Interview with Bill Tunney

Narrator: Bill Tunney

Interviewer: Nancy Solomon

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

Principal Investigator: Nancy Solomon

Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting

Abstract: On November 28, 2007, Nancy Solomon conducted an interview with Bill Tunney as part of the Long Island Traditions Oral History Collection. Tunney is a commercial fisherman based in East Patchogue, New York. He grew up in Bellport Village and started clamming on Great South Bay when he bought his first boat at the age of thirteen. Over the years, Tunney began to work out on the ocean and has expanded his fishing activities to include gillnetting as well as dredging for crabs and scallops. Tunney briefly left the region for college, during which he earned a degree in mechanical engineering. However, he eventually decided to return and make a career of fishing. He speaks to some of the challenges he faced as a newcomer to the profession, including having to earn the respect of more established fishermen. He also discusses what a typical day of work entails and the different kinds of fish he targets during each season. Tunney explains how he shifted to spending more time on the ocean as the bay became less lucrative. Learning to make effective nets proved to be one of the hardest parts of the job, and Tunney offers a breakdown of how webbing size and color can affect one's catch. He also details the parts and process of setting gillnets. The conversation also covers Tunney's clientele, the federal regulations that have impacted local fishermen, the annual costs of gear, and the number of other commercial fishermen operating in the area.

Nancy Solomon: Today is November 28, 2007. This is Nancy Solomon talking with fisherman Bill Tunney of East Patchogue. So, Bill, how old are you?

Bill Tunney: Forty-four.

NS: How did you get into fishing?

BT: I grew up in Bellport village.

NS: You look at the road.

BT: Clamming was real big back then in the bay. It's just something I wanted to do. When I was around thirteen, I bought my first boat. I mowed lawns when I was a young kid, bought a boat, and I just started clamming. One thing led to another. It's not like my family—I'm not a second, third generation, just something I liked and stuck with it.

NS: Did you have friends who did the same thing when you were growing up?

BT: Yes. I had quite a few friends in high school. That was a pretty big thing, clamming on the bay, in the Great South Bay.

NS: Was there anyone in particular who kind of showed you the ropes?

BT: You know who helped me out a little bit? You might even know him. You know John German?

NS: I know of him, yes.

BT: He's the president of the Lobsterman's Association. He helped me and a couple of my friends out when we started scalloping on the bay. So, he was probably an inspiration, more or less like a mentor at times.

NS: Did you grow up in East Patchogue?

BT: Right next to East Patchogue, Bellport village.

NS: Bellport, okay.

BT: Right.

NS: How many commercial fishermen were there when you were growing up?

BT: In Bellport town?

NS: Yes.

BT: Probably half of that marina at Bellport used to be clam boats, crabbers. Put a number on it. It might be hard for me to say, but it was quite a few of us. Sad to say, now mine's the boat there, the last clam boat.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: So, you were saying that you have the last clam boat in Bellport. Is that where you keep your clam boat?

BT: Yes, that's right.

NS: What are some of the different kinds of things that you do?

BT: What are some of the other things that I do?

NS: Some of the different fishing activities.

BT: On the bay?

NS: Yes.

BT: I dredge crabs. We do that right here Moriches Bay and down the bay shore. I used to dredge scallops every fall. We just haven't had scallops for so long—last year, we had a few. I didn't get time to do it. I went right from gillnetting to dredging crabs, so I didn't get to go scalloping last year.

NS: What kind of crabs are you…?

BT: Blue crabs, blue claws. I potted blue claw crabs probably fifteen years, when I was younger. Probably in my twenties into my early thirties, mid-thirties, I potted crabs along with the clamming. That's right about the time where I started working on the ocean.

NS: How long have you been working on the ocean?

BT: Let's see. It must be twelve years now. Twelve, maybe fifteen. Some of them overlap.

NS: Had you worked on anybody's ocean boat before you went out on your own?

BT: Yes. I worked on some clam boats in the sound, you know the surf clam boats. I worked on a couple of gillnetters out of Shinnecock and that's the way you learn.

NS: Was there anyone in particular that really showed you the ropes who was a mentor to you?

BT: Yes. There was a friend of mine, Richie LaRocca. He helped me out a lot, the gillnet. I don't know if you know him or not. Him and his brother, they're second generation, they've been doing it for a while. And they showed me a lot, helped me out.

NS: Did they trust you at first?

BT: Did they what?

NS: Did they trust
you?

BT: Did they trust me?

NS: Yes.

BT: What do you mean?

NS: Well, there's usually like a certain period where you have to earn somebody's—

BT: When I went on my own, I had known them long enough where they respected me anyway. It wasn't a problem. But the other gillnetters on the ocean, I had to earn my respect from them. That was a tough go, but it was all right. After a while, they realized you're just out there to make a living and not cause trouble, you fit in.

NS: What are some of the ground rules when you have different fishermen all working with the same [inaudible]?

BT: As far as where you set your nets?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, when I first started out, you really can't be too aggressive, and you have to completely work around the people that have been there for years and years. I found my own spots, few areas that other guys didn't work that I seemed to like so I got comfortable with some of those areas. When things happen, like when you break down and one of those guys comes over and tows you or vice versa like when they have problems and you go out of your way, you stop what you're doing for the day. After a while, they accept you, but it took a while. It probably took five, six years before really they didn't try to intimidate you. Some of them did, tough luck.

