

Interview with Cory Weyant

Narrator: Cory Weyant

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.

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Abstract: On December 8, 2003, Nancy Solomon interviewed Cory Weyant, a bayman and dragger fisherman from Freeport, New York. Cory discusses the significant changes he has witnessed in his fishing career over the past fifteen years, reflecting on the decline of fish populations and the impact of overfishing. He describes the transition from small trawlers and local fish markets to the current state where strict regulations and reduced fish populations have drastically altered the fishing industry. Cory adapted to these changes by shifting his focus from commercial fishing to providing bait for the increasing number of sport fishermen. He recounts his early experiences and the variety of fish he encountered, such as flounder, fluke, whiting, ling, and cod, which highlights the abundance and diversity of fish during his youth. He addresses the impact of regulations, pollution, and habitat changes on the fishing industry, stressing the importance of sustainable practices and the need for enforcement of existing laws to protect the environment and future fish populations.

Nancy Solomon: – talking with Cory Weyant. Today is December 8, 2003. This is tape one, side one. Cory, in the last fifteen years, you've seen quite a few changes in your own work as a bayman and a dragger fisherman. What are some of the things that first come to your mind in terms of how things have changed, both here in Freeport on the bay and on the waterfront, in general?

Cory Weyant: How things have changed as to comparison fifty, twenty years ago where there was many more small trawlers in my area, which I've been brought up on this block since I was two – ow, I'm forty-seven years old – to where there was many more trawlers to where they used to sell the fish to the people. Fish was much more accessible. Fish was much more abundant. People would come down to this area. To where things now as it went [from the] '60s into the '70s, there was still some fishermen, some fish markets. Now, into the '80s, overfished. Then, finally, '90s, so many laws to where the local fishermen can no longer keep up with it. It's no longer abundant. The amounts of fish has changed so dramatically. Our technology has finally caught up to us. But at the same time, being a commercial fisherman, if you didn't learn to adapt to your surroundings, which are brought up with that, you can no longer be a commercial fisherman. Going from working on the small boats to working in fish markets to working on offshore trawlers to nowadays dealing with bait because there are so many more sport fishermen around us, ten times the amount of what there was twenty years ago. So, now, I have adapted to catching baits for these people.

NS: When you first began, what kinds of things were you catching?

CW: When I first began fishing?

NS: Yes.

CW: Well, we worked on [inaudible]. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: We were discussing some of the kinds of fish that you caught when you first began.

CW: Well, when I first began, as I love to teach the kids in the school, I like to go back to when I was a boy and first used to go across the fishing boats. I'd say the old timer, the *St. Peter*, which was the first trawler I actually wound up working on, "Oh, what do you got today?" There was many, many different types of fish; there were flounders and flukes and this and that. At that time, the man told me, "Don't be a fisherman; be a farmer like Kennedy," which I love to tell the kids in school. Then the teachers say that I'm dating myself. But that was my first interest in that. You saw the many types of fish. There was yellowtail. There was cods, many different things. Then eventually, when I wound up – my first trawler I worked on was the *St. Peter*, across the street from my house sixteen, seventeen years old, and we catch in the winter – in the winter, it was the whiting, where you'd stand in them up over your knees to laying where you can only catch X amount and then you'd have to throw them over. The cod fish where you would float a bag of cod fish, and you'd see it two, three lifts – they'd get the fish on the boat, about 187 fish in one tow. The things that I've seen all my life, the butterfish, where God said to me, "Here the they are." We had a rip in the bag, and they come all the way up, and the captain I worked for – "Shake them down. Shake them down." The next thing you know, they were raining to the bottom like silver dollars in the blue water because there was a rip in the bottom of the bag. I actually tell the students – when I talk to kids about reality, things that have

happened – it was like God saying, "Well, boys, this is what they look like," but you can't have them. We got two bushels that rained onto the deck, and there was the biggest butterfish you ever seen. So, just so many stories and things. What I always liked about fishing is that every day was different. Every single day is different. There's never the same day ever. I've been on, damn, hundreds of boats anyhow. I won't go with thousands, but I'll tell you – hundreds of boats, from catching squid to catching – I can tell you episodes on every boat I've ever been on in my life, working out on Montauk [inaudible] with [Kurt Schmitty?]

