Interview with Flo Sharkey

Narrator: Flo Sharkey
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 3, 2000, Steve Warrick interviewed Flo Sharkey as part of the Long Island Traditions oral history collection. Flo, a dedicated baywoman from Long Island, comes from a family deeply rooted in the fishing and shellfishing industry. Flo explains the various methods she uses when clamming and discusses the types of clams she gathers. She learned the trade from her brother and father and shares insights about treading and scratch raking. Flo mentions the importance of following the clammers' code of ethics and the territorial nature of clamming, with people becoming upset if someone encroaches on their work area. Due to the competitive nature of clamming, earning fifty percent of your wages from clamming is necessary to obtain a license. Flo reflects on the changing dynamics in the industry, noting that in the past, many clammers were college students earning money to support their education. However, regulations now require clams to be sold within one hour of docking. As she has grown older, she has come to appreciate the significance of preserving family traditions. Flo's father wanted them to be self-sufficient and capable of taking care of themselves while working on the bay. She speaks of her brother teaching her son the art of razor clamming, continuing the family tradition. However, Flo expresses concern about the future of the bay, believing it won't be there for the next generation. She mentions the impact of water quality on clamming, with many clammers exposed to diseases from the water. Flo also laments the destruction of wetlands, which act as natural filters to keep the water clean. Flo reminisces about the bay's past, where thousands of people worked as baymen. Nowadays, seeing two clammers at once is considered a lot. She recalls a time when baymen would help one another, emphasizing the sense of community that has been lost. In winter, Flo engages in oystering on the North Shore, a different way of life compared to clamming. Despite the challenges, Flo describes her life on the bay as hard yet fulfilling. When asked what she would tell others about working on the bay, Flo states, "It's a hard life, it's a fun life, and you have to love it to do it."

Steve Warrick: This is Steve Warrick working with *Long Island Traditions*. Today, I am talking to Flo Sharkey. We're going to be talking about clamming, doing some killeying along the Great South Bay. Place is down where Flo docks her boat in Patchogue. Today is July 3rd, 2000. This is tape 003, side A. Could you tell me your full name?

Flo Sharkey: My full name is Florence Sharkey, S-H-A-R-K-E-Y.

SW: When and where were you born?

FS: I was born in Port Jefferson. I don't know if I'm going to tell you – my right birthday is 12/13/43.

SW: Was your family involved in commercial fishing, shellfishing business?

FS: My father was the second-generation fisherman, and I'm the third, and my son is the fourth. They've done it basically all their lives. I've done it most of my life, but I had a brief period where I did work in supermarkets. But I still, on weekends and holidays, I went out fishing.

SW: Did you learn a lot from your dad?

FS: Well, most of it was either through my dad or through my father – my dad or my brother. My father was a clam digger and a fisherman, but basically liked fishing. My brothers were first clammers and went back into the fishing. I basically, most of my life, did clamming. I liked the clamming better.

SW: What type of clamming do you do? Do you do raking, tonging?

FS: With things going bad, basically, when I was young, I treaded with my feet from eleven years old. I treaded to at least well into my thirties, and then started scratch raking. Basically, that's all I do throughout the year is scratch raking in the fall, in the winter, in the spring, and tread with my feet in the summer.

SW: Which do you like better? Do you like doing the scratch raking or the treading?

FS: Well, at most times, I used to like treading the best. But now that I'm getting older, I don't like ducking my head so much, so I try to scratch rake most of the time.

SW: Is there a certain technique you have to have in treading?

FS: Most of the time, even when we taught like my son and the other members of the family, from about the first week to about a month, they basically just get the technique down. After that, they get pretty good at it, and every day, they get a little better. But after forty-three years of still learning, I always find something a little different or a little better.

SW: What do you have to do with treading? Do you pull the clam up? Do you reach down to pick it up off of the bottom.

FS: Basically, we walk backwards on the bottom using your whole foot. We always walk backwards. When we feel something touching our foot, at the very bottom of the ball of the foot – the clam usually sticks up a little bit to come up to feed – we'll duck down and get it. But most of the time, it's a clam. But sometimes, it's a shell. Once in a while, even a crab's got on us by the finger. But most of the time, it's a clam. Can we tell a live one or dead one? I would say about ninety percent of the time, we can tell the difference. But if it's a big clam, we move it with a toe or something, if it's too big, we can't tell the difference, where it's smaller, we can. If it moves, it's not a real clam. So, we go from there that way.

SW: What type of clams would you generally get? What size?

FS: When we were young, it was called a wild clam, and no one puts them out there, they're wild. Basically, when they first started off, we got cherries, chowders, and necks. But now, forty-some-odd years later, basically, we only catch necks to little necks. The cherries and chowders are out of the bay, caught up, gone.

SW: Have they changed the names over the years of these clams?

FS: Yes, they have. I guess because of the quantity isn't there, number one, they changed how we call them. We used to go by bushels and weight. Now, we go by count. We used to just call the clam a "neck" with everything up to a cherry. But now, it's called "little neck," "neck," "top neck." If it looks like a clam, smells like a clam, it is a "neck" to me, nowadays.

SW: What's the market? What do they want at the market when you take in your clams? Do they just want the little necks?