NS: How can you describe your work? First describe your boat.

BT: My what?

NS: Your boat.

BT: My boat?

NS: Yes.

BT: I'd say, it's a thirty-eight-foot Osmond Beal. It was built in Maine. I had a thirty-five-footer

before this. I had a thirty-five-footer for about ten years. I had this one built to order. It's something I've been working on for a long time. So, it's a typical lobster boat that I use for gillnetting. Be the best way to explain it.

NS: After we're done here, you'll maybe tell us how you changed it so it would be a gillnet boat?

BT: How I what?

NS: How you changed the boat so you could use it as a gillnet boat.

BT: Okay. We're just going to stop here and drop a few (totes?) off.

NS: Is this one of your customers?

BT: Yes. You know Mastic Seafood?

NS: Yes. So, we were talking about how you got into the gillnet fishing business. What prompted you to go that route?

BT: To go
gillnetting?

NS: Yes.

BT: When I was working on the bay, pod clamming and crabbing—clamming is hard on your body. That's what prompted me to really look for other things to do that might be a little bit easier. Plus, I like mixing it up. So, I did. I worked on some other people's boats and lobstering was very territorial. Tough to get into. I've done that. I've worked for somebody on a lobster boat. The surf clamming is just such a huge investment. You need a big boat. You need several engines on the boat and dredges. I just didn't have the money for that. So, gillnetting was really achievable. What I did was I found somebody that had a boat, a younger guy than me, and he was struggling. I approached him. I said, "Look, I know a little bit about gillnetting. Would you like to do it for a few years, see how we do?" So, that's what I did. I approached the guy that had the boat, and I put together the nets and he'd just clean his boat up a little and we did it. We did it for like three years together.

NS: Did you work on the boat together?

BT: Yes.

NS: What was his name?

BT: You know that boat that was down to Marina, the old gillnet boat?

NS: Yes.

BT: That was the one that I started on.

NS: Wow.

BT: That was the boat that I had a partnership with for about three years.

NS: What was his name?

BT: His name is (Ed Schifola?). In fact, his father owned Mastic Seafood for pretty much forever. He just recently sold it. I used to sell crabs and clams to Eddie's father at Mastic Seafood. He was like, "Why don't you approach my son? Because he's not doing that good." He goes, "I know you don't have enough money to do it on your own." That's how it started. So, it was good. It just went from there. Eventually, I branched out on my own and we still fish together, me and Eddie. We're on the radio all day long talking to each other, and helping each other out, but we just went on our own.

NS: How did it change for you having worked with somebody to working on your own?

BT: How did it change for me? Well, when you're working with somebody else as a partner, it's kind of like being married. It's a lot of give and take. I had some ideas that I really wanted to try that I couldn't really do while I was working with him. That's probably what prompted me to move on. It was the right thing to do. It was good. I fish a lot harder than he does.

NS: What do you mean?

BT: What do I mean?

NS: When you say you fished a lot harder.

BT: I have a family. I'm married with kids. He's not. So, he enjoys life a little more than I do. He's got a great work ethic and a hard worker but, I push a little harder than he does. So, I felt a little held back, but it was a great partnership. I can't say anything bad about him.

NS: I'm not asking so much about your partnership. But what were some of the things that you started doing once you had your own boat?

BT: Some of the things that I did?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, I tried lots of things that I couldn't normally do. Fishing can sometimes be pretty frustrating. You have an idea, and it takes money to try it. A lot of times, those ideas don't work. So, when I was on my own, I fell flat on my face over a bunch of things. But I felt like in the long run, I was able to try more things and I became a better fisherman. I didn't have somebody saying, "Well, I really don't want to invest in that right now." You know what I mean? It gave me some more freedom to do things. Am I answering your question?

NS: Yes. So, if you could tell me a little bit more about the specifics or what were some of the things that you tried that work, that didn't work.

BT: Well, I made my nets a lot different, and that experimentation takes a lot of money. I experimented with different weights on led lines, different thicknesses of webbing. I'm more of an experimental-type person, so I was able to do that. When I got my own boat, I put a bigger net reel on it so I could carry more net. That helped me out. I just tried things. I tried all kinds of things right off the bat that I normally wouldn't have done with had I stayed in that situation. But I guess, that's pretty much it, just trying different things. I'm just going to stop here and pack out again.

NS: What's the name of this business where we're stopping?

BT: This is called Blue Water Distributors. A lot of the conch fishermen come here. In fact, they're probably cooking conch right now. They're probably shucking some kind of shellfish. The conch fishermen right here that's going to take these crabs from us. This guy, (Keith?), this guy (Keith?) he works on my boat sometimes.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: So, we were talking about being on your own and trying different things. What's a typical day like for you on the boat?

BT: Typical day? It's an early start. I usually get up around 3:00, 3:30. Usually, I like to get on the nets first light and I spend about five, six, seven hours on the water running nets.

NS: How long do you tow a net for?

BT: You know what, I don't tow a net. What we do is gillnet. Gillnetting is not dragging. What we do is we set a net out—

NS: How do you set it?

BT: Excuse me?

NS: How do you set it?

BT: Set it? Well, it's on a big drum, on a net reel on the back of the boat. We can run it right off, it'll pay out. The net is usually about twelve hundred feet long. They sink to the ocean floor. Then they have a float line.

