

## Interview with Bob Slager

**Narrator:** Bob Slager

**Interviewer:** Steve Warrick

**Date:** July 16, 2000

**Location:** West Sayville, NY

**Project Name:** Long Island Traditions

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

**Principal Investigators:** Nancy Solomon

**Transcript Team:** National Capital Contracting

**Abstract:** On July 16, 2000 Steve Warrick interviewed Robert Lowell Slager for the *Long Island Traditions* oral history project. Bob followed in the footsteps of his father, and started dredging clams at the age of 16. Bob provides details about his life as a clam dredger and the changing nature of the bay, including the sharp drop in clam populations due, in part, to pollution, as well as the shift from primarily seeing commercial boats to pleasure boats. He describes the equipment he uses, the techniques he's developed over the years, and his thoughts on the future of clamming in West Sayville. Bob says of the people who work the bay, "they are...a hardworking bunch of people. They see the livelihood that they had, which is slowly drifting away. Many of them are still willing to stick to it. I haven't seen anybody thumb their nose at the bay. Everyone that's ever been out there says, 'I wish I could go back to it.' I think that pretty much sums it up. Everybody who's ever been out there's said, 'I wish I could go back, but I just can't.'"

Steve Warrick: This is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. Today's date is July 16, 2000. Today, I will be speaking with Bob Slager of West Sayville about running a clam dredge boat. Bob has followed in the footsteps of his father, who also ran a dredge boat out on the Great South Bay. This is Tape 010, Side A. We will be actually on-board Bob's boat, the Hildegard for this taping. Could you state your full name for me?

Robert Lowell Slager: Robert Lowell Slager.

SW: When and where were you born?

RLS: I was born in Bay Shore in 1945.

SW: Where do you live now?

RLS: In West Sayville.

SW: West Sayville.

RLS: 85 Cherry Avenue.

SW: How long have you lived in this area of Long Island?

RLS: All my life.

SW: All your life?

RLS: Every day of it. I had a few vacations here and there, but minimal.

SW: Were your parents from here?

RLS: Yes, they were.

SW: What type of occupation were they involved in?

RLS: My father was involved in the shellfish management, dredging, and tonging in his early days. I quit high school when I was about 16. That was about 1968. Thereafter, I started dredging clams. I was the youngest captain on the bay. I started dredging clams in, yes, 1962 and continued with that until 1982. During which time, we did a number of different projects, transplants and so on, trying to re-support the stocks of the bay. In 1982, Islip Town canceled our leases, and thereby, put us out of business. Thereafter, I went to work for a shipyard.

SW: Now, could you describe this area to me? Say, in terms that you were talking to somebody who has never been here before, what would you tell them?

RLS: Oh, you're going to have to be a little more specific.

SW: Well, what does the area mean to you? What was it like growing up here?

RLS: Growing up I saw a lot of – Originally, if you’re talking in regard to what the bay has become right now, the bay has, basically, become a place for pleasure boats. Originally, if you go back far enough, the first boats that were here were all commercial boats. Everybody made their living either upland doing farming or farming on the water. Now, farming on the water, at that time, was not exactly “farming” on the water because they didn’t have the ability to do that. But there were commercial boats who made their living on the water. I guess as time went by, there were a number of people that came in from the city, richer families and so on that had different estates around the area. They had the ability to have pleasure boats. So, there was a mix then between pleasure boats and commercial boats. But by and large, they were all commercial boats. That’s what I saw when I was young, was a much greater number of commercial boats as compared to pleasure boats. Then the turnover came through the 50s, the 60s, the 70s. Now, you see it turning over much more to pleasure boats. The commercial boats have gone by the wayside, and well went beyond that.

SW: Now, you were saying you went into working in the bay pretty early.

RLS: Yes.

SW: Why did you do that?

RLS: Well, I can’t necessarily say that was in my blood. Because so many people use that type of terminology, “Oh, it was in my blood.” It became my blood because of what I did. I developed the love for it simply by reason of having done it. When I was in high school, what I really wanted to do – I’m talking to you now, Steve.

SW: [laughter]

RLS: I wanted to be a pilot on an aircraft carrier. I said, “Well, that’s not to be.” So, now, I’m going to take the second-best thing. Now, I wanted to go into auto body work because I did a lot of that when I was a teenager, auto body work. I did a lot of, in the 50s, hot rod cars and stuff like that. But when I finally got out of high school and I started working with my father as a captain of a dredge boat, I finally – it’s more or less like I found my niche, and I was good at it. I was good at it for so many years. As I said before, there came a time when our leases were canceled. I had to go to work for the shipyard. But beyond that, now, I’m back into dredging once again. Unfortunately, the product has now gone away by reason of, well, you could say, pollution or whatever, a number of different factors. There’s a lot of different factors that control what I do now, legislation and so on.

SW: Did your father show you what he was doing out there? Did he sort of give you some pointers?

RLS: Yes. Yes, he did. Yes.

SW: Do you recall any of those, what he told you to look for or how to run the boat?