FS: Well, they'll take anything, especially this year where it's the worst we've ever seen. And they'll recull, even though we count up to 400 clams, they put them on the machine, number one, to see if you've got any seed in there. You're not allowed anything under one inch. The machine will tell them which is the top neck, which is the neck, and which is the cherry or chowder on one of these machines at the regular clam shops.

SW: How about when you're scratch raking? How hard is that?

FS: I don't think you can just go out there and scratch rake. Somebody has to teach you a little bit. I have my father's rake that he made in the 30s. It's for grass. Not too many people have it. It's called a turtle rake. Of course, he designed it. If I see anybody with it, something like mine, I ask them where they get it and how did they come about it, because there wasn't too many made. But now, we have one fellow that is duplicating that rake. But we don't like the pattern to get out. Let's put it that way. That's why if I see somebody who's got a rake something like mine, don't worry, I scoot over there and find out where he got it and how he got it. Like I said, the more you do it, the better you get at it. I've been doing it since I was quite young. First, when I started raking, I hated it, because I was so much better with my feet. But you can't use your feet with this, so you had to come to something. But now, I actually like the scratch raking better.

SW: What's the depth of water, say, you look at when you're doing the scratch raking?

FS: Scratch raking basically is up to your waist is your best scratching. Now, through time, because we're going deeper and deeper for the clams – we used to just have to go along the flats. Now, we go up almost to our chest, and we use different types of stilts to give us the height up to the waist. Because if it gets too high, your arms are in the water and you can't push properly. So, your waist is the best for your body because you're not bending over too far or you're not pushing your arms in the water too long. So, waist is the best.

SW: When you say stilts, what are these stilts?

FS: Stilts is man-made. They're made out of wood or metal. I have three different sets. Number one, when I first started scratch raking, I went down the cellar and found my father's old stilts. The only difference between his and mine is, years ago, they didn't have Velcro. When we had Velcro, boy, it made it so much easier to make a stilt. I never did figure out how – because the material on his old stilts was so bad, I couldn't tell how he had them together. At first, I used ropes for mine, then I used the material you put in your lawn chairs. Then finally, I got to canvas and Velcro, and it really works well. But then when I was in Florida, clamming, the guys showed me how to make stilts out of metal. But that kind of stilt, you need a wetsuit on, because it can go from a foot and a half to seven feet. But you're like a monster walking down the water. I only wear a wetsuit with them because you can tumble over, where, in the wintertime, I only use the wood stilts because I have waders on, and I can't afford to fall. If you fall, you drown then.

SW: So, is it awkward walking on the stilts?

FS: No, after a while, it's – I'd rather not be on them, but if I have to, I like the wood better than the metal because the metal is much higher. I got so I can walk for a mile on them better. But if I fall off, I use my rake as my crutch to get back to the boat to put them back on. You have to put them on in the boat. You can't put them on in the water.

SW: What type of boat?

FS: I use a Steiger Craft, an eighteen-foot Steiger Craft. Number one, it's a good overboard boat. Basically, I'm always in the water. I never clam out of the boat. Where the guys with the long handles do, I don't, especially as I got older. I guess I don't have the power I used to have. So, I'm overboard. It's easier for me.

SW: How about when you do killeys or trapping killeys?

FS: I have a small boat that I go up in the shallow waters along the Great South Bay, but basically on the mainland side. I usually look for the wetlands and mosquito ditches where the killeys on the high tide go up into the mosquito ditches and come out when the tide goes out. When a storm comes now – and it never used to happen years ago that if you're too far up the creek, everything in your pot including your crab will die through road runoff and pollution in the big creeks nowadays. But when I first started off, that never happened to you.

SW: Do you like to go out killeying?

FS: I like killeying, and I can't even tell you why. But I do like it. My son started it when he was a little boy. I never used to have to killey. I used to basically just clam. But now, I would say 50-50 – 50 in killeying in the summertime and 50 in clamming.

SW: Now, are you doing that because the clam population is dwindling?

FS: Yes, basically because I can't make a full salary on clamming. So, that's what made me decide to go, "Well, I got to do something else or get a land job, and I'd rather have an on-the-water job." So, that's what made me go to the killeying business.

SW: What do you trap them in? Could you describe the killey trap to me?

FS: A killey trap is – basically, your best trap is one that you made yourself. I have a pattern for my father's when he made eel pots, but I used a smaller mesh for killeys. You make it out of wood and – what the heck is it called – wire, certain mesh wire. The smaller the mesh for killeys, the better you are. Nowadays, we use coated wire, and it seems to last a little longer than just the plain metal wire.

SW: About how big is the killey trap?

FS: I don't know the measurements. It's about a foot and a half long and a foot wide. It has a funnel. The killeys go up in the funnel. Basically, the bait we use to put in the pot is either rolls of bread that can come out of some store and horseshoe crabs. There's nothing, there's no bait that works better than horseshoe crabs that we chop up and use for bait for killeys.

SW: Why do you think that is?

FS: Because we've tried everything else. We tried clams. We tried soft clams. I even had one man yesterday tell me, "Use cut-up fish." It just doesn't work. You've got to have horseshoe crabs to catch killeys. A little bread won't hurt, but it's not going to do the job the horseshoe crab will do.