NS: I am going to steer you back.

CW: Sorry, I get crazy.

NS: Steer you back.

CW: Okay, sorry.

NS: So, in a typical catch on a dragger boat back in like the '70s or '80s –

CW: Whiting, ling, flounder.

NS: What is ling?

CW: I do get going. I'm sorry with that. Ling would be known as scrod, which they [inaudible], but it's actually the red hake, which is like a cousin to the white hake or whiting. So, the whiting was so abundant, but it was cheap, and everybody caught hundreds and hundreds of boxes. Ling was abundant but cheap. At the time, ling was scrod, sold as scrod. It was so abundant. If you got a nickel back for them, you were lucky. Maybe a dime. Throw them over, only to pick the big ones and let the little ones go. At that time, a fish – you can walk on them as far as you seen. If somebody goes out down the drags and gets a box of ling, they like to kiss their feet. Actually, I wouldn't mind some to make some fishcakes myself. It was the best. It was overfished, it was beat up, it was unregulated – bang, what have you? Like anything else, like cod fish up North. At the time, there was whiting and ling. Every day, whiting and ling. We'd come in, and the *Irish M.* would be next to us. We would sell them for four-pound for a dollar, and all of a sudden, he'd go, "Five pound for dollar." How's that? Fill a bag of fish – five pounds of fish for dollars. That's twenty cents a pound. Okay? It'd go back and forth, wherever the line would go – to six pound per dollar. That was good money. You took it. You took it. I'll tell you what – working on that boat when I was seventeen, eighteen, and I get paid in singles. I'd walk out – and I'd get paid because we sold all the fish, and I get a lot of singles. Boy, I was like the richest man in the hill. I had a stack of money. It was only like eighty, ninety dollars, but it was all singles with scales all over it. The next day, I'd be needing to get more of them singles. It was a rough life being a young boy on this canal. [laughter]

NS: What about in the bay? How long would it take you to catch, say, a couple of pounds of eels?

CW: Well, back when I was a kid growing up, you go out jacking. My dad was involved in eels. [RECORDING PAUSED] As far as eels, I never messed with them until my late twenties. My father worked with Charlie Wertz, which was a big eeler in the area. The Wertz family is still a big fishing family, the father and the son.

NS: Yes, I know.

CW: But myself eeling, I didn't start until after I ran a fish market for about four years. I stopped because I couldn't take the nine-to-five every day. I went back to the big boats in the ocean, but then I started eeling. Since then, in the late '80s – I'll give you '85 – I guess I've been eeling twenty years. So, I couldn't catch because I was a greenhorn, a novice. I learned traps. I lost plenty. But nowadays, I did rather well. I could catch on an average day, just pulling – here's my last time out, and I only had fifteen pots out because they're all changed over to green crabs. My last time out was eighty-two pounds. So, that was decent. They were sitting. I caught some snakes. I caught the little ones for bass bait. So, it was a decent day. It was a couple hundred dollars but for fifteen pots. So, it's a matter of knowing where to put them, a decent catch. Earlier in the season, I caught them. So, there are some eels around. What helps me is I also smoke, which is something that I've been doing.

NS: Right. Have you seen the number of eels decline or harder to catch? Do you need more traps to catch the same number of eels?

CW: No.

NS: Or has it been pretty steady?

CW: Actually, I feel this year was one of the best years I've ever had. I caught more eels with less traps, but I traveled more of an area just because I think that I'm a better fisherman because I've been doing it so long, knowing where to go and catching it before – the early bird gets the worm, and I did well. Caught them early. Things are different. Technology, okay, because of our traps, the type of trap. My trap has been brought up from a Verity trap, but I still build my own. Everybody likes to think theirs is the best, but I did well this year with the eels. There was quite a bit around.

NS: So, you haven't seen a decline in the eels?

CW: No.

NS: Have you seen declines in other things?

CW: Striped bass has come back because of regulation. Actually, declines early/ late in the '80s. That's when the declines came when I was on the boats. Everything is coming back. [inaudible] strong.

NS: What were those declines in the '80s [inaudible]?