NS: Right, to keep it upright.

BT: So, maybe they open up ten, fifteen feet depending on what we're fishing for. Some nets will only open three feet. Some nets open twenty-five-feet. It just depends on what we're targeting. Then we'll (tend?) those nets. I'll usually bring out about two nets with me and I'll bounce

between those nets. I'll make maybe half hour to one and a half hours sets. The shorter sets are when we're looking for fish. Usually, the first three, four hours in the day, we're looking for a body of fish. We're trying to see a sign of where they might be or where they might make up and then we'll let the nets fish a little longer. Hopefully, we'll make a day's pay.

NS: What keeps the net from collapsing onto the floor?

BT: The bottom of the net has the lead line. It's a long line, only about a half inch in diameter and it has lead inserts all throughout it. So, it actually weighs—it's fairly heavy. So, that brings the net down, that holds the bottom along the ocean floor. Then on the top line, we have floats spread out heavy five-six-feet. There's hard plastic floats. The float line opens up the net and the lead line keeps the net from sliding on the ocean floor so it doesn't collapse.

NS: Is there something at the beginning and the end of the net that keeps it stationary?

BT: Yes, we anchor both ends.

NS: With what?

BT: Excuse me?

NS: How do you anchor it?

BT: How do you anchor it? Well, we actually have small anchors. They're about twenty-five-pound anchors. On the surface of the ocean, we have what we call highflyers. They're flags. They're about, I don't know, twelve, fourteen feet high. Then we have a big flag material with a radar reflector on it and then it sits upright. It goes about six feet into the water and we have weights on the bottom of it. So, we have both ends of the net marked with a big flag and then anchors on the ocean floor. So, it doesn't move. It stays right there.

NS: Do the nets ever get ripped?

BT: Yes, they do. Sometimes we'll set a net and there happens to be a wreck there. An old boat or an old—you just never know what you're going to run into. And we'll haul the net back and it'll get hung up real bad. Sometimes we can get it off, but sometimes we can't. We'll tear it. Or sometimes, some of the draggers sometimes pull right through the net in a foggy, rough day if they don't happen to see it. Sometimes by accident, they'll tow through it. That doesn't happen too much, but it does happen.

NS: So, what happens when you get a rip?

BT: What happens when you get a rip? You don't have to repair the tear in a gillnet. It's okay to have some holes. But what you don't want to is you don't want that loose material. Because when you haul the net on the reel and then you set it off, that'll fetch up. So, what you do is you just cut it clean. It's okay to have a few holes in the net. The net doesn't have to be completely

perfect where fish are going to get out—it's not that type of net. You kind of understand what I'm saying?

NS: Yes.

BT: The way you catch fish with a gillnet is the net is stationary. The fish have to be moving. The fish can be there and they're not moving, then we won't catch a thing. They have to be either feeding or migrating or moving to shallow or deeper water. They have to be on the move otherwise, we won't catch them.

NS: What are some of the different kinds of fish that you catch with the net?

BT: Let's see. My year usually starts around April. We go for flounder and fluke. We'll catch some sundials also. Then around May, the monkfish will show up. We'll catch some skate, some monkfish, May, June, and July. Then in the summertime, we'll switch over to the smaller mesh. We'll go for blues. We'll work on some bonitos and Spanish Mackerel, few weakfish. Then in the fall, we return back to the monkfish. That's what I'm doing now. They're on their return migration and then they'll go offshore for the winter. We catch a few striped bass in the fall along with the monks.

NS: Have any of this, the Magnuson Act, affected what you catch, when you catch, how much you catch?

BT: There's a lot of things driving the regulations. You have the Magnuson Act. You have politics. You have the federal government setting quotas and then the states are allowed to implement that. It's affected us.

NS: Can you give me an example of how it has affected you?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: How has it affected you personally like before and after?

BT: I don't know how much time you have. [laughter]

NS: I have lots of time. I have lots of time.

BT: I tell you what, the regulations and a lot of the changes that have come down because of the Magnuson Act. What it does is it puts you on your heels. Because the regulations come out, and they'll declare a certain size—you just constantly have to change your gear. So, it's a little nerve-wracking when it takes six to eight months to order, special order gillnet, and have it made. Then something shows up in the mail that says you got to do it differently. So, really, I wish there was more of a lag time as far as when the New Year comes around and these regulations come in the mail and then you have these meetings. So, really, the biggest effect is just uncertainty of what you can and can't catch. You don't know what your income is really going to be because the regulations are changing all the time. Then the most frustrating thing is just you having to change

your gear and react to those. They say you can't use this size mesh on monkfish anymore and you got a whole backyard full of it. It's tough and I'm pro-conservation. I think a lot of the regulations are good, but a lot of them are too driven by politics. I keep saying that politics, but some of them aren't good. It's tough. It's scary is what it is. It really is.

NS: Were there some things that you used to catch routinely that you no longer catch anymore?

BT: Well, the one species that we can't touch anymore is sturgeon.

NS: Did you used to catch a lot of it?

BT: We used to catch a few, yes. They used to give us tags just like the striped bass. We're not allowed to work on sturgeon anymore.

NS: Ever?

BT: Ever. They tried to take striped bass away from us. Actually, we successfully fought it. There was a push for gamefish status here in New York, probably ten years ago, maybe fifteen years ago. We fought it. We were lucky. We had a lot of support from the draggers, from the lobsterman. So, we almost lost the striped bass. Even though it's a limited fishery now, it's important to us.

