dark. Once you get out there you see all the stars, everything. But that little boat – oh my god, I bet you, I don't know how many bushels of clams we caught with that boat. Probably 50,000 bushels, I would think, in the time I had that boat.

NS: You were still treading and digging?

JS: Treading in the summer. Hacking on clam bars in the winter and the summer. Raking. My thing is mainly raking. I rake a lot of clams.

NS: What was your first rake like?

JS: My first rake was from a guy up in Huntington. I think the name was called [inaudible] rake, manufacturer. A guy by the name of John built me my first clam rake. I was about 16 when I got my first clam rake.

NS: Do you remember what kind of rake it was? [inaudible].

JS: It was before they came out with the Rhode Island rake. It was just called a mud rake. We

used to call them mud rakes back then. All made out of steel. I probably had that rake for a year or two before I wore it out. Nowadays they're made out of stainless steel, so they always look shiny and brand new. My stainless steel rake I have now I've had for more than two years. [inaudible] clams with that rake, too.

NS: Do you remember where you got that rake from?

JS: That rake I got from a guy named Ray out of Bay Shore. It's called [inaudible]. We became friends. [inaudible]. He just passed on about a year and half ago. Now I was just introduced to another new guy. I just got my first rake off of him six weeks ago. It seems [inaudible].

NS: You've been using clam rakes for how long now?

JS: I'd say about 35 years. 36 or 37 years, something like that.

NS: How do you know where to go clamming?

JS: After all these years, the spots seem to stay the same. But there are new spots. There are spots that come and go. It's like a hunt. It's like hunting. I never thought of it that way until one of my friends said, "Are you going clam hunting today?" I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I am." He's kind of right. It's like an easter egg hunt. You're looking for that clam. But for the most part, a lot of them grow back in the same areas. There's areas where they are and there's areas where there aren't. As far as I know they never were there either. It's just the way it is. Maybe something to do with the tide, doesn't let clams stay in certain areas. I don't know but it's – some places have them and some places don't.

NS: When you were first getting started, how many clammers were there?

JS: When I first got into clamming was the mid 70s, 1974-75. Out in the Great South Bay was a big clam boon. Between '75 and '77. There were a lot of clams out there. I'd go out there occasionally after school. It was a long ride but I would go out that way. Because actually our bay was closed from '72 to '81.

NS: How come?

JS: I'm not even sure why. I was too young to even know why. So I had to travel. I couldn't stay in our area, our area wasn't open. I could go to Zack's Bay in the wintertime, but that was it. I had to go further east. So, I used to go down there. A lot of clammers back then. You could walk [across their boats?]. They just opened an area just this past week, [Hempstead Harbor?]. It's juts like that again, you could walk right across their boats, there's so many of them. I might go up there. A good friend [invited me up there with him?] [inaudible]. I might go up there for this summer. [inaudible]. Go work there in the harbor. [inaudible].at Channel East. So I used to go there – a lot of clams in that bay.

NS: How did you get out? Did you take your boat out there? Where did you keep your boats?

JS: My boats are always in Freeport.

NS: In Freeport, where did you keep them?

JS: My parents had a house on the water. So, I kept the boats behind the house. There was a time I always had two Garvies, so in case one broke down, I could always go clamming the next day. I always had two. It's only up until the last year or two that [inaudible]. That house was sold [inaudible].

NS: Where do you keep your boats now?

JS: One's on one side of Freeport, one's on the other side.

NS: Where exactly? Are they in marinas?

JS: Yes, they're in small marinas. [inaudible]. This one's in marina [inaudible] [six boats] [inaudible] [traffic around?].

NS: How much do you pay to dock there?

JS: Between the two boats I pay $2,500. If I was in a big fancy [version?] I'd be paying $6,000 a year. These little places are [inaudible]. Water space is very expensive these days.

NS: Where was the house you grew up in?

JS: The house I grew up in was down towards the end of [south?] Maine Street. [inaudible] park. [inaudible].

NS: Were there other clammers in your neighborhood?

JS: No, [inaudible].

NS: What about other [inaudible]

JS: Weekends.

NS: Recreational.

JS: Recreational.

NS: [inaudible]

JS: [inaudible] recreational. Everybody had a regular job. [Go out?] on weekends, occasionally after work some days. Most of the commercial people were [inaudible] [Mount?]. They were over that way or in Baldwin. On that side of Freeport there weren't a lot of commercial [fishing boats?]. But back in the 50s and 60s, it was [inaudible]. There was a lot of oyster [inaudible] in the 50s and 60s. [inaudible].

NS: Let's get back to your story. So, when did you decide to become a commercial fisherman?

JS: It wasn't really a decision. It's just what we used to do. We used to make a couple of dollars at it. There was no such thing as a license back then, you just did it. And you'd go into Woodcleft and sell all your stuff.

NS: Who did you sell to?

JS: To local markets. Cold Storage Fish Market, Captain Ben's, Two Cousins. I first started selling clams to Two Cousins. We were so little. If it was low tide when I got there I couldn't even get the clams off the boat. They used to have to send down the older guys, the 18 and 19 year old guys, to come down to my boat and carry the clams off my boat. That's how little we were. We had to go by boat because we didn't have driver's licenses. That was the easiest way to do it, go right there.

NS: Do you remember what you got paid when you first started clamming?

JS: When I first started clamming, we used to get $32 a bushel for Littlenecks, which was pretty good. Then after that big freeze from '75-'76, a bushel went from $32 to $115. And that lasted for a few weeks after the freeze until other clammers were [inaudible]. That was [inaudible].