CW: In the '80s, all the whiting that we were discussing. Because in the '70s, I was on the boat. So, into the '80s, those things got beat up – whiting, ling – then you didn't see it. Codfish? Like I tell my children – I love to say “my children” – in my classes, “Codfish?” I said, “A friend brought me down a codfish from Hyannis, Massachusetts, and I made codfish cakes out of it. But that's the last time I had fresh codfish in this area.” Because this is also something that was beat up or overfished – whiting, ling, codfish, flounders, a lot of things are making comebacks, but the deal is that the laws were put on too late, but now they are so strict. So, hopefully, for our future in 2020, what have you, they'll be that product back. I'd love to stand in whiting and ling up to my knees again. Boy, that'd be a sight. People used to talk about frost fishing, but you have to have that fish there to get beat up. When the surf in the winters – they used to get the whiting, get beat up in the surf, and they would get knocked on the beach, but there was such an abundance of fish, too. So, the frost-fishing days might be over.

NS: When you're talking about the regulations, what are some of the regulations that have affected your livelihood?

CW: Well, the regulations that affect my life – it really doesn't affect it because, like eels, they finally made a mesh. It has to be over six inches in length. So, these guys that used to take glassy, little, tiny, tiny babies, which I never did, that's for them. Our mesh size are bigger. As far as nets, which there's virtually no fishing boats left on this canal – there's four little ones – their bag is so big now; it'd be like using a codfish net to drag for fluke. The holes are six and a half inches big. So, it passes virtually almost everything through except for the larger ones. So, regulations on that are so stringent. It's crazy. As far as myself, it's not bad because I don't really deal with food. I deal with bait. I catch green crabs or blackfish, which I'm doing right now. I was out yesterday, and I had ten bushels. One of my better years, I did well after I changed my eel pots over. Up to twenty bushels in a day, I would catch green crabs. Like anything else, everything has a cycle. Believe me, you see a crab, and I tell people I take with me, “You see a crab with eggs on the bottom, that's a thousand crabs right back in the water,” because you're cutting your own toe. Everything is your own – how would I say? – your own protection. Use your brain. You're going to wipe something out – like I've learned since I'm a kid, you wipe it out when it's little, it's not going to be any later. So, you got to just take it easy, fish for what you can. Hopefully, we'll be able to – killies? Look at this year with killies. There was none. Now, people are so used to not using killies for bait because they use frozen bait, spearing, squid. Summertime, killeying, as I teach in the schools, I bet you, I went killeying six times this year. Six for the whole summer. The killies didn't come until August, and by that time, they didn't want them – my bait. You want to talk about how things have changed? My bait alone, the horseshoe crabs, I happen to have eight, maybe fifteen left, and Timmy – *St. Peter* – has asked me because he sells to the aquarium. I will supply the New York Aquarium with two bushel of white crabs, fifteen to twenty horseshoe crabs, and fifty starfish, which I will all catch, which will go to the New York Aquarium. So, look how things have changed. I'm now catching for the aquarium for food. In the photo – Timmy. Well, I never actually worked for Timmy, but he had the old *St. Peter*. Now, he has the little *St. Pete* still across my house. Things have changed dramatically.

NS: You were talking before about how there used to be a lot more fishermen. What are some of the people or the boats that you remember around here? From when you were growing up, how many fishermen did there used to be?

CW: When I grew up here on Woodcleft Avenue, [where] I've lived since I'm two – when I grew up here since I'm a little boy, there was upwards – I've heard from the old times which I've worked for – they say sixty, seventy boats. Now, there's four: the *ET* – Tony Sougstad worked for him, the old Stonington, the Wertzes, the little *St. Pete*, and the old (*Terry Lee?*), which was [inaudible] boat. In the '60 and the '70s, when I was growing up, up and down this block, boats used to be [inaudible] tied up next to each other. They'd be five, six deep. You'd meet guys from Cape May, Port Charles, this, that. When I tell my kids I remember meeting Cousin Willie, Miguel, (Virginia Maurice?) [a] Black man, fished all his life, and I know him late in his sixties. So, the boats there was no longer – the fishermen moved to other ports. Now, as you can see, they changed the block over. It's now a tourist trap. We walk up and down. We look at the ambiance of the water. We'll serve you fish by the plateful. The days I wish – in my mind – what I know on my mind was on tape or pictures from the selling the fish off the boats to looking at the party boats where you could walk on to walking right into a real shuck house, where they shuck the clams right there. Things have changed so dramatically. It's crazy, but that's how it is.