NS: So, before that regulation, how many pounds of striped bass would you catch in a season if you had to pick a number?

BT: Before the regulation, it was a free-for-all. I don't think that's the right way to do it. I think you should have regulation. I really do. They regulated the fluke. It came back in tremendous numbers. We're benefiting from it now. Now, they say we have a tremendous stock, but we're overfishing and so they're calling us back. So, right now, they're tweaking that. We're hanging in there, though. They've given us some fluke, but the bass used to be a free-for-all and it was overfishing. I'm not going to say it wasn't. They protected it and it came back. Thank God they gave us something to work on. Sometimes when they shut something down, you're afraid you're never going to get a piece of it again. I'm trying to think if there's something we can't—no, really sturgeon is the only species that they outright took away from us. But everything's regulated now, the bluefish, the weakfish. We're back where we started. You want to come to the house? [RECORDING PAUSED] I hope I'm giving you the answers you're looking for, I don't really know.

NS: Yes, no this is very helpful. I'm just trying to learn more about how you do, what you do, how it's changed over time. Are there any special memories you have when you first started out that were learning experiences for you?

BT: There's lots of them. What are you looking for?

NS: Something where you really learned something important.

BT: Let's see. But there's been so many lessons. [laughter] I tell you one thing and it applies to anything that you do on your own. You just have to stay focused and motivated, whether you're a fisherman, whether you're a carpenter. I think now that I look back, the only reason why I have made it—and it's been a tough business, we've had a lot of hard times. Really, you have to stay focused and motivated. Even when times are bad, you got to just keep plugging away. But let's see. Special memories. When I was younger, as a teenager, I loved clamming on the bay. It was probably the most simple, fun thing that I've done because you're young, you're full of energy. I used to jump on a boat in the summertime, 7:00, 6:00 in the morning. I used to close up around 1:00 o'clock. Sometimes I would come home and sell my clams, sometimes I would go to the beach and hang out with my buddies. It was just a lot of good times.

NS: What kind of boat did you have when you first—

BT: A twenty-foot Garvey. A twenty-foot Garvey. In fact, I still have it. I probably should have took you to see it down in Bellport. I had one built, just like I did this after a while. I had an old boat when I was younger.

NS: Where did you get your first boat?

BT: I bought it from—I think there was a rental place here in Moriches. It might have been Silly Lilly's or something like that. And they used to rent out little fifteen-foot wooden dories with little ten horsepower engines on them. I bought one of those old boats and it leaked like a sieve. I just had all I could do to keep it. Every year, I had to caulk it and it was a mess, but it worked out. It was my first boat. I had it for five or six years probably, with a small engine. So, those are good memories.

NS: Where did you go clamming when you first started?

BT: Bellport village. I had my boat and I worked in Bellport Bay. Bellport Bay and Patchogue Bay.

NS: What were you using to harvest the clams?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: What kinds of clams were you harvesting?

BT: Hard clams, littlenecks, and cherrystones. Some guys used to jump overboard and they used to work with their feet and scratch rakes. But I never really got into that. I always stayed on a boat and I used a clam rake, the long rake, they call it, with aluminum handles. Did a lot of crabbing in the bay. There's some good memories there too.

NS: What kinds of crabs were you getting?

BT: I was potting blue crabs. I used to do both. Well, I went to college out of high school by the way. I've got a mechanical engineering degree.

NS: From where?

BT: (Widener?) University. I graduated with honors, believe it or not. [laughter]

NS: I believe it.

BT: I didn't apply myself in high school. I could have done much better. It was very easy for me. I was a math, science head, but I did all right. I was like a C, B student. But when I went to college, I had mixed emotions about going to college. I wanted to stay and fish. But my parents—and it was a good thing what they did. They said, "You're young, you'll be able to fish and clam for the rest of your life." They helped me with school and I'm glad I did it. I went away to school. It gets you away from home and makes you grow up. You meet a lot of nice people. But I did end up coming back to fishing. But I don't ever regret taking those four years off to go to school and make sure I'm more well-rounded person. A lot of people don't have the opportunity, but I did.

NS: So, getting back to the crab.

BT: I'm sorry. I did take time off to go to college, I have to let you know.

NS: That is a very interesting part of your life.

BT: Crabbing was good. I used to work out of a little twenty-foot skiff, a Garvey. And I had a young boy who's probably like fourteen, fifteen years old, a friend of the family. He used to pick the crabs for me. He used to work all summer long with me. This was after high school. This is even after college, obviously.

NS: How many pots did you have?

BT: I used to run about one hundred and seven-five pots. One hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy-five. I used to catch—I'm sure that's your next question, right? I used to catch between ten to twenty bushel a day. Plugged away, did all right.

NS: What did you use for bait?

BT: I use bunker. That's probably my first experience with gillnetting. Because a couple of the other crabbers, they would set a little bit of net in the morning and catch their own bait. So, I talked to them and they told me how to do it. I started doing that. I started catching my own bait and that's when I first started gillnetting in the bay.

NS: Okay, you're using gillnet. How long did you have to set the net for?