SW: Where do you get your horseshoe crabs?

FS: At a certain time of the year, basically in June and the end of May, on a full moon, you go along shore and you gather them – where people don't go, where it's flat and it's flat bottom that goes up – not to a bog, to a sand beach. You usually go where your father took you when you was a kid to gather horseshoe crabs for him. You pen them up until you need them.

SW: You make the pen out of netting?

FS: Yes. Well, my father when he used to make it, it was out of wood. Nowadays, we have the

netting. So, we use the netting to make the pens with four sticks to hold the net up and hope nobody steals your horseshoe crabs you worked for during the night.

SW: You keep them right in the water?

FS: Yes, they have to stay in the water. They have to stay with some drainage, where there's some water flow. You usually try to get them as close as you can to the canal.

SW: When you're out there clamming, if there were other clammers out there, do they respect boundaries out in the natural state or do people come to where just the clams are or is there a code of ethics regarding that?

FS: Well, years ago, there was always a code of ethics. But now, because the clamming is so hard, they kind of make the wrong codes. But basically, you don't own the clam until it's in your basket. Years ago, if somebody come upon you, you just let them clam. There was plenty of clams. There was enough for everyone. Now, being it's hard clamming and they're not everywhere like they were years ago, the guys do get mad. "I got a buoy" or "Don't go by my buoy." But the real rule of law or thumb of law is that if you feel there's clams there, you must go wherever they are. No matter what they say or do, you just stay there and you clam. He doesn't own them until he's in his basket. When he puts them on the dock, that's when you really know you own them, and the man puts the money in your hand. That's when you own them, not until then. But these other fellows think they own them. The land is for everyone. I tell them when they try to run you off that nobody owns those clams. Mother Nature owns them. Until they're in your basket, you don't own them. But we do have men – and this is only new. Years ago, nobody would bother you. When I first started off, there was five old men out there, and they didn't bother anybody. Now, if you come upon them and you just decided that's where you're going to clam, everybody's giving you dirty eyes and dirty looks. But why do you care? As long as you're catching a few clams, you just continue on.

SW: Now, these people, are they commercial shell fishermen or are they recreational clam diggers?

FS: We have a lot of recreational, especially what I do in the water. Once they see a clam digger, they think we really know everything, they think. Unless they actually jump in my basket or put the anchor in my boat, I really don't care what they do. But like I said, it's the same for me as – even though I have a license, it's the same for them. It's everyone. It's called the wild clam.

SW: Is there anything special you have to do to get a license for commercial?

FS: Now, it is. Years ago, you didn't. You just brought your money down to the DEC and applied for it. You gave the money, and they gave you a license. Now, because those things are so tight, they'll tell you you have to make 50 percent of your living to get a license. Now, if you haven't done it, how do you make 50 percent? Now, my son wanted to be a crabber. He was still in high school, so he didn't have to fill out income tax because he wasn't making that much money. So, the DEC wouldn't give him a crabbing license because he couldn't show 50

percent of the income was through fishing. So, how he got his crab license – and he spent $3,000 for pots – is I had to give him my crabbing license, turn it over to him. I had to pay for it first, pay the $50, turn the license over to him, and then he had to pay $50. Now, I don't understand how they got $100 for the same license, but they did. That's how he is still a crabber and I'm not.

SW: What happens? Do you have to renew your license every year?

FS: Every year, you have to renew your license by January 1st. There's supposed to be no moratorium on how many clammers there are, but in every other species of fish, there is a moratorium on. In other words, if you hadn't had a license before, you're not going to get a license. The clamming, I do believe – in any other industry in the United States, if you were an electrician, the state or nobody could tell you, "You couldn't be an electrician." I don't understand why they try to say it now, limit the people out of it. Because when I first started, most of the men that were clam-treading like myself were men going to college. They were working their way through college in the summertime. I feel that if a kid is going to school, he should be entitled to go out there and make a living. If he had a boat and a means of doing it or someone to teach them how to do it, I don't think the state of New York or the town of Brookhaven or the town of Islip should be telling these kids that they can't go out and make a living if they have the means of doing it. It is a good life. Believe me, when they're done with a day's work, they're not going to go out and get in trouble, because they'll be too tired. We often thought that's why my father insisted that we go to work. We didn't have time to get in trouble because we're too tired after we got done working.

SW: How long of a day do you work?

FS: Especially as a young girl, we had to be at our boats by 7:00 in the morning. We jumped back in the boat by 2:00, then it was time to sort off and either sail home to the mainland to sell or sail back to the beach where our parents were. We'd go home every other day with our clams. But nowadays, there's a law that you only have one hour to get to shore to sell your clams off. Once you hit dock, you've got one hour to get to wherever you're going by legal law to sell your clams.

SW: When did that law come into existence?

FS: I think that came in in 1998, one-hour limit once you hit dock to sell your clams.

SW: Why is that? Do you know why they have it?