NS: Are there any clam boats left on Woodcleft?

CW: Clam as far as bait or food?

NS: Skimmer.

CW: Skimmer, that's me now. I work on the *Sturgeon II*, which was a fishboat for years. The original *Sturgeon I*, Captain Ben's father, Jerry Bracco, worked on that boat. Then he captained *Sturgeon II*, Clarence [inaudible] Cummings and Matt Cummings – they were partners. Now, since I was lobstering up until 1988 and then they asked me to work for them, catching the skimmer clam which (George Street?) originally used to catch across from my house and shuck and sell for five dollars a bushel, and now they're fifteen dollars a bushel. So, we still catch the same clam. Everything is going up, and our backs have gone down. Let me tell you, when I get off a clam boat, I know about it. We're not as young as we used to be. [laughter] That's for sure.

NS: So, the one clam boat is Timmy Swanson's?

CW: No, that's gone. That used to be across the street. Timmy just has the little *St. Pete*.

NS: So, who has the clam boat?

CW: Just us. The *Sturgeon II* for bait on Woodcleft. There's three other boats, but now they're out at Freeport River. They're (Schmitty's, Curt Schmitt?). Two boats, but they're [inaudible] food, sometimes they bait. And the *Susan H*, strictly for food like *Doxsee* [inaudible] for food. So, clamming is a big business, but now, it has shifted. Most people will go out of Rockaway

Inlet. There's clam boats down there. There's twenty of them down there. We call them rocket launchers. They are a hundred-foot a piece, and they catch eight hundred thousand bushels a day. It's a big business, like I talk about while we're doing in the classes, but we're catching them for bait, so we come home with three hundred bushels.

NS: How many boats used to go for the skimmer clams?

CW: You have as many, if not more than it did then now because of technology. Because back in the day, they would go – Billy (Botch?), Billy (Brunell?) – God rest him – Billy (Brunell?), one of the pioneers, and Bob Doxsee, one of the pioneers in this business. They used to go in the '60s with things that looked like the Flintstones pulling something on a boat with a pump. Nowadays, the pump's under the motor and hydraulics – everything else. These rocket launchers catch tenfold what these men caught back in the '60 and '70s.

NS: Yeah, but how many more boats were going for the skimmer clams around here?

CW: Now?

NS: No, back then.

CW: Back then, no. Back then, with a clam, no. Back then, George (Street?), maybe the [inaudible] six, half a dozen, maybe. There was not much around this area. A couple boats catch them. They couldn't catch much. Their boats could only hold a couple hundred bushels, so that was a good day for these boats. I remember watching the old scoop come in; that was Billy's first boat. Man, I wish they had pictures. Right across the street, they're loading them right here. Right where that JC Cove is, right there. They're coming in, I think, three and a bushel up on a roof. The thing right down the waterline. I used to get paid down at cold storage. That's when the (Botch?) got into it with his bigger boats later in the '70s. We get paid quarter to drag the bushel from one end of the trail and the other boat and stack them. They'd fill them, two, three thousand bushels of clams, and they'd stack them right to the roof. The tractor-trailers would go process them. The Howard Johnsons would have the clams strips in like that. That was the heyday back then.

NS: Now, when was this?

CW: In the early '70s, when I was in high school – '70, '71, '72. When the (Botch?) got on them, all the [inaudible] – all the guys I know, everyone was clammer. Everyone I knew was a clammer. Fishing? What's fishing? Fishing dropped. Because you could go out on a clam boat, and you make a day's pay. It was guaranteed because they were there, but if you didn't break your back. Oh, boy, I worked with some of the clammers down at the old Rubber Duck, me and Ralph [inaudible] "Got to go on a boat. Oh, boy." [laughter] [inaudible] fishermen. We all got along. Fishing, you can make your money, and it was hit or miss. I remember walking off that day, like I tell the kids, lunch money, or walk off with a stack – boy, you wouldn't believe, baby, I don't want to see you tomorrow. But you got it because you caught it. It was like going to a bank. But today, the way to deposit was, *bang*, catch one hundred eighty fish, the codfish. Great days, and you had bad days. Every day has been different. There's not one day in the ocean that I would not forget, and there's so many memorable

moments. It's unbelievable. So, that's what I like about it.