BT: As the water warmed up, sometimes you leave it overnight. Sometimes you just set it for four or five hours and you'd have your bait. Sometimes I would run the pots and then pick them

up on the way in and I'd have my bait for the following day. I'd just put it in the freezer until the next day. So, I did mix gillnetting up a little bit with the crabbing. But I used bunker and bluefishes—fantastic bait, but it's a little expensive to use. But sometimes when you set the gillnet in the bay, you had a couple of crabs that would eat a couple of bluefish that you didn't want to sell so you use those for bait. What a great bait bluefish was. I guess, because it's oily.

NS: You were crabbing. You were clamming. Were you doing anything else on the bay?

BT: Yes, I was scalloping.

NS: What kind of equipment were you using for the scalloping?

BT: Just small dredges, little twenty-four-inch dredges. You'd (pull?) like four of them. Right over her in Moriches, it used to be real good. I used to have a trailer. I used to trailer out to Sag Harbor and go scalloping out there in the fall. Bay Shore, we had a few scallops set up in Bay Shore. So, I used to do a lot of traveling with the boat in the fall in the trailer.

NS: Where did you get your dredges from?

BT: I bought them. Good question. Remember that gentleman I told you, John German, the older fella?

NS: Right.

BT: He got me dredges from somewhere. I don't know if they were his or if he got them and I paid for him, but he set us up with scalloping.

NS: How many other people were doing scalloping during that period?

BT: A lot of people. A lot of baymen used to scallop. It was something we all looked forward to. It was a break from what you were doing. We always look forward to that fall opening. We talked about it at the coffee shop. It was a lot of fun. When they opened it, they had a ten-bag limit, whatever the limit was. It was a nice short day. It was just a nice break from the routine. Whether we were crabbing or clamming, that's probably one thing that we really—that's a good memory, looking forward to the opening of scalloping season. It just like recharged your battery and it was a lot of fun. But we don't have scallops anymore. It's sad. I can remember twenty, thirty boats right here in Moriches just plugging away on scallops. We'd go out to Sag Harbor and we'd see fifteen, twenty boats. You'd read about it in the *Newsday* all the time, the catches. That was good stuff. Dredging crabs is fun, too. Not too many guys do it.

NS: What kind of dredges did you use?

BT: It's similar to a scallop dredge, but they have long teeth. They've got about six, seven-inch teeth in them and they're spread very wide apart. It's maybe a cross between a clam rake and a scallop dredge, fairly heavy. We do that, I guess right around the summer. You could start now.

You could probably start dredging some crabs. If we get a little more cold weather, they bed in and mud. That was something else we looked forward to. I guess, as a fisherman, we looked forward to change. We went from one season to the next and nobody really wanted to pull on a clam rake all year long, but some guys did. But we look forward to change. That's good.

NS: How many months out of the year were you able to work on the water?

BT: I worked out every month. When the bay froze over, we used to go out on the ice and cut holes in the ice and clam right through the holes. Have you ever met anybody that did that?

NS: Yes.

BT: Okay. Sure, we worked right through the winter. Obviously, not as productive as it was during the warm months but kept plugging away. Sometimes when the bay froze up real bad out here in Moriches, the ocean water wouldn't freeze as quick. So some of us would run out here and do a little bit of clamming, dredge the crabs, or we'd trail to the North Shore [inaudible] harbor. It doesn't freeze as quick as the bay. We would bring our clam rakes over there. Winter over there if it was real bad on the south shore. We'd move around to try to avoid the ice. But sometimes the ice was just fine. If it got thick enough, we'd walk out on the ice and that was fun too. Not too many people could say they did that, right? [laughter]

NS: No. So, these days, how much time are you spending in the bay? How much time on the ocean?

BT: These days, I'm spending a lot of time in the ocean. I spend probably eighty, ninety percent of my year in the ocean and not too much time on the bay anymore.

NS: How come?

BT: How come? Well, it's just the bay isn't as lucrative as it used to be. It's a tough go on the bay. It's really tough. The clamming is pretty much over on the south shore. I shouldn't say that. There are a few guys hanging on, but it's just marginal. It's very hard work and it's just the clams aren't there. I don't know. They don't seem to spawn out. They don't seem to take it for whatever the reason. There hasn't been many clammers on the bay for a long time now, and it just won't come back. So, I guess, probably my move to the ocean was out of necessity financially. Although some guys do do well on the bay. The crabbing has been good. The crabbing has been decent.

NS: When you do go on the bay, is that what you are doing?

BT: Yes. Right now, my activity on the bay would be dredging crabs or dredging scallops. Mainly dredging crabs. I haven't clammed in a while. I haven't dug hard clams in probably—the last time, I dug hard clams was in Port Jefferson. That was a while ago. I'd have to think about that, probably ten years ago.

NS: Let's talk some more about the ocean. How far out you do go and how long does it take you to get there?

BT: Right now, I'm fishing in state waters. I stay inside of three miles. So, I don't go out very far, but I travel east and west. Right now, my boat is in Moriches. Sometimes back in August, I was fishing off of Bridgehampton, down by Montauk. So, I would have a long ride. I would come to the boat at 2:30 in the morning, and it'd take me an hour and a half to get rows going before I even started fishing. I travel a little bit. But for the most part it's a half hour, forty-five-minute ride to the nets, sometimes an hour.

NS: Are you fishing mostly off of Fire Island?

BT: Yes. Right now, Moriches area is where I do most of my fishing. But yes, I'm right up against Fire Island. Excuse me.