RLS: Well, I recall a number of incidents, but they're stories. The number of times we went out there in the late 60s, in the 70s, there was a thing out there called Cladophora. It was a blanket of algae that was stimulated by a protein in the water, phosphates, which there were many of them in the bay at that time. When the water was clear enough, the sunlight would shine all the way to the bottom. The phosphates were on the bottom. The phosphates grew into an algae. At the exact same time, there was such a plethora of seed in the bay that the Cladophora laid over the seed, totally blanketed it for about, I would say, a year. There was no better time in the bay than that. I'll say, 1965 to 1970. There was a tremendous amount of sea clams in the bay. Everybody thought this is never going to end. We have so many clams out here. We've made it for life.

But unfortunately, that went away, too, due to either overfishing or the Southwest Sewer District. Things changed over the years.

SW: So, what do you do when you run a dredge boat? When you're captaining a dredge boat, what is your...?

RLS: What exactly do I do?

SW: What exactly do you do?

RLS: I maintain the boat totally by myself. I don't get a lot of help with that. Excuse me. That was bad terminology. Then we take the boat out on the bay, put the dredge on the bottom. We try to, as much as possible, use LORAN bearings to locate ourselves. Put it on the bottom. All we had to do is, run the boat, run the dredge up and down. We had to picture the bottom of the bay as being a golf course. A golf course goes up and down, so does the bottom of the bay, it's no different. So, you have to run back and forth between where you pick the clams on the back end of the boat, back up, forward to the controls to raise the conveyor to tend the bottom. Run it around it in a circle of about, I'll say, 150 feet. By reason of where the clams are because they've all been taken out of the dead flat water. In other words, any place that the clams were in a flat bottom. Most of those have been taken because that was easy. What we have left to work now is the hard bottom, which is up and down. So, you have to tend the conveyor up and down. You're constantly running back and forth between raising the conveyer up and down, adjusting speeds as per the load on the belt and so on, and that type of thing. Pick all the clams and then bring them in at the end of the day.

SW: What do you need to know in order to operate the dredge boat?

RLS: Oh. Here's one of my favorite questions. What do you need to know? Everything. I tell people all the time, "If you want to run that boat, you better be able to build that boat." A lot of people didn't understand what that meant. But in other words, if you don't know every nook and cranny of that boat, everything that can possibly go wrong with it – because it's a city on the water. Everything that's upland is on that boat. You have electrical. You have water. You have this and that. There's so many systems on the boat. Any one of them can go wrong, and they're going to put you on the bottom. So, you have to tend to every single thing. There's nothing left of the imagination. There used to be a time in my life where I said, "I can fudge this and fudge that." Because I'm there on the boat, anything that goes wrong, I can fix it because I'm

there. But if you're not there to watch it and see it as it happens, they can get you in a world of trouble.

SW: Is anyone helping you with this? Do you have a deckhand or are you by yourself?

RLS: No. No, I'm by myself.

SW: Have you had a deckhand in the past?

RLS: We used to have two and sometimes three deckhands because there were enough clams to make enough money to supply two or three people. Now, there's not enough product anymore, and it can only be done with one person. So, you're out there by yourself and you're by yourself alone. Because sometimes, even for the sake of things going wrong, if you make a call on the radio and there's nobody there to answer the radio, you are out there by yourself. Hence, the perfect storm. You're out there by yourself.

SW: Where are you dredging in the bay?

RLS: I'm on the Great South Bay between West Sayville and Fire Island, and between Blue Point and Nicolls Point, which is Heckscher Park.

SW: Now, is this the only area that you are allowed to dredge in?

RLS: Yes, it is. Yes, there is none other. The area that I dredge in right now is a land grant from King Charles. It dates way back to the 1800s. It was given to, I'll say, Bluepoints company, but I'm not sure that that was the name at the time. I believe it was. They still hold that grant until today, and it's irrevocable.

SW: Now, how about when you were out there working with your father? Were you dredging on that ground?

RLS: No.

SW: Was there any lease ground?

RLS: At that time, there was a lease ground from Islip Town. Islip Town leased ground to private diggers from – I'm just going to take a guess at this, perhaps from 1935, 1940, somewhere in there, to a number of private individuals, private corporations for the production of oysters. That continued up in late 1972. It amounted to three percent of the total amount of ground that Islip Town owned at that time. We held that until 1982.

SW: Now, were there a lot of other dredge boats out there at that point?

RLS: Originally, there were a number of small diggers, private diggers, who did oyster farming. But thereafter, they turned over to three major corporations. I can't say major corporations, but it was Shellfish Marine, Fire Island Fisheries, and George [Vanderberg and Son?]. So, as we on the west, Fire Island Fisheries, Charlie [Hart?], Shellfish Incorporated in the middle, and George [Vanderberg?] on the east end, that was down towards Nicolls Point.

SW: Now, on the bay, are there any other dredge boats other than those working with Bluepoints?

RLS: No, none other. No. There can't be.

SW: How many are working at Bluepoints?

RLS: Presently, five. It used to be a dozen. But then at the same time, Islip Town used to have 5,000 digger's permits. Now, they have possibly 10 perhaps, maybe 50. But I doubt it. I think there's more likely 10.