NS: How many baymen were there when you were growing up?

CW: There was quite a few, just about as much as there is now. I guess it levels out. Around this area, I'll give you fifty. That's a good number. Back then, it was the Kellys. There was probably the Millers. The Millers was always around. There are lots of clans. I remember (Billy Lean?), the (Leans?), Bill (Lean?), and his brother (Gordon Lean?), oh, man. Billy is still around. His young son went up to the woods. But boy, when I was a kid, they'd take me out in the bay when I was ten years old and sit right in the water, clamming already, and seen my first scallops and all that. It was great. There was quite a few back then, but so much more was open. But then again, back then, our [inaudible] were gigantic. Back in the '60s, everything was gigantic [inaudible]. Gas might have only been fifty cents a gallon, but they were [inaudible] back then if you thought about it. There wasn't a lot of – you didn't see what you got now. Then they got fancy in the '70s, and there's still clam diggers. The clams went up a little bit. Look at the guys now; they go out, and they're clamming. They're working. They're getting the money, but you only sell X amount. There's steamers in this area. There's a lot of clam diggers still in this area. Fifty, anyhow. There's guys that still making their living strictly clamming. That's all they do. I never messed with that because I have too many bait licenses.

NS: About how many clammers are there?

CW: Now, right here in Baldwin/Freeport area, full-time clammers? Thirty, thirty-five that I could [inaudible].

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

CW: That I knew of? Maybe, like that. Around the area, I'm talking within five towns.

NS: Yeah. But were there other clammers that you didn't know?

CW: Oh, yeah, there was a lot more because there was a lot more clams, a lot more area was open.

NS: If you had to take a guess, how many clammers were there altogether?

CW: I guess, a few hundred back in the '60s. I remember driving around, and everybody was clamming. They were clamming from one end to the next. They were clamming. They went oystering. Oyster, what's that? Come on, back here before we had the hurricane in '38, they say this was the oyster capital of the world. What do I know? I only see the remnants. I see these old shells that are piles or where the houses were. I know about bay houses, so they say. I know about it since the '60s. When I was [inaudible], since I'm five, we'd go to the houses; it was lines and lines of houses. Now, there's twenty-four. Come on. So, everything is changing. Geez, by the time I'm an old man, maybe the marsh won't even be there like we were just discussing earlier about erosion from boats.

NS: What are some of the habitat changes, the erosion? When did you first start to notice?

CW: Twenty years ago, easy. Back in high school, we'd go into marshes, and you never realized it. I wasn't an ecologist, but I would still – come on, you'd look at the marsh. They would be beaten up by boats. As boats got bigger and faster, the waves got more erosion to where I used to keep my boat twenty years ago; that marsh no longer exists. It's gone. It's sand. It's beach. It's gone. You can see the skeletons from old bay houses that were there a hundred years ago. So, things change dramatically all the time. The whole bay changes. Believe me, I was running around this sandbar only a couple of weeks ago. [inaudible]

NS: Has the erosion affected the crabbing, the things that you catch?

CW: The crabbing builds up. I believe that everything has a cycle to where you might have a good year – this year has to be exceptional – to where you had a bad year where I go out with just as many pots as I got down [and] maybe scraped together two bushel. Like, whoa. Why bother going because gas is so expensive? So, anything – striped bass cycles. Weakfish back in the early '70s when I worked for [inaudible] – '72, '73, which is now Woodcleft Fishing Station – I worked for that station for five years. We used to sell [inaudible] shrimp touts for weakfish. They'd catch weakfish anywhere from nine, ten, up to fifteen pounds. Everybody could catch a weakfish. They'd come in. "What's the good [inaudible]?" We'd look and see what we had [what] most of the colors were, and we'd sell those. "This is the hot one today," because it was so thick at the time. We've never seen anything like that since. The fluke, good year. Bass – phenomenal this year. Cycles, I believe [in] cycles of life, what have you, and maybe everything will make a comeback. What we were just talking about before about how a seal was popping up around me. We never saw those twenty years ago. You saw one or two. Now we have them.