FS: Well, they'll tell you it's some bacteria that might get into clams. But that's a farce, because I'll tell you why. Most of the shops do have refrigeration that these clams do go into. The clams are coming out of seventy-degree water – seventy and seventy-five-degree water. Now, you want to bring them down to fifty and below and bring them into the shop, put them in the refrigerator, take them out to sort them, take them out to put them on a truck, put them back into the refrigerator. Nobody's telling me that they're not doing more harm to that clam than giving me a time to be in on a dock by. It doesn't work that way. They can't go up and down in temperature.

SW: What would you say is one of the reasons you are clamming? Was it because you like to be out on the water, following in the tradition of your father?

FS: Well, as you get older, you realize the importance of following the tradition of your father. But when I was young, I think I did it more for the money and for the enjoyment of not having a boss telling you when you could and could not come home. The money was there for you. But as you got older, you realize the importance of doing what your parents showed you. I don't think my father really wanted us to do it full-time, but he wanted us to know it in case something happened to a job, that we could always feed the family. I don't know if he really wanted to teach us. He made us work on how to get home if you break down, not to ask for help. You've got to be able to do it yourself. That was his way to teach us that we wouldn't have any trouble if something went wrong in the boat – and to sail no matter what weather it is, to learn how to sail. I'm not sure that he really meant for us to only have it as a full-time job, even though most of my brothers and sisters, that's all their full-time job was. I'm the only one that really went off the water and on the water and off the water. They liked it so much they never had a land job, where I did have a land job. But still, on weekends, in my time off, went to the water because I enjoyed it, and I like to go on it.

SW: Can you still make a decent living now off of that?

FS: Well, not as a permanent of one anything. You have to follow the trends now. My son right now is razor clamming because he can make a little money doing that. The only reason he can do that, being a young guy, is that his uncle showed him how to make a bench, took him out there, taught him about the bench, and how to run a motor on a bench. Could a young guy just say, "I want to do this?" No. From us, teaching a lot of people and then them [inaudible] they won't teach people any longer. They'll only teach a family member. My son goes clamming – diving for clams in deep water with a tank on. He's not allowed to take anybody with him when he does that on his spots – on my brother's spots, because my brother showed him where to go and how to go. If destitute, he knows he can make a day's pay there. But he's not allowed to bring anybody else with him. So that if all else fails, he knows he has a little spot to go to, that he'll at least get enough money for that day or a week. So, if something happens to him, then he doesn't have to worry about his nephew having food money. The old-timers, years ago, learned to keep their mouths shut and not tell everybody. If they knew something, you kept it in the family. I hope my son will respect the family law. [laughter]

SW: Could you tell me what a razor clam is?

FS: A razor clam – in my time, I rarely see them. I've seen shells of them. It looks like just what it says, a razor. It's thin. It's about 12 inches long. It darts. It goes very deep in the bottom – six inches, eight inches into the bottom. That's why we don't see them. Normally, if they're dead, we'll see the old shell on top. But they know how to look for holes and what kind of holes to look for when the tide is down to see if they're there. It darts a tongue out. That's how it gets up and down in the sand and in the water. It darts so fast. It looks like a little jet going in the water. I wish I had a shell to show you. Like I said, it's 12 inches long, basically. They could move. If my son was to work in this one little area too much, a whole little tribe or a whole little village will get up and move some place else. Now, you got to find them again. If you work a week in one spot, then you must move to another and look for them again because

the whole little village might get up and move and go to another little spot. But they're taught to look for holes when the tide is down where the soft clam or razor clam is.

SW: What do they use the razor clams for once they take them to market?

FS: Basically, the Chinese people eat them. They're rubbery. To me they're rubbery in taste. Maybe I just don't know how to cook them, where the Chinese people know how to cook them. But basically, it's Chinatown, New York, that buys most of the razor clams. Oriental people know, I guess, from their country, they know how to cook them and use them. But the Americans are not too much into that. So, they have to also find a buyer where to sell them. That's a big thing too.

SW: Now, how do you and your family feel about your son getting into working on the bay and doing the clamming?

FS: Oh, we want him to know it just like our father wanted us to know. But I begged with him to go to college, because I feel, in his lifetime, he's not going to have the bay like we had. We've got a lot of environmental people, but nobody really cares about the bay. It's never going to bring him the livelihood we had, because it has been decreasing so fast and furious. So, I begged him to go to college. Did all his paperwork for him to – if not college, some kind of trade school. So, if something happens to me, I know he can provide for himself, because I know the bay, and his generation won't be there for him. But I just want to say, also, the bay is not doing well in any of the canals or creeks and the brown tide. But also, it's going to come to the big fish, us, if we don't clean up the water, because we've seen it in the Carolinas. We've seen it in Florida where our men went there to work, come back with sores they couldn't identify and got very sick over it. It was from the quality of water that they were working in.

SW: Did you experience that when you went to Florida yourself?

FS: I didn't. I, myself, didn't. But at least ten guys from the town of Patchogue come back with these humongous sores, and the doctors couldn't identify them. They were coming back with sicknesses where they couldn't even work even a land job, that they were throwing up and disoriented. The Carolinas were checking to see what some of their men were getting sick over. It wasn't in a contained lab. Even the lab technicians were coming up with the same sickness where they couldn't even dial a telephone. There is a name for this sickness, and I can't even say it. It's a big, long – visteria, some kind of visteria. [Editor's Note: Possible vibrio]. The Carolinas got it, Virginia's got it, and the only thing that saves New York so far is that we have a cold winter. It must kill it off. Where down south, they've got too much heat. So, they keep it year-round. That's what our baymen feel. I don't know if that's the real truth. It might have something to do with it, where we have a lot of ice and cold winters. It doesn't get a chance to get that bloom up here.