SW: How about license? Do you need a license if you're on the leased ground?

RLS: No. No license required. The permits for operating on that ground are controlled by Bluepoints Corporation.

SW: So, they take care of...

RLS: Yes.

SW: That's all part of it?

RLS: Yes, they do.

SW: Now, once you're out there and you're trying to locate the clams, where are some of the places that you would look for the clams to be – a set of clams or so forth? Are there certain aspects of the bay that you go to?

RLS: Yes, there are. What I look for nowadays is a place where somebody else would not have wanted to work before, in other words some undesirable piece of ground. This would have to be on an edge. In other words, look upland, it's on a hillside. That's why you have to run up and down. For example, I worked over in Manhasset Bay in 1978. I was looking at the chart. I was there with my boat to do a survey for Bluepoints Company, at which time I was employed by another company. They wanted to do a survey on the entire periphery of Manhasset Bay. The gentleman's name was [Steve Lane?], who worked for Bluepoints at the time, asked me if I would run the entire periphery of Manhasset Bay. I said yes because of the configuration of my boat, which had a dredge down the middle at the time, I said, "Yes, I can do that." So, we ran around for about, I'll say, about two and a half hours, and we caught about 30 bushel on the edges of Manhasset Bay. That was up against the west side, up against the south side. I finally looked at the chart and I said, "Here's an area, and you're looking at it on the chart, it's called Leeds Pond." Now, if you look at Leeds Pond and what it's showing on the chart, it's showing you brackish water coming out of a marsh up above. Just beyond that, you have an edge. This edge drops off from, I will say, seven feet down to about twelve feet in a very short area. But it's also about 600 feet long. So, I said, "Why don't we try it there?" Well, he agreed. So, we tried it. We had a bushel every five seconds of clams on that edge, and we did this for about four or five days in a row. Every five seconds. Because when you have brackish water coming out of salt water and you have an edge like that, the clams usually tend to accumulate on the edge. That becomes very lucrative. So, anytime you're looking for clams, you want to look for them on the

edge of something. They're always on the edge of something. I don't care if it's on the edge of the lot or on the edge of an edge, up and down, the edge of a shell bed going into the mud. They're always on the edge of something, unless you go back to the 70s where they were everywhere. As I said before, people said, "Oh, we'll never run out now." No. But we did.

SW: Now, do you think that everyone out there knows where to look for an edge? Is it passed down or is it...

RLS: No, no, no. No, they really don't. There's a number of captains out there, two or three of them that – oh, they even tell me in the morning, "Bobby, when you go out there in the morning, don't even think about where you're going to go and catch the clams. Just lose your mind. Leave your brain at home. Let the boat go around in circles and maybe you get lucky and you're going to catch some clams at the end of the day." Perhaps, that's why I am the top boat just about every day because I do think about what I'm doing. But at the same time, I've mentioned before that we have predators out in the bay. We have spider crabs. We have blue claws. We have starfish. All of these things eat clams. What's the biggest predator? The human being. What have I become? I am the biggest predator out there because I can outthink the starfish and I can outthink the spider crab and the blue claw. I know where the clams are, and I'll find them.

SW: Now, from what you've seen in the bay, what do think is in the future of it?

RLS: That's kind of a tough question to answer – and that was a political answer. I told my son when he got into it about – I think he's been in it about five years now. He bought his own dredge boat. He asked me if another dredge boat becomes available because he knew the kind of living I was making at the time. At that time, there were still a fair number of clams left in the stones, which I showed you. I was doing about 10 to 20 bushel a day. He asked me if another boat becomes available, "Tell me about it and I'd like to buy it." So, finally, a time came when a boat was available. He bought it. What I told him was, "You're going to have to be the best of the last," because the last is what you are. Unfortunately, unless things turn around to a large degree, you're going to have to be the best of the last. That's the only way you can make a living out of it. So, as far as the future is concerned, what I would see as a possibility, if they would open up an inlet somewhere east of here, perhaps maybe about five miles or so. It could be Watch Hill. It could be Davis Park. It could be Old Inlet. Any place east of here. The last time we had any growth, any amount of clams in the bay, any spawn, any seed clams in the bay, was about seven years ago when Old Inlet broke through. We did have a fair amount of growth that year. We had a set the next year, and the conditions did improve. So, as far as any possibility of any future sets are concerned, it would have to be by reason of something like that. This bay needs a flush. We have too many things coming off the land into the water. A number of years ago, we had DDT being sprayed in the meadows to take care of the mosquitoes. That killed all the crab larvae. So, now, you had no blue claws in the bay. Well, just a couple of years after that, we had loads of seed clams in the bay. Now, was it coincidence or was it something that we did? Then you had the Southwest Sewer District. Would you drink this water out of a toilet? No, you wouldn't do that. But they took all the brackish water out of the land and they pump it out into the ocean. You changed the salinity of the bay. There are so many things that have changed, but you can't point your finger back at any one period in time and say that this is the perfect set of circumstances that we had at that time that produced all those clams in those years. Because if everything is going fine, nobody takes data. It's only

when things start going bad. That's when you start to collect data, okay. But what was it before?