NS: Do you do any gillnetting in the bay?

BT: I used to. I used to gillnet in the bay. We used to be able to gillnet in the bay in the month of May. We can't do that anymore.

NS: When did that change?

BT: I have to make a few phone calls to find out.

NS: Roughly, what year, '80s, '90s?

BT: It was probably in the '80s, but that was a last-minute legislation. It was stapled to something, and it went through the midnight hour and boom, the bay was closed. That hurt us real bad. It really did. They could have regulated it without shutting it down. You know what I mean? But anyway, back to the gillnetting in the bay. In April, the bunkers show up in force and we used to go bunker fishing. It was a lot of fun, too. [laughter] We used to take that little twenty-foot Garvey and just load it to the rail with bunkers. We used to sell it to all the lobstermen. The lobstermen used to come down when lobstering was a real up and going business. They used to come down with their barrels and we'd salt up the bunkers. It was fun, it was a lot of fun. Then towards the end of April, the weakfish would come into the bay. In the beginning of May, the blues would come in. Then we would switch over. We would switch over from the bait and we would target the blues and the weakfish. But when they took the month of May away from us, it hurt us. All we could do was go for bait. It probably helped shove me into the ocean when they shut the bay down.

NS: How come they did that? What was the reason given?

BT: Politics. Probably, the drive behind that was just a lot of people didn't want to see gillnets in the bay anymore. It's a shame that they did it, that they got away with it.

NS: Was it sports fishermen? Boaters?

BT: Yes, sport fishermen. They got it done. It's tough to get it back, too, once that legislation is passed.

NS: Now, can you set your net in the other months of the year?

BT: Yes, you can come back into the bay in June. Yes, you can. But the weakfish—the water heats up, the fish are by the inlets, they're just not in the bay or the Great South Bay, it's pretty much over. You get a couple of weeks in June. Where you can catch a couple of blues and a couple of weaks, and then it's a real struggle. Then you have the crabs come out. The crabs become active right in the beginning of June. Then gillnetting is very difficult with the crabs because they'll just jumps right on the fish. So, it used to be spring thing.

NS: So, you're mostly offshore within three miles?

BT: Yes.

NS: How long does it take you to get there?

BT: To get where?

NS: To where you want to fish. Set your nets.

BT: It's about a ten-minute ride to the inlet. Today, let's see. I went about a forty-five-minute ride in the ocean, maybe forty minutes. So, it took an hour to get to the nets. I'm trying to think, the inlet's the 420, I was on the 498. Yes, I only went eight miles. I went eight miles to the west once I got to the inlet. It wasn't bad.

NS: Are the fish as plentiful as they once were when you first got into offshore fishing?

BT: Some are, some aren't. The fluke—there's more fluke than I can ever remember. More bass than I can ever remember. The monkfish, they had a little bit of a lull. They seem to be coming back. They're doing a lot to protect that. That's a unique fishery. That's more of an offshore fishery—offshore, twenty, thirty, forty, one hundred miles out. The big boats used to target them there. They're calming them down a little bit. It seems like the fish, it's a more healthy stock. Bluefish, they come and go. I can't figure them out. Right now, they're healthy. There's not an overabundance of bluefish, but I have seen more bluefish in the past than what I see now.

NS: Can you get a decent price?

BT: For blues?

NS: Yes.

BT: In the summertime, you can. You know what, what they're doing now with the bluefish is good. They regulate it. They have us on a certain poundage per day, and it's actually helped the

price because bluefish you can (gut?) the market. It's not a very desirable fish. So, that's working. We see between sixty and ninety cents a pound in the summer. That's not bad for bluefish. And the regulation does help. I think this summer we had a two-thousand-pound limit for a while and then it went down to fifteen hundred and that was perfect. Fifteen hundred pounds was just right. You don't always get it.

NS: For how long, per day?

BT: Yes, per day.

NS: We went to two places that are your customers. Who are some of your customers?

BT: Who were some of the other customers that I have?

NS: If you could just tell us.

BT: Okay. We stopped at Mastic Seafood today. They buy some of my fish. But the reason why we stopped there today was because I have a trucker that goes to New Bedford. He's a wholesaler and he also stops there. So, I dropped some fish for that trucker. The name of the gentleman is Mulligan Seafood. I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

NS: Was it hard to get customers?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: How did you get your customers?

BT: Good question. I guess that's another thing you have to learn. When I was working on the other boats as a deckhand, you try to take it all in. You try to figure out how they're catching the fish, but you also have to see where they're selling fish. It's not that hard to figure out how to find your buyers. You just get to know a couple of them, and they'll help you out. They'll give you phone numbers and it just happens pretty quick because people look for the fish. They want it.

NS: Was it hard to get reliable customers?

BT: Yes, I've taken some months with that. A lot of the fish goes on consignment. Like Mastic Seafood, when you go there, they want it, they pay you right away. It's not on consignment. But what I shipped into the city today is on consignment. I have a good rapport with the fella that I shipped to. But sometimes when you're new, when you're not real well-known, they won't pay you what they should. So, you have to stay away from those people. You figure it out over time. You just have to be careful. You can't put all your eggs in one basket. Then you get a feel for what the prices are local. So, when you ship into the city, that's a wholesale setting. You got to be careful, but you can get burned. And the other buyer we went to was Blue Water Distributors in Mastic Beach. He bought some stuff. He ships a lot of stuff to the West Coast. He flies a lot of stuff out of Kennedy. It's a good way—like when we're catching a lot of fish, I give him fish. He

goes to the West Coast and then the remaining of the fish goes to New York. So, not all my fish dumps into one hub into New York. But I have a guy that goes to New Belford. I got a guy that ships to the West Coast. I've got New York and some local fish markets here.