SW: So, you've never encountered any of that?

FS: I haven't, not in this area. But I do know if we don't [inaudible] the way we are, it will prevail.

SW: Do you think a lot of it's due to more development building and people moving out in this area?

FS: Well, I'm sure it is, and wetlands being destroyed. That gives the water the chance to be – not to have the pollution. If the wetlands were there, it would do the natural function of cleaning up the water before it gets to the bays. Without the wetlands, actually, we're allowing them to get to the people. I really believe that some of this stuff is killing people, but most people don't understand it.

SW: So, the wetlands act as a natural filter?

FS: Filter. The Town of Brookhaven will tell you, "We have a law. There's no destruction of wetlands nowadays." Well, I know that to be an exact lie, because I see two down at the end of our river here, developing our wetlands. Nothing's done about it. If you've got the right money, the right power, you can do it.

SW: This is Steve Warrick, continuing the interview with Flo Sharkey for Long Island Traditions. This is tape 003, and this is side B. We were talking about the wetlands and sort of the destruction of the wetlands. There's not much being done about that. Has that put a lot of people out of work in the bay?

FS: Yes. From 1972, we had over 8,000 people here in the Town of Brookhaven alone. Now, we're down to 100 permits this year. A lot of men buy the permits, even though they're not working the water or are afraid of losing them. So, we have less than – for eye length of the bay, two or three miles, if you see two clam diggers nowadays, you see a lot. Well, you had 8,000 in one little bay.

SW: What did it look like when you had that many clam diggers out there?

FS: Well, basically, there wasn't any time that you weren't by yourself. There was always some other clam digger next to you. Now, all day long, if you see another clam digger, you think it's rare. In all the times that I was out here, you're never not able to see within a mile at least one. Now, it's miles and miles before you see anyone. We have different types of fishing going on, but clammers, no.

SW: When there were a lot of clammers, was there a certain kinship or camaraderie with these folks?

FS: Basically, years ago, if you broke down or anybody that you knew that broke down, you would help them get in, even if it cost you your day's pay to get the other fellow in. He would do that for you or you would do that for him. But nowadays, if you break down, you got no one to call because nobody's around you to call. If someone was having a bad day, and he was basically your friend or somebody you knew, you would tell him, "Come on over here. We're doing all right over here." But that isn't there anymore. Yes, you lose a lot of good fellows because they have big mortgages now. It's no more like a couple of hundred-dollar mortgages, so you could make more mowing lawns than you could work real hard on the bay all day. Man

could make easily a couple hundred mowing lawn. You could be out here for two days and not make a couple of hundred dollars and work hard for it. So, what would you do? Anybody in their right minds would start looking for something else. So, it's really hard. The clams aren't coming back because of the brown tide in the summertime. It's not given a chance to come back. Mother nature wants to come back. Last year, we had a pretty good bay. We had this different type of allergy that was in the bay, but it wasn't brown tide. We've seen abundance of new babies coming up. But it takes seven years to grow a clam in the Great South Bay because it takes twenty-one days to flush our back bay out to clean the water. So, we don't have it as good as right next to an inlet where they only takes about five years to grow a clam. It takes seven here.

SW: How about the oystering? Did you ever see any oystering in your lifetime?

FS: In my lifetime, no. The 38 hurricane took the oysters out of the bay. But we do oyster over on the North Shore. Now, when the oysters come in in September, that's when we're allowed to start oystering. When there's abundance, a lot of us from the South Shore will go over there. We'll get a couple of months' pay – a decent pay. Not an exceptionally high pay, but a decent pay, and we'll do oysters. Maybe they'll go from five guys to 200 guys in the Town of Brookhaven waters over on the North Shore oystering. But then because there's so many – abundance of so many guys, we're going to lose that within a two-month span of time. Again, they're wild oysters. They're nobody's oysters. Nobody planted them. They're wild.

SW: Have you done this, oystering?

FS: Yes.

SW: Going up there?

FS: Yes. We used to count on that. That would help get a few of us off the bay. So, we used that as a means to make extra money. We used to have these scallops that also helped us not clam and go into that industry for a couple of months, but we don't have that any longer neither.

SW: Is there a difference in oystering to clamming then?

FS: Oh, totally different. The oysters that we do on the North Shore is – basically, the water goes dry on the flats, and you pick them up. You just pick them up with your hands. You count them, and you bring them to a buyer. There's never where you can pick clams up in your hand and you count them or you bring them to a buyer. Total different way of life doing oysters. Same with scallops. We used to take dredges and take two people to the boat and make a very – not a great amount of money, but a decent day's pay from two to four months out of the year. But that has ended. We used to go in state waters in Greenport and Sag Harbor. We used to follow the trend. But again, that's out too.

SW: Now, is there any rivalry between the people coming from the South Shore and going up to the North Shore to do this?