SW: How did you feel when your son told you he wanted to go into the bay?

RLS: I was proud. I was absolutely one hundred percent proud. Here's a story out of school. My family dates back to, I'll say, 1850 in the United States, could've come after that. I'm not sure. Every bit of my family has moved away. I have no one left here except for my brother's son, Gregory Slager. He's the last one. He works for a telephone company, he's got a very good job. My son was adopted from Paterson, New Jersey, as was my daughter. My daughter runs [1926 Matthews?]. She supplies the water. My son who was adopted from Paterson still runs on the bay. His name is Slager, her name is Slager. They are the last vestige of the Slager family that still operates on the Great South Bay. They're there all the time, and they love it. My family is gone. I have my children.

SW: In growing up here, you've talked a little bit about your father working on the bay and so forth, and now, your son and daughter being out on the bay. Did you grow up in a relatively Dutch-oriented community?

RLS: Yes, I did. Oh, one hundred percent Dutch community.

SW: What was it like growing up? What was...?

RLS: It was rather strict, somewhat strict. Certain slices of life, things that you do. It's not what you do on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. But when it came to Saturday, you took your Saturday bath. You got ready to go to church on Sunday morning. Sunday was reserved for the Lord, and I take no exception to him. He's still there, still in my life. But I just didn't like the idea of having to come down to the dock on a Sunday morning after church and Sunday school and having some other of my Christian fellow brethren saying that all those people on the dock are going to hell. I didn't consider it so. But that's pretty much what it was like. It was that strict.

SW: Now, was this tough for somebody who liked to be on the water every day and who maybe was on the water every day, whether working or what have you? Was this sort of tough to overcome in later years? Were you able to go out after this?

RLS: Yes, it was. For me to get over the hump of saying, "All right, I'm not going to go to church every Sunday." You belied your first love. Yes, that was hard to get over. Ask me another question.

SW: Have you worked on Sundays then since?

RLS: I have worked one or two Sundays, and I totally hated myself for it. I can't do it. I wanted to work today, but I couldn't, I couldn't do it.

SW: This all stems from your upbringing up here?

RLS: Yes, yes. A man cannot belie his nature. A lot of that goes back to the way you were brought up.



SW: Was it predominantly the Dutch who were working on the bay at that time?

RLS: Yes. At that time, it was. Yes.

SW: When did that start to change? Do you recall when that started to change?

RLS: Perhaps, in the 70s. When the bay got really, really good, there were so many clams out there. We had any number of schoolteachers, airline pilots, policemen, anybody that wanted to make a few extra bucks would go out there on the bay. All you needed was a small boat, a rake, your feet, a pair of tongs, whatever it was, and you could make an extra \$100 a week just by reason of a few hours a day. Even at that point, the Dutch baymen or even the ones that weren't Dutch because they weren't all, they were all saying the same thing. Here were these schoolteachers, and they complain about how much money they're making. They're not making enough money and they cry poverty. But they're making more than we are every week, but yet they can come out here. Now, I can't go to their school and teach and take part of their salary, but they can come out here and take part of mine because they're taking away the same clams that I'm supposed to be catching, and I'm a fulltime bayman. So, there was one of the contentions that happened during the 60s and the 70s and perhaps since then. What happened since is even the baymen that were out there, because all the product went away, they started drifting here and there. They went to work in the school, janitorial jobs. They went to work for the railroad. They went everywhere. Perhaps now, in Islip Town, Brookhaven, as I said before, perhaps, 40 to 50 baymen. Most of them were in Staten Island now catching clams for [depuration?] because there's not enough product here in the bay to make a living anymore, so anybody has left. They're all gone.

SW: So, there was a general resentment, I guess, when the...

RLS: Yes. Oh, there definitely was. There was a lot of conflict between those years, particularly mid-60s, 70s between the dredgers and the private baymen, either rakers or tongers. They thought that we had it all. Okay, it's true. My family made a lot of money because we bought clams from the diggers. We produced our own clams, and there were plenty to catch. They made millions. Obviously, that's all gone now. But at the same time, the clam diggers at the same time were making the same amount of money. I had people stick their finger in my face and say, "Why are you working for your father? If you were working out there alongside of me with the rake, you could buy new [inaudible] motors. You could buy a new truck just like I have. You wouldn't have to be driving that old piece of junk that your father gave you," because I made salary. That's what it came down to. So, there was a lot of conflict between the baymen, dredgers and schoolteachers, airline pilots, policemen. Anybody else that wanted to go out there and make a few extra bucks because they said they're taking it out of our pocket, and it was true. It came out true at the end.

SW: Were there disputes over territory then at that point?

RLS: Oh, there definitely was, yes. I mean, if you had a dredge boat close to the line or if you had a raking boat close to the dredge boat line, everybody thought that everybody's trying to steal from everybody else. Well, there's only so much to go around. I've said the same thing my

whole life. Now, if you want to be a friend, am I going to steal from you? I don't steal from a friend, but I might steal from an enemy. In spite of my upbringing, if you're going to get in my face, maybe I could steal from you. If you want to be a friend, I can't steal from you. So many of them chose to be enemies. They did that, and hence the conflicts and the animosities. They go on to this day.