NS: When you were first breaking into the fishing industry, did some people really extend a hand to help you?

BT: Did some people?

NS: Yes.

BT: Some people did. Probably the one fisherman that did help me out was Richie LaRocca. I fished with him. He was always a phone call away. If I needed help, he would help me out. But there were some gillnetters that when I showed up in the ocean, they showed up at my front door kicking it down practically. They did not want to see me out there. They gave me a hard time. They would set their nets right over my net. They would run them over. You had to deal with that mentality, too. But for the most part, I have to say it was okay. There was just a few bad eggs.

NS: What was the hardest thing for you to learn?

BT: The hardest thing for me to learn? That's a loaded question. [laughter]

NS: Really? I wasn't meaning it to be.

BT: The hardest thing to learn.

NS: We all have our challenges in any profession, there are hard things to learn.

BT: Probably the hardest thing to learn was just how to make those nets right. When I first started gillnetting, I made all my nets. When you go from working on somebody's boat and you think you understand what they're doing to really having to make your own nets. I stunk as a fisherman when I first started. [laughter] I did. I just knew that when I see them put forty cartons over the dock and I get six, then I'm doing something wrong. You know what I mean? [laughter] That learning curve is tough. You've just got to hang in there, but I did. It took me two, three years before I really even—seriously, maybe even four years before I really turned a profit and thought that, okay, I'm going to make it. That was the hardest thing for me, figuring out how to make those nets to catch. Once I got it, then you're still building and I'm still changing things. But it was nicer once I got to the point where I could make a living. Then you start focusing on other things, but that was the hardest thing for me.

NS: So, that leads into the question, what makes a good net?

BT: A good net is a net that will catch fish and that will pick easy.

NS: Obviously.

BT: Now, I've built nets in the past that catch fish, but you can't get them out of the net because they're all tangled up. Some nets just catch dirty. If you use the wrong size webbing, you'll catch grass and mud. So, you want the net to fish clean and you also want it to catch the fish. So, there's a delicate balance between catching fish and being able to pick them and catching fish and having them a tangled mess in your net. So, otherwise, you can't turn your nets over.

NS: So, how do you make a net so it's easy picking? What do you have to be able to do?

BT: You have to have the right size webbing. For example, when I'm bluefishing. When I first started bluefishing, I tried like two, three different sized nets. To go bluefishing, you need three- and three-quarter inch, you need four-inch, you need four and an eighth, you need four and a quarter, you need four and a half, you need four and three quarter, you need five, you need five and quarter, you need five and a half. You need all these nets ready to go. Then when you start your season, you go out there with four or five. Maybe I shouldn't say four or five. Maybe three or four different sizes and you got to figure out what fish are going to be there for the year. So, you see how these nets catch. It takes you a couple of weeks to figure out what's there. You know what I mean? So, you see this net's not catching too well so you take that off. So, you bring back the next size.

NS: Is it related to the size of the fish and how fast they're swimming?

BT: Yes. Gillnets will—if the fish is too big, it'll bounce off. If the fish is too small, it'll swim through. So, you really have to find a delicate balance so that you need the fish to engage into the net and get caught. If the webbing's too heavy and the fish lays on a net, it won't catch. It'll retreat. So, it's an art. I'd like to say it's an art.

NS: Yes, it is.

BT: You have to have the right size net so the fish gets caught properly and doesn't bounce off. But if that webbing's too thin and not strong enough, those bluefish are forced—they'll stretch that webbing and swim right through it. So, you got to have it strong enough, but not too thick where it'll bounce off. Do you see what I'm saying?

NS: Yes, exactly. How long have you been using monofilament nets? What came before that?

BT: Well, I've never used anything but monofilament. I know they were nylon nets years ago, but I've never used them.

NS: Do you know when it changed from nylon to monofilament?

BT: No, I honestly don't. I can't really add much to that. Different color also. We've tried different color nets.

NS: Does that matter?

BT: Yes. I bought a net where one year I ordered a whole load of net for the summer, I couldn't even use it because it was the wrong damn color. It wouldn't catch. It was too dark. Thank God, I didn't throw my net out from the year before. So I went through the whole summer using last year's net [Recording Skips] opportunity to learn something. But I guess I learned something the hard way. But yes, we use different colors. We use light green, light blue, light gray, pink, clear.

NS: Which colors work best for which kinds of fish?

BT: I strongly believe in a light green.

NS: For everything?

BT: Yes. I use light green for everything. I have had luck with like light pink and an icy blue color, like a light blue. But I tend to go with the light green. I think that works good for me. You hanging in there?

NS: Yes. How about you?

BT: Yes.

NS: We were talking about this marina here and getting the dock space here and you were talking about Shinnecock. What happened in Shinnecock?