FS: Oh, yes. There's a little bit. But if you're in the Town of Brookhaven, your entitlement is

allowed to go there. But if you're from another town, no. You're not supposed to go to a town water on the North Shore. Then there is a big rivalry. They don't like the guys coming from out of town there. But you can buy an out-of-town permit and do it. It costs you almost double our permits value for the town. That's not the state. That's the town.

SW: When you bring your clams back or what have you, your catch for the day, do you sell directly to a middleman? Do you sell to a restaurant? What do you do with your –

FS: Some men sell to a restaurant and all, but most men don't have the time. They count their clams and they take it to a buyer. In the Town of Brookhaven, we have about seven buyers. It's your option to go to any one of those buyers. You just hope you get the best price for your product. But there are a few, and it's usually a part-timer that will take them to a restaurant. Most of us take them directly to the buyer. We don't have the time. You put eight hours, seven hours on the bay, an hour and a half going back and forth in your boat. You don't have the time to search around other than, "Get me to the buyer. Get me out of there, and let me go home."

SW: Say if a recreational clammer has got the clams, can they take their clams to the buyer or to the restaurant?

FS: Well, they can take it to a restaurant. No one's saying they can't. If they have a customer and the recreational – and I'm sure they do it, but I don't think it's where people think there is a lot of it. I don't think there's as much as some of the baymen think it is. But they cannot take it to a regular buyer because you have to have a license. He will check your numbers on a permit number. Now, he has to keep a book on you. At the end of the year, he has to give you a 1099, telling you how much you sold to him at the end of the year, so that we can report it to the federal government. So, years ago, he might have gotten away with it, but no longer.

SW: Do you think that is helping you out some?

FS: I don't really think it is, because the buyer, when he got that 1099 that the Federal Government came in, he also got free refrigeration – many things free to put us onto the books. I'm not saying we shouldn't be on the books. What I'm saying is that he got a little extra that he forgot to tell us about. But I have no problem with a 1099. You have to report. You're not going to get away with not telling the government what you're doing. So, I'm used to it, getting checks. Sending fish and clams to the Fulton Fish Market, we always got checks. So, my family was kind of used to it. When the other guys were all crying, we were kind of – when you get a check, it's like having a 1099. So, you better report it. [laughter] So, I have a little book here. Even in my killifish, I list what I get and where I sell it in case someday, when they come down and say, "[Why?] you didn't claim this," you better have a little book.

SW: So, you got to be thinking all the time then?

FS: Yes.

SW: How about the bay? Do you really need to know the bay in order to work it?

FS: Oh, yes. You have to know the flats. Can you just go out there and say, "I can jump overboard?" No. You learn it. I learned a lot of it from my brothers. But most of the guys, if you're going to make a decent pay, you're going to learn where the holes are and where the best clam spots were. Most of the cabins of the clam boats used to have a little note on how we take ranges on spots. Most, if you ever looked in their cabins, they all had little notes with just a pencil writ on the paint of where he caught clams and what his ranges were. Many times, when we get out there, if I couldn't take a range, you wouldn't be able to get on the spot because they're not every place. You better be able to take a range to get back to where you were yesterday if you found a few clams. That's even today, because they're not in great abundances. But they've never been where they're all over the bay. They're in certain natural spawning areas where they – the clam sets, and you better hope to know where they set. That fellow's going to do better than one that doesn't know that.

SW: How about the bay itself, the tides? Do you have to work with your tides if you're out there scratching?

FS: As a scratch raker and a treader, yes, I have to work tides. But if you're a long worker, no, it doesn't matter. They go there eight hours or whatever. But some days, the water runs hotter that they'll have to move up to a flat and off the deep-water edge. They have to know that. If they're a decent clammer, they'll know that. But basically, a treader must work tides, and a scratch raker must work tides. I go three hours before and three hours after the tide. After that, if I don't have those stills, I'm not working at all. Best for me to work tides.

SW: Do the tides run pretty quick?

FS: Yes, but nothing like the North Shore. They have an eight-foot tide. We only have a two-and-a-half-foot tide here. Some days, yes, on a storm, it can really rip through. But then you've got to go up on the flats, and the men know to do that. Like I said, nothing like the North Shore. When you're there, you are going to work tides. No matter if you're a long raker or not, you're going to do the same thing, run for flats if the tide becomes ripping through too fast.

SW: Then the weather, how is it working on the bay in the winter?

FS: Oh, you wonder why you chose this as a livelihood. Some days, when you're catching, you don't mind what the weather is. If you're doing well, it really doesn't bother you. But when you're having a bad day, and all of a sudden, a snowstorm comes up – and you've now got to find your way home, because in the snow, you can't see. In a snowstorm, unless you have a compass, you are not coming home, because it's from here to those boats. You don't know where the shoreline is. You just can't see, so you better have a compass. Many a times, I never sailed with a compass. Just by luck, I made it home – luck and knowing some of the low parts of the water.

SW: Have you ever had to work in ice? Go out there and break ice to do anything?

FS: Oh, did we have to work in ice? One time, we cut the boat right in half and we didn't notice. We didn't even know we did it. When we got the boat on shore and unloaded the boat, the boat

almost come right off, split right in – well, we cut the bottom right off of [her?] – it was just the grace of God that we made it to shore with it. We didn't even know. A thin ice is worse than a thick ice. We didn't realize it happened. So, then my brother had to take three days off and fiberglass it back together where the rest of – we went in another boat while he was doing that, but we had to pay him a salary anyway.