SW: They stretch back that far?

RLS: Oh, they go way back.

SW: Were there rivalries even before the people started coming there?

RLS: Yes, there were. Even within my own family, the Slager brothers, the [Vise?] brothers. There was always a little bit of rivalry with who's got more money, who's got more land and this and that kind of stuff. There was never a good reason for it. There was enough money to go around. Nobody had to do anything to anybody else. Just go ahead and make your own living, but no. Somebody chose to push that line here and there. The rivalries, yes, they came up.

[Break in audio]

SW: This is Steve Warrick with Long Island Traditions. I am continuing my conversation with Bob Slager, and we are on board the *Hildegard*. Today is July 16, 2000. This is Tape 010, and we are on Side B. We're talking a little bit about the rivalries before. What about the camaraderie? Even though there was rivalry, did the people still stick together, help one another out?

RLS: I'm sure there was a fair amount of that, yes. Many times, when people got in trouble out there and everybody else helped everybody else, not one person got in trouble. Yes. There would be a time when they would say, "All right, forget about the rivalries. This guy is in trouble, and I'm going to help them out." In this day and age right now, I haven't seen that. I see a little more conflict in regard to rivalry than I've seen in regard to other people helping people out. Charlie [Hart?], a number of other people that I have contact with, yes, they could help me anytime. There's other people that would simply put me underwater.

SW: Are these people that also work on the bay or are they recreational?

RLS: They have been on the bay, yes. They have been previously. Not anymore. But they still have bone of contention with anybody that dredges clams.

SW: Has that always been the case?

RLS: Yes. Yes, it has.

SW: Even when your father was doing it? Now, does this go back to the time when they were dredging oyster, you say?

RLS: No, no. It goes back to the time when they first started dredging clams, which at the time was – oh, in the late 40s where they started with the spring-tooth harrow and oyster dredge.

That's how they turned the clams out of the bottom. That's when they first started catching clams with any kind of harvesting equipment other than a tong or a rake. It's been since then that the rivalry occurred. Anybody that had mechanical equipment was looked down upon by somebody that worked by hand.

SW: Why do you think that is?

RLS: Simply because somebody thinks that one person has more than the other, which usually isn't the case.

SW: Because you...

RLS: There may have been a time when it was, but it's not anymore.

SW: Well, as far as everything goes, you would have more overhead though to cover, right?

RLS: Oh, yes.

SW: As far as operating costs.

RLS: Oh, yes. Yes.

SW: Can you give me some idea of what the overhead is in running a dredge boat?

RLS: On running a dredge boat? Oh, with the lease and the upkeep of the boat, probably, I'm going to take a guess at about probably \$30,000 a year, overhead. So, you had to make that first and you can make the rest of the – oh, the \$60,000 that you might pull in in total. So, you might come up with \$30,000 after which you have pay.

SW: When the guy is tonging or raking, they have relatively low cost?

RLS: Yes. They have a smaller overhead, but their products have also gone away to a large extent. They have less to work with the – I mean, obviously, they have more than we do, but they have less equipment.

SW: Now, as far as the clams not being as plentiful as they used to be, was it a gradual decline or was it somewhat rapid?

RLS: Well, I would have to say it was somewhat rapid in regard to – at the time that the Southwest Sewer District came in. Previous to that time, and as I said before, there was a period of time when there were so many clams in the bay, we couldn't keep up with them. There was so many seed and they were growing so fast, the water quality was good, salinity was fine. We had rapid growth. There was no way in the world that we could not catch 30 to 40 to 50 bushels a day with the dredge. At the same time, the clam diggers were catching four to five bushel a day. The price was a lot less then. But calculated by the amount of money that the product required at the time, everybody made a very good living at that time. You can mark that single period in

time when they put in that sewage district, when everything from Nichols Point and west went away. It all went dead. Now, was it a chance thing, was it nature, or was it what we did? I tend to think that it was what we did, what happened at that time. Because still, from that day on, from Nichols Point exactly where the sewage district ended up until, I'll say, Bellport, we still have clams. Not as plentiful as they were, but you still don't have that brackish water that used to come from the west bay into the east bay, so that much changed. I always say, "Go back to the last thing you did. Mark that point in time."

SW: What do you think about when you're out on the bay? Because you are in the boat by yourself and you're doing all the maintenance and working, do you have time to think about what you are doing or are you...

RLS: I try to detach myself from what I'm doing. I listen to the radio, W-A-L-K. I listen to a few songs from the 50s, and I think about how good things used to be. At the same time, I hope that things are going to get a little bit better in the future. What I think about in regard to exactly what I'm doing, yes. How can I do it better? Is there another place I can go to? How far away is it? How far do I have to run? Am I going to do any better for the sake of picking my conveyer up on deck and sail to another spot? Likely it's not, I won't. No, I'm probably going to lose time, and that's all. Better off staying where I am.