NS: Are you seeing things now that you didn't see twenty or thirty years ago?

CW: You see more wildlife coming through the area, a lot more birds. The seals is something. I mean, look, I get paid to talk about it now. But ten years ago –

NS: What about fish? Are there fish or shellfish that you see now that hadn't been around?

CW: No, it's been there. Mussels. Oh, yeah. Okay. There you go. The black mussel. Actually, maybe I'll be intelligent enough to harvest these in five years if they get big. These things are attaching themselves to every trap I put down. On a two-day set, I have to scrape the trap off. On that kind of mesh, like right there?

NS: Yes.

CW: That would be coated, top to bottom, with mussels, but all this big. I mean, full to where I could scrape it off. But if you could harvest those, that's what you see from [inaudible] cultured mussels. That mussel raised until it's that big.

NS: So, that's new today?

CW: Or what's new is where I get my salmon – farming, fish farming, catfish, salmon, mussels, oysters, clams. I heard they do it with fluke, too, now.

NS: What are you seeing personally that you haven't seen in a long time?

CW: Mussels in our area – abundance. More crabs. I don't know. People don't mess with it like they used to because they used to be for fishing industry. Now, the fishing industry isn't here to harvest what's around us.

NS: What kinds of things?

CW: The mussels are just for one. Now, it's an abundant thing. The killies – there's still X amount of harvesters, but they're not there either. Everything goes in cycles. Nothing has really made a major comeback, but things are still there. They're regulated in such a way. Clams are a good steady thing around this area, but it's all regulated. Pollution is a big problem in our area.

NS: Can you tell me some of that?

CW: Well, just recently, in our area, we had – right there, where Richie lives in Bellmore, a truck pumping out the pool, Newbridge Road, it goes down the block, doesn't decide to go to the waste factory, and dumps it down the drain. *Bang*. It wiped out the whole clamming for over a month. Because clams are a bivalve, take in the water and blow it out. So, they take in whatever is in the water. It wiped out the whole area. Pollution – big factor. In the summer here with boats alone, much more areas closed up because of the emissions from our boats, the waste. Everything from dumping our pools into the canals, where I've seen going eeling, everything comes up white. Let's dump a pool full of chlorine in a canal and see what happens to the fish. Nobody regulates it. To dumping pollutants, such as that guy got caught. What about every time he didn't get caught? There are many different things. Your run-off. Your run-off alone. So, pollution is a big problem fishing in our bays. That's why I really don't mess with food anymore. I stick with bait. As far as a guy making a living, digging food, God bless him. Because there's so many regs, it's tough. It's tough. I'll stick with the bait because there's more of them than there is of us. That's for sure.

NS: I was thinking about the whole erosion issue. What is causing the erosion, and is it affecting you in other ways?

CW: The erosion – what it'll eventually affect is that it will knock away the marsh.

NS: What's causing the erosion?

CW: What's causing the erosion is bigger, faster, larger powerboats to where you saw virtually – those smaller boats in the '60s to some in the '70s to massive in the '80s and the '90s as technology has progressed to where party boats might have been the old World War II sub-chaser to now they are the superpowered hundred and ten-foot boats; they can do thirty miles an hour [and] throw a six-foot wake that will just tear the marsh in half. Now we have pleasure boats that are anywhere from forty to sixty-foot tuna boats to a fishing boat that now – they're

wakes. You know what I laugh about every year? They put up a sign that says, "Excessive wake, strictly enforced." Right? Every year, it falls down because the bank eroded around it. You find the sign [inaudible]. It's really like a joke because who is strictly enforcing it? They should give me that job. I'll tell him he threw a big wake because I'm getting put on a bank, which I've had many occasions to tell these people my opinion, so to speak.

NS: Well, you can tell it to us. What are some of the other things that are hurting the environment that you see?