SW: Do you have any names for the thin ice or the thick ice?

FS: Yes, but I'm not like the other guys. It's just ice to me. But they have names for it.

SW: Do you know what they are at all?

FS: No, I'm not thinking right now. I can't think of them. I probably know them by the back of my hand, but right now, I'm not thinking of them.

SW: You said your sisters worked at the bay as well. How many other women have worked on the bay?

FS: When I was young, there was quite a few college girls with either their boyfriend or their husbands worked the bay. We've seen quite a few come and go. Well, my sister, until she passed away, she worked with me every day. She was the type that wouldn't go unless she went with someone. It didn't bother me if she was with me or she wasn't. But she was my sister, and I was glad just that she had a ride out there. It wouldn't bother me if she was there or if she wasn't. But her, she wouldn't go if she didn't have someone to go with. But that never bothered me.

SW: How about now? How many other women are working on the bay?

FS: None. Just me.

SW: How do you feel about that?

FS: I never think nothing. It really doesn't bother me. You have to have the drive. You can't let anything bother you. You're just got to say, "If I want the money, I got to get out there." This is the type of job – you don't go out there, there's no money. So, you have to be willing to just get up and go. Good stamina. "You want the money." That's the word.

SW: How do the other guys that work on the bay feel about that?

FS: Only one girl?

SW: Yes.

FS: I guess, at first, they didn't like it. But my father always taught us that it doesn't matter who it was. It didn't matter. He used to say, "You can do anything a guy can do, and a guy can do anything a girl can do." But he always taught us that if you want to do it bad enough, you can just do it. So, I never let anything – if I was a guy or a girl. I wanted to do it, I'd just do it. But I

have to do as equal as he has to do to survive, so I never let that get in my way neither.

SW: Do you think you've earned their respect?

FS: Yes, I don't think any of them have a problem with me out there. Once in a while, the eight thousand, if they've never seen a girl before, they might have said something. But we didn't let anything get us down.

SW: Since you do more than just clamming, how would you describe yourself? As a clammer, a bay person, a bay woman?

FS: Well, just as a bay person. Some of the guys go – when they say baymen, it doesn't bother me if they say baymen, bay person. So long as the money is the same when I bring it on the dock, my product is the same as theirs, it doesn't really bother me. Any of that doesn't. There isn't too many women, so I don't take offense of any of it, what they call me. So long as the money is in the hand at the end of the day.

SW: Now, looking back on your time that you've spent working in the bay, does it have a special meaning to you just to be out there?

FS: Oh, it does. Especially, like I said, when you get older, it really has a meaning that – we used to laugh, and we used to say, "Well, there's no retirement for me. The only retirement I'll ever get is in the box, because we'll never have that big amount of money to retire." It doesn't bother me. If that's the case it's going to be, that's the case it's going to be. You can't buy the beauty and the fun times you had out there. So, if I have no money and I have to clam until I die, well, I have to clam until I die. That's the way it is with me. It wouldn't bother me. I don't have to have these big fine things. All I need is a place to put my head when I want to go to sleep, a trucker or something to carry my clams, and a decent boat to travel with. That's the whole stem of it. Enough to pay my taxes, keep a roof over my head. That's all.

SW: If you wanted other people to know what it takes to work on the bay, what would you tell them?

FS: It's a hard life, it's a fun life, and you got to love it to do it. Nobody's going to give you the money. That's the only thing, you've got to work for it. Because we have a lot of men out there that made a very good living. They knew how to manage their money. They weren't afraid to go to work. God bless them. That's the way I look at it. Nobody gave it to them.

SW: In your view, what do you think about the people who have worked on the bays?

FS: Most of them have a real sincere – a way of working hard, not minding it. You meet some awful good friends, and you meet some awful bad ones. They're just there, and they don't care who else they hurt. But this is my way of life. God bless you if that's the way you feel. There's more to the bay and the quality of it and family than it is to have all the money in the world and not have something like a nice, clean bay. So, family and time to enjoy them and time to work without killing yourself, that's more to life to me than anything, because life is short. Now that I

see it more and more every day, I just think back and hope for the next it'll be as good as the last.

SW: What do you think the future of the bay is?

FS: If we're not serious – and I mean serious – of protecting wetlands, all of us user people enjoying it and taking care of it, there'll be no bay for the next generations. That's what makes me sad, because they'll never see what I've seen. The nice, pristine water, plenty of good fun on it, because I do feel if we don't take care – countries fight over water. I mean, fight over it. It means livelihood. It means life or not. Well, that bay, for the fish and for the people that really want to enjoy it is, it could be a war, because without clean water, none of us will be able to enjoy it, to go buy it. We'd get sick if it's not corrected in a short span of time. I'm not kidding with that when I say that. I really believe that. If countries can fight over water, what's wrong with us people about – all user groups, the people, the recreational, including the commercial person, take more respect of the water. The people that are not knowingly polluting it – knowingly or not knowingly, you better start respecting it because you can't live on water that's going to get you sick. So, if you want to live on it, you'd better start taking care of it around it. But they have no idea that they're doing it. I do believe a lot of people don't realize they're doing it.