SW: How about just being out on the bay?

RLS: I love it. I absolutely love it. It's my life. It's what I do. I love the freedom of not having to get up and punch a time clock. When I worked for Charlie [Hart], and I love the guy, but I had to be there at 8:00 in the morning, leave work at 5:00 at night. But due to the condition of my body, which doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning because I hurt too much, I can go to work at 9:00 and I can still make a day's pay by 3:00 or 4:00. So, in regard to that, I love the freedom of being able to go out there and do the time that I want to do.

SW: Has this always been the case, you setting your hours?

RLS: There was a time that I was comfortable going to work and punching the time clock when I worked for the shipyard. I didn't mind it, but I was a bit younger then and my body didn't – as I said before, it didn't hurt that much.

SW: How about...

RLS: I can get out there and stand on the back end of that boat for about eight hours. As you saw, I can sit in the chair once in a while. But I'm much more comfortable out there in the bay. I don't care if I'm rocking and rolling around. I don't care how much I bounce around. That doesn't hurt me that much. I love the freedom.

SW: Now, you told me about your hours, about what you like to work. Has this always been the case? Have you kept those same set of hours in the past, say, when you were working with your father? What were your hours, your schedule?

RLS: My schedule then was 8:00 to 5:00.

SW: 8:00 to 5:00?

RLS: Yes. The shipyard with the Brewster Shipyard and Bay Shore with the Shellfish Marine, 8:00 to 5:00. So, now, I have a little more freedom to work the hours that I want. Often as not, it's less hours and for the same amount of money. But for the time that you're out there, you frustrate yourself.

SW: Have the – not the sizes, but the names of the clams, have they changed over the years?

RLS: Yes, they have.

SW: [What is determined?]

RLS: A seed used to be anything up to one inch. Anything over one inch was a little neck. Anything up to, perhaps, one and a sixteenth – between one inch and one and a sixteenth was a little neck. Beyond one and a sixteenth was called a top neck. Beyond, I'll say – I'm taking a guess at this – inch and a half was a cherrystone, and beyond that was a chowder. Now, what we've seen is that what we used to call a cherrystone has now become a top neck. This is a very large clam, generally used for baked clams. It's just got all they're good for. You wouldn't want to eat that on a half shell.

SW: Why has this gone on? For the market?

RLS: Likely as not because somebody turned their product over and sold something outside of what it originally was and said, "All right, this is not a top neck anymore. This is not cherrystone anymore. Now, we're going to the top neck." By reason of the fact that you have to sell the product because you're up against other markets that are pushing shellfish stock into your area. So, you're trying to get your product out. So, you call it something different than what it actually is.

SW: Do you still look at them as the same when you see them?

RLS: Oh, I certainly do. I certainly do. I see the top neck as a top neck, and that's about one and a sixteenth and one and a half. I see a cherrystone as a cherrystone. But then now, they call it a top neck.

SW: Of course, the smaller clams are bringing...

RLS: Premium price, yes.

SW: What is that at this point in time?

RLS: I believe it's around 22 to 23 cents. It could be as high as 26 at times.

SW: Now, in the past, was it higher or lower when clamming?

RLS: It's never been as high consistently as what it is now. I think by reason of the fact that many of the Massachusetts markets or the production from Massachusetts and Rhode Island, they've going away. So, now, it's once again returned back to Long Island, and we still have the premium product. Our product is still the best. It's known as the best in the world, but they are less. So, by reason of the fact that the other markets have gone away, we still have the premium product, and you can probably get more money for that.

SW: How about in the winter? What are you doing on the bay in the winter, the same...

RLS: We break ice.

SW: Break ice.

RLS: We break ice, yes. As much as we possibly can, if we can run the boats through the ice, we'll break as much as we can. On some of the boats that I've had in the past, we have already broken about a foot and a half of ice to get out there and catch clams. It can't be done anymore because of the type of boats that we have now because the skin of the boat is too thin. So, likely as not, right now, we could probably break about two to three to four inches of ice. But we do work in it, yes.

SW: Now, is that more difficult to do this type of clamming?

RLS: Definitely, yes. It takes a lot longer to get out there. You have to work at a certain circle. It shifts a little bit, moved off your spot, you have to break a new hole. So, it's very time consuming.

SW: Is it anymore dangerous?

RLS: Absolutely, yes, because you can punch a hole through it. Even steel skin with ice, yes, you can punch a hole in the boat.

SW: What are some of the more difficult conditions to work out on the bay?

RLS: Oh, generally speaking, rough water. Thunderstorms that come up during the summertime. At times when you get desperate, you haven't worked for four or five days, so you think, "All right, I'm going to take a chance and I think I can work today." But maybe you really shouldn't have gone out. But you put the dredge on the bottom, you're bouncing up and down and you say, "Well, I think I can take it. I can handle this." The last thing that could possibly happen, the worst thing that could possibly happen is you break the cable. You only have one cable that attaches the dredge to the front of the boat. Once that cable goes away, the dredge ends up behind the boat. Now, you have to call another boat. Now, you're in rough water conditions. The only thing that you can do is cut the chains off the back and drop the entire conveyer to the bottom and sail in. Then you go back out the next day on a [conveyer] to pick up the conveyor. This means that somebody's going to have to bring a cutting torch out to you, so you can cut your conveyor off the back end of the boat. It's happened at times. It's happened a few times, only once to me.