BT: Shinnecock, it's fine there. It's not that I was asked to leave or anything. I just started fishing in Moriches. I did well down here and I liked it. Another reason why I like fishing here is because we're away from the dragger fleet. There's a lot of draggers out of Shinnecock. The gillnetters and draggers can work together, but it's easier if we're away from where they Frequent, work the most. I found a home down here. The people around here are pretty receptive. They're actually really nice. You know what, when we come to the dock, we always offer them fish. We really try to let them know that we're normal people and that we're not trying to kill everything in the ocean. A lot of people see us come in with a truckload of fish and they look at us and they say things and they look away or they shake their head. That's tough, but we do get that sometimes. But here, it's okay. There's a lot of down earth people.

NS: Do you have to work on your nets a lot?

BT: Yes, a lot, a lot.

NS: Where do you work on your nets?

BT: In my backyard. When the season's over, I guess I'll take a week or two off, but then I'll get right working on the gear in my backyard. It takes probably four to five weeks to strip out the nets that I'm not going to use and prepare to make nets for the new year.

NS: What is stripping out?

BT: The nets, you know how we discussed there's a lead line and a float line?

NS: Yes.

BT: Well, the webbing is what gets all torn up and eventually it gets stiff. It doesn't last long. Maybe two seasons is the most I'll get out of a net. Usually, one season, then I have to make new nets.

NS: How long is a typical season for you?

BT: The monk nets, I use in the spring and the fall. That's it for them. I've got to make all new nets for the following year.

NS: How much does it cost you to make a net on average?

BT: Monk nets, thank God, the monk nets—there's not a lot of webbing in a monk net and we pay by the pound. [Phone rings in background] Excuse me. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: We were talking about how much a typical net might cost you.

BT: Well, I get to reuse the lead line and float line. There's a lot of expense that goes into the nets. Let me tell you how it works now with the money. Right now, I don't make my nets anymore. I have somebody make them. So, I spend more time fishing than I used to. I used to spend ten weeks hanging nets in the wintertime—just hanging nets, making no money at all. That's when I was trying to figure out what makes nets work. So, I would make all kinds of different nets and then I change again in the following year. Now I know what I want. So, it'll cost, to make one monk net—twelve hundred-foot, just in labor, the hanging part is about—

NS: Well, how much do you spend on a net?

BT: How much a year do I spend on nets?

NS: Yes.

BT: Fifteen thousand dollars.

NS: Okay. And so one net would be about how much?

BT: I'm sorry?

NS: What would the cost be for one net, ballpark?

BT: For one net? Well a monk net wouldn't be that much. A monk net would only be five hundred dollars. But a bluefish net would be very expensive. It'd be a thousand dollars, maybe fifteen hundred dollars because there's just tremendous amount of webbing.

NS: Would that be the most expensive net that you would spend money?

BT: I spend more money on monk, yes, because I use more monk nets than we do for bluefishing and striped bass fishing. But, yes, the heaviest part of our investment is in monk. We lose a lot of nets. We lose them to storms. We lose them to draggers, to scallopers. We've got to deal with that, too. Last year wasn't a bad year, but I had a horrible year about two years ago, maybe two or three years ago. The Montauk fleet showed up for squid. Before the spring was over, ninety percent of my gear was hit by draggers. You try and mend it. You just try to hang on for dear life with a situation like that. That was a horrible—but that happens. When they tow through a net, maybe it's a twelve-hundred-foot net, they'll tear a hundred foot of it up, you'll mend it up. Sometimes the net will fish, sometimes it won't. Sometimes you just have to bring that net home and bring another one back out. We do have bad years like that.

NS: How long will the net sit while you're trying to catch?

BT: The monk gear, we fish overnight. We tend it every day. When a storm comes, we get that net. That's why we have a big net reel on the boat. We'll get them nets and we'll leave them on the boat, let the storm go by, then we'll go back out and set them. So, we fish overnight for monk. For the bluefish, it'll sit anywhere from a half hour to an hour and a half. We just constantly bounce between two nets. Then we take those nets home with us. So, when we're striped bass fishing—striped bass, bluefish, weakfish, bonita, those nets aren't in the water for more than an hour and they come home with us.

NS: Do you use poles to anchor the nets with the ones that are sitting overnight?

BT: We use anchors, heavy anchors. Real heavy lead line, too, because they're out there in all kinds of weather.

NS: How many gillnetters are there around now in your geographic region?

BT: In our area?

NS: Yes.

BT: There's four of us here in Moriches that fish in the ocean. We're not talking about the bay, right? Just in the ocean?

NS: Right.

BT: Four in Moriches, there's probably four out of Fire Island. Probably six out of Shinnecock, maybe seven. Maybe another three out of Montauk, maybe four. What is that, fifteen, twenty tops? Right?

NS: Do you have a sense how many there are on all of Long Island?

BT: There's probably the same amount in the bay, I would say.

NS: What about the western part of the island? Do you have a handle on if there are any gillnetters out there?

BT: You get down to Rockaways, there's a few more boats. Probably another four or five in the ocean. So, maybe that would make twenty in total.

NS: So, most of them are around

here? BT: Yes. Most of them are in

this area. NS: In the eastern part of the

island.

BT: Yes. It's hard to say how many guys in the bay do it. A lot of the crabbers catch their bait so maybe there's another fifteen, twenty guys in the bay that do gillnetting for a long time.

NS: Like seasonal. Okay.

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

Reviewed by Cameron Daddis, 08/13/2024