SW: Are there any groups that have been formed to look into this?

FS: There's many groups formed to look into it. But I don't believe – now that I've been in the group, there's some that really want to help. There's some there for what they're going to get out of it and not really realizing it's got to be a whole effort or it's not going to change. When I joined the South Shore Estuary and got involved, they got the baymen, because at that time I was the president of the Baymen's Association, I really felt we were going to do something about cleaning up the bay. Here it is, eight to nine years later, and I'm not sure all of us are serious about it. There's a lot of groups there that – hooray for me and to hell with whatever else is going on. It scares me. I sometimes wonder, should I have gotten involved? I'm not kidding you when I say that.

SW: Do you plan to stay involved?

FS: Well, I'll never give up with the hopes, because I do believe when I go to schools and things like that and talk about it, and I tell the kids my generation didn't take very good care of their bay, that it's going to be their responsibility in the future, I do feel that my generation didn't give them the pristine bay that we had. I just hope that everybody gets in tune, because that generation is going to miss a wonderful thing. I'm talking about my son's generation and down the line. I just hope that I'm wrong and that people do get involved. Seriously get involved.

SW: What are your thoughts on the clam boats that have dredged the bay? Do you think they have taken too much?

FS: You'll hear a lot of people talk about it, like Blue Point Company. Now, when I was young, my father's time is when the dredge boats came in. He always said, "They have the best part of

the bay." They really do. They have the most pristine. I don't think it's them that – well, everybody goes, "Oh, they have no grass on the bay." They can't help what happened to Veterans Highway. Veterans Highway is ten miles behind them. All the chemicals in factories that were built up in the commercial area, Blue Point Company can't do with the chemicals coming down the waterway. All water runs from north to south. I didn't even know that a few years ago. Until something happened to this bay, I couldn't tell you a lot of things – until the brown tide came in, and then the baymen start looking into the waters. We were just having a good time making plenty of money, and never worrying, never not thinking the bay was going to be for us. Everybody goes, "Oh, it's the clam boats." Blue Point Company isn't having any more problems than we are having problems. We didn't dredge the bay. So, it isn't just Blue Point Company. They didn't ask for the abundance of crabs that came in the bay because the water's dirty. That eats a lot of baby clams up. They didn't ask for, like I said, on Veterans Highway, all these factories. Who knows what's back there? All that stuff gets funneled into the ground. Then it comes out through our groundwater back into the bay. They didn't destroy the wetlands that filters everything before it goes to the bay. So, I can't blame Blue Point Company. Everybody goes, "Oh, take the –" I don't think there should ever be another one. I don't think we should ever give land to a certain company again, and especially that land was Brookhaven Town land. But I don't think they did any worse. They're not any worse off than we are. This is how the baymen put it to me. The old-timers said, "When we were young, we used to catch from eight to ten bushel." We did. In the 50s and 60s, eight to ten bushel. They used to catch 100 bushel, so we know. Now, we catch a bushel and they catch six-bushel tops, okay? So, we know that the numbers are right. They're not catching any more or any less than us. So, the dredge boats, well, the way [Carl?] explains it to me, it isn't doing any more or less than we are. The numbers are right in. Our small amount versus their small amount. Now, our large amount versus their large amount – they used to do 100 to a 150 bushel a day. We did ten. So, the numbers are right. If you did the multiplication, the numbers are right for their bay versus our bay.

Now, when they talk about using seed or developing a hatchery the way Blue Point Company did, we put seed into the bay so that compensates. You can never do what mother nature does wild. They use a notata clam. That's what they redo the bay with. Now, all the years that I clammed on the bay, if I caught eight notata clams – in my life, I caught a lot. I've worked at Blue Point, Cherry Grove, and the Pines where part of their land comes back up to us. If their notata clams were doing what it's supposed to be, I would have caught a lot more than eight clams in my lifetime. So, I know a seed that you put out in the bay this big that's fed in these hatcheries, and you just go from the bay, they're not going to survive. This is the way my brother told me. If you take a raccoon, you bring him to the city, he ain't going to know how to get in and out of the dumpsters and survive. You take a raccoon from the city and you bring him out here, he won't know how to hunt neither. Well, the same with a clam. If you take this little baby clam, it never really fed itself before. You throw it out in the bay, it isn't going to know how to look for its food or feed. So, putting seed into the bay – because I've made the Town of Brookhaven put it in a certain spot for quite a few years when I was the president of the Baymen's Association, and they want notata seed. We never found them. So, we know what you think you're doing helping mother nature, you're not helping mother nature. If you're born for six weeks, eight weeks, two months, two and a half months, and you never had to search for your food, it's force-fed to you, you don't know how to go out in the wild and search for it. They don't even know how to go into the bottom because they've never done it. For protection, they've never done it. A hatchery is a joke. It sounds good, but get out into reality, it's not

good.

SW: Well, I want to thank you for your time today.

FS: Okay.

SW: Thanks a lot.

FS: Have a nice day.

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

Reviewed by Nicole Zador on 7/8/2024