SW: Now, is it easy, of course, with the different radar and different instruments to tell where you are at out there. Is it easy to get turned around, say, if you've got foggy conditions?

RLS: Definitely, yes. Many times, on a foggy day, you'll have, I'll say, a southeast or a southwest wind, but the wind can switch by a little bit. Now, due to the fact that our compasses are usually located close to the gauges, gauges are magnetic, so is the compass. The compass always gets thrown off to the gauges. So, the compass is not entirely accurate. The only thing that you can depend on then is the LORAN to locate you. LORAN, nine times out of ten because of inefficiency, many times will go down on a foggy day. You'll get the top line, but you won't get the bottom line. So, you can locate yourself in one direction, but not in the other. So, you'll end up picking the conveyor saying, "Oh, well, I have to sail in. I'm going to go in shore." The compass doesn't work anymore because it's being drawn off by the gauges, the LORAN doesn't work because you only have the top line, and you really don't know where you are. So, you could put the conveyor on the bottom and follow the bottom because you know what the bottom looks like. But you can't do that because you might be in uncertified water. So, you have to put the conveyor on board. So, you can get any number of problems that way, too, with the location, which has happened to me.

SW: You come back by – not only using the instruments, but is there a certain part of instinct or just knowing where you're at?

RLS: No.

SW: Or knowing the bay that it's over?

RLS: No. I've been told, I don't know how many times, and I think the first time was probably about 20, 25 years ago. Rely on your instruments. Do not rely on your instinct because you're going to lie to yourself, and it happens. Because if you have a little bit of wind switch – I've called the company at times and said, "Which way is the wind?" They have one wind in one direction there, and I say, okay, fine. I can sail up the wind and I can get back home. But the wind out in the water, because it pulls down the beach, it goes down the middle of the bay, and on the edges, it pulls more or less towards the shore. You can't rely on what they're seeing on shore to give you the direction of the wind out on the water. So, you had to rely totally on the instruments. Radar, to get you back home is the best, but I don't have it. Two boats do. One boat is very good at it, the other is not. Radar will get you back home. LORAN will locate you. It will give you a definite position within 50 feet of the bay. But radar, yes, it will get you back home.

SW: Over the years and growing up around this area, have you come to, I guess, get a better understanding of the bay and how important is to understand the bay and where you are working at, as far as your job goes?

RLS: Restate that in another way.

SW: Do you need a really good understanding of the bay, being out there day in and day out?

RLS: Oh, yes. You certainly do, yes. In regard to that, not that I'm an old seaman or anything like that, but read the cloud conditions, read the water conditions, listen to the radio. Find out what's coming through as far as weather is concerned. Conditions make all the difference in the

world. You don't have to exactly know what's coming on in regard to your situation because it doesn't matter what the bay can put out. You can always raise the conveyor. You can put it on board. You can always get back in. You can't work the bottom in certain conditions. But never leave yourself in a jeopardized condition where it's going to take too much time to get back from one place to another. I've had incidents with my pleasure boats more so than my dredge boats – although I've had a number of [problems?] with those, too – with the timing involved with getting from one place to another, put the boat in jeopardy. So, in regard to that, yes. You do have to know the conditions of the bay. It is very important. It's not a dangerous bay, not by any means, but just know what's ahead.

SW: What are your feelings about being involved with Bluepoints? It is a very old company and has a long tradition.

RLS: They have a few problems. I think by and large, they're a good corporation. I think over the years, there are some things that they could have done better. But anybody can look – hindsight is one hundred percent correct, retrospectively, yes. There's things that I would've done differently. But there are other things that they're doing right now that they could have done 20 years ago, but at that time, they didn't know. So, everything becomes a new experiment. You find out what works. It takes a long, long time in order to find out what works. They finally have an oyster product, which is presently being grown in Mattituck, transplanted to the Great South Bay. They have a very fine product for a year and a half of oysters. Something that hasn't been done for 30 to 40 years. It's now an ongoing program. All they have to do is expand it. So, they are progressing in that respect.

SW: Now, do you see this ever happening with the clams?

RLS: No.

SW: Why not?

RLS: Only because of the transfer of water in the bay. We don't have enough tidal flow in the bay. We have brown tides every year. I understand there's a bill in the house now. It's something about the brown tide. One of the local legislators has a bill. They have a certain number of million dollars appropriated for the – how can I say it? What's the word I'm looking for? To take care of the brown tide, in other words, \$2 million or so on. The last thing that I heard was, they're going to take a vote on it in, I think, August or October. I said, "Why not now? What's wrong with now?" If we have a brown tide condition in the bay right now and you have a certain number of million dollars appropriated to take care of this problem, why don't you take the vote now and take care of the problem now? Well, I guess that's the way the county works. So, they put it off.