NS: Why did the price go up so much?

JS: Because the whole bay froze. I remember [big chunks of ice?] out in the bay, 26 inches from top to bottom.

NS: How would you [pass?]?

JS: We actually hooked up [a guard post?] [inaudible] [sink?].

NS: On the boat?

JS: Behind the house. My neighbor was in the hospital because [his boat sank?]. [inaudible]. We stacked them up, [I have pictures of that?], six or seven boxes of ice stacked up, [inaudible] feet high. Some of them were 26 inches thick, big ice blocks. The whole entire Island was shut down. Nobody could. It was frozen solid like a rock. So the price went up because no one could get them. It's always supply and demand with this stuff. It's always like that.

NS: You used to cut the ice in the canal?

JS: Yes.

NS: You could go clamming right there in the canal?

JS: Well, you couldn't go clamming.

NS: Where would you go clamming?

JS: We'd go clamming out in the water, out in the bay. Somedays, you'd start the motor, and the

motor would [inaudible] and the propeller would [inaudible] for five minutes. When we were iced in, this way your boat didn't get locked in [solid?]. It was always in a puddle of water. This went on for [three weeks?]. People were ice skating [inaudible] bridge. The whole bay was just solid. It happened again nine or 10 years ago. We were iced in for 10 days. I remember. January 21- 31. That was in 2002, 2003. [inaudible] for 10 days. All the canals froze. The bay froze too. Some days you'd go out, and look what path was clear on the way out, wasn't clear on the way back and you'd find a different way back. [inaudible] come drifting down [inaudible]. That's when you know it's cold. When the sprays [blow up on?] your rain jacket, become a half inch thick. When you go to bend your arm, the ice just cracks off your arm. When you have to steer home with your back to the wind, that's when you know it's cold. Then ice builds up on your back. I hope [inaudible] like that again. [inaudible] those are tough. Then you have to worry about your clams freezing. Now if it's 20 degrees or less I won't go out. When you first wake up, if it's like 18 when you first wake up, you know it's going to be at least 21 - 22 for the day once the sun starts beating. Once it's 2:00 in the afternoon, 1:00 in the afternoon, it starts getting cold again. So, you want to catch [inaudible] those days. Low tide's between 10:00 and 1:00. Those are the warmest days. When it's [inaudible].

NS: Would you go out alone?

JS: Yes, I just about always go out alone. [inaudible]. That's how I got my first [inaudible]. There's not really that many people out there [inaudible]. That's why I got my first cellphone. [inaudible].

NS: When did you start – coming back to Great South Bay, when did you start [inaudible]?

JS: I think it was '81, possible '82.

NS: Were you fishing for other things at that point in time?

JS: Back then I was gillnetting a lot.

NS: Who taught you how to gillnet? [inaudible].

JS: No, [inaudible] ocean. This guy named [Allan Keller?] and his son, [Davey?].

NS: Oh, that's right.

JS: They taught me about gillnetting.

NS: Where did he keep his boat?

JS: His boat was on Woodcleft, usually tied behind the fish market.

NS: Do you remember the name of his boat?

JS: The [*Joanne Jay?*]. It was 33-foot [inaudible]. It was like a [bulldog?]. [inaudible]. Nothing stopped it. [inaudible] bricks. [inaudible] Cold Storage Fish Market.

NS: Where is Cold Storage?

JS: Cold Storage is now where, I think it's a Japanese sushi house now. That was Cold Storage. There was quite a few fishing boats [tied behind it?]. I think [inaudible]. They'd load up the boat with ice, either at night or early in the morning and go out and fish. If they couldn't use it, they'd send it to the fish market. It was nice, we'd just come in, pull up to their [inaudible] [tie in?].

NS: Did you fish year round?

JS: Mostly. There was a spot between Christmas – well, no, it actually started during hunting season. We used to stop fishing the first week in November because there was too many sand sharks, and we didn't want to catch any sand sharks. [inaudible]. Nobody really wanted [inaudible]. Then until the week between Christmas and New Year's, we'd start cod fishing [inaudible]. We'd cod fish all the way until around the second week of March. Right as the cod fish would leave, the whiting would start. [inaudible]. You'd catch [lings?], you'd catch whiting, you'd catch blues. Then as the water warmed up a little, you'd start to catch mackerel. Then about a couple of weeks after the mackerel, you'd catch [blues?], you'd start catching sea trout, and fluke [inaudible] [bluefins?]. [Butterfish, too?]. But mainly, the majority was blues. [inaudible].

NS: Were the prices for fish the same overall? [inaudible]. Was there a particularly good fish?

JS: Good fish was sea trout. It was a good fish to catch. Fluke, flounder. Mackerel was good. [inaudible] when the price of blues [inaudible] price of [white?]. There was a certain price [inaudible] 15 cents a pound. Most of the people [inaudible] would go fishing for [inaudible] the price [inaudible]. Everybody stuck together. [inaudible] instead of getting paid for it, we got a bill. Then they charged us six cents a pound to ship it. So that meant the ice [inaudible] plus the place [inaudible]. So, every 100 pounds would cost us six dollars. I remember one time getting a bill for $180. We sent [inaudible] they said, "What are you crazy?" [inaudible]. So, not only did we [inaudible]. [35 years ago?] [inaudible] [$2,000 for 1,000 pounds?] [inaudible] [we always had plenty of fish?] [inaudible].

NS: Do you want to stop here?

JS: I think so, yes.

----------End of Transcript----------

Reviewed by Nicole Zador on 08/23/2024