SW: How has your experiences working in the bay and living in this area, how has that changed your life?

RLS: It is my life. [laughter] Pure and simple, it is my life. It's the only place I want to be. Alright, a little funny one between you and me. My wife wants to go to Price Club, "Bob, why are you driving 20 miles an hour?" Because the fastest I go on the water is seven. I'm used to going on that seven miles an hour. 40 is too fast for me. I don't like that. So, how does it shape your life? You go a little bit slower. That's what I want to do. I like to go slower.



SW: Have you ever thought about going on mainland? Has it ever been...

RLS: Yes. Just a couple of weeks ago, I had an offer. I thought I had an offer. I got a telephone call from somebody who said, "Oh, Bob, I thought you might be interested in a career change for the —" and I'm quoting this verbatim. "I thought, Bob, you might be interested in a career change for the right money." My wife was there. She heard the telephone message. In the meantime, I'm sweating this thing out for about two or three weeks because I know I have to answer this. It's up in Holtsville. This is up in the center of the island, and I don't want to go. It gets all the way to Saturday morning and I know I have to go there because I'm scarcely making a living on the bay. I'm sweating it out, and she says, "Bob, come on, shape up. Go to the meeting, find out what it's all about." Well, it turns out to be an infomercial for [a city corporation?]. I wipe my brows and said, "Thank God, it wasn't a job offer," because I cannot work upland. I just want to be near the water. It's the only thing I want to do. I don't care if I work in the penny shop or by Bluepoints Corporation in Bay Shore by the water. I cannot get away from the water. Now, that makes sense. So, nostalgic, like, "Oh, this guy is lying to himself." But when I drive my car, I had to have the window down. I go Upstate, I go nuts. Although I've seen some places on the west side of Jersey, they're pretty good over there. They've got nice rolling hills.

SW: Are you going to continue working the bay as long as it is possible?

RLS: As long as I can, yes. If I have to, I'll go crawling back in [bilges?], which I'm probably going to do tomorrow.

SW: What do you think of yourself as far as, say, the terminology? Do you think of yourself as a bayman or a dredge boat captain, a clammer? How would you describe it?

RLS: I can give you a very good answer to that. [laughter] This is kind of a funny one. I have a brother that took a correspondence course to become a pastor. Everybody that I knew growing up in the church that I did, they had to go away to college for about three or four years to become a pastor. Then they could call themselves reverend this or reverend that. So, my brother took a correspondence course and he becomes a pastor in one year. Now, he calls himself Reverend Slager. So, after all these years, I think I can call myself Captain Bob. [laughter] That's what I call him. Among other names that I have, some people actually call me Captain Bob.

SW: Do you like that?

RLS: It's really a slang term. It's like you thumb your nose at somebody. "Hey, captain. Hey, captain, how are you doing?" Yes, okay, I'm just as good a captain as you. I don't have a license. I don't run a hundred-ton vessel. I don't have a hundred-ton license. But you know what, I can run the boat just as well as you can. I've seen this. I saw it about two years ago, where a captain with a hundred-ton license took the [*Charlotte*?] out of here, out of the museum. He towed it with another boat over to Charlie [Hart's?], couldn't get it through the cut because he was coming in on a 40-mile an hour on the [screamer?] out of the southeast. Trying to tow the boat downwind, didn't make it. The boat ended up on the north side of the dock, hooked it around. Finally dragged it around, lifted the deck off the boat that he was towing with, ended up with the *Charlotte* lying up against the poles. Here's the boat in total jeopardy, a hundred-ton captain. He went home, left the boat out there sinking. I said, "Oh, Captain Hundred Ton." I don't even have a license, but I wouldn't have done that. So, license, yeah, well, it doesn't mean

much to me. I'm still Captain Bob. [laughter].

SW: You said before that you were proud when your son went into the same business.

RLS: Yes.

SW: What is the satisfaction that you yourself have felt over the years?

RLS: Only in knowing that basically, I guess that I get up and go to work every day or as much as possible. My wife is happy with me. I can say that. I guess that pretty much squares the whole thing up. She's happy. She says, "Bob, we just have enough to get along with for this week. Maybe next week, it would be better." She never has a harsh word to say. That's my satisfaction.

SW: What would you like people to know about those who work in the bays? What would you tell them?

RLS: About the number of people that I've seen working on the bay?

SW: Well, just about them in general, as far as them wanting to know more about them without judging them. How would you describe the people who've worked out here?

RLS: Well, most of them, even in regard to the last segment that I saw on TV, and a few other people that I knew, they are a hardworking clan, a hardworking bunch of people. They see the livelihood that they had, which is slowly drifting away. Many of them are still willing to stick to it. I haven't seen anybody thumb their nose at the bay. Everyone that's ever been out there says, "I wish I could go back to it." I think that pretty much sums it up. Everybody who's ever been out there's said, "I wish I could go back, but I just can't."

SW: Well, I would like to thank you for your time today. It's been a pleasure.

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

Reviewed by Nicole Zador 8/22/2024