CW: Pollution – big deal. Plastic bags, cans, bottles, your oil, your erosion, your defecation, everything around you because people take it for granted. They think that when they're in the water, out of sight, out of mind. As I say to kids, "You take this bottle, throw it in the water, it went away." But then I show them a bottle that I caught that's one hundred and fifty years old off of New York Harbor because they used to dump their junk in the 1880s, 1870s, three miles offshore. We catch it now. Now, look at this. You still read the address, the name of the company, and everything. So, it didn't break down. It didn't go away. So, you throw something in the water now, I said, somebody two hundred years from now is going to go, "Coca-Cola?" It doesn't go away. We think it's out of sight, out of mind. It went to the bottom. We're killing ourselves. That's just one pollutant, let alone the run-offs. Think about everything that's in the air, everything that's on the land, everything. When it rains, Mother Nature cleans it off. Where does it go? It goes into the sewers. It goes into the drains. It goes into the bay. Mother Nature can only do X amount. So, these are all things that will catch up to us in the long run. But without the laws, we wouldn't be able to still even do what we do.

NS: How often is the bay closed now?

CW: Every time it rains, over half an inch of rain.

NS: How long did they close the bay?

CW: Seven days until all the clams can purge themselves out. That means it's four times seven and twenty-eight times the tide is changed in seven days just so the clam will purge himself. He will clean the stuff out of him.

NS: What happens if it rains for a couple of days?

CW: Well, then you can't go for seven days. The last time, it was over a quarter of an inch of rain. That's that. The clammer had better get up at Mickey-D's [McDonald's] and get the job flipping the burgers like we always joke about. It's a joke until it's you sitting there going, "Boy, I wish you would have put a little of that money away." Like I said, not a clam digger. I'm a big digger. So, we always work. I catch my mussels in the spring. I catch my crabs. In the spring and the fall, I catch my eels and smoke my fish. And I work on a clam boat.

NS: Did you used to go out on the dragger boats more often than you do now?

CW: Oh, sure. I did that until the late '80 – I did that.

NS: How often would you go out?

CW: When I worked in the '70s on the boat – I worked on the boats – those were day boats. We'd go out. We'd fish on the boats, and we'd come back every day and sell our catch.

NS: You went out every day?

CW: Every day. Well, every day it was fit. You come down, and it'd be blowing a gale; you're not going anywhere to when I ran a market for a while when I was twenty-one. Three years of that, nine to five, looking at old women and telling them all the recipes, I just couldn't do it anymore. That's when I got back on the big rigs. Then I got on the big rigs, and that is a whole different world. You're out with a crew of four to five guys anywhere from four to seven days, two hundred miles from shore, and that's when you see stuff you've never seen before in your life. You see waves you've never seen before in your life. You get to know about people the way you've never known in your life. Every day is different, without a doubt. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

NS: Where would those boats go out of?

CW: Out of Point Lookout. Bruce [inaudible], [who] I worked for, running the fish market – [inaudible] Packing. I ran the fish market, looked out the back door, and see these guys working. I just couldn't take it anymore. So, back to sea for me.

NS: So, you worked out of Point Lookout. Were there any other major [inaudible]?

CW: The Doxsee Clam Company, down the line, the *Day Star* and the *Bright Eye*, but that was it. And then you had the old lobster boat; that was the *Happy Days*, which, believe it or not, who would know that was [inaudible]. He ran out of there for years, and he was one of the oldest lobstermen and fishermen out of the area. That wound up being a lobster boat that I worked on ten years later as the *Genesis*. That was the *Genesis*.

NS: So, you could work full-time going out on the dragger boats, the lobster boats and the clammer boats?

CW: You could work full-time if you wanted to.

NS: Is that what you did?

CW: No.

NS: No.

CW: If I worked on an offshore boat, I'd be divorced right now because I wouldn't be home for a week at a time. Believe me, when we hit the dock, you didn't want to be there anyhow. But that was back in my younger days. It's kind of young man's trade. I work on the clam boats now. We go out at 3:00 in the morning, and I'm home and off the boat by 2:00 to 3:00 in the

afternoon. It's a twelve-hour day, but I'm home to see my wife and children. Sometimes, I'll get off that boat and jump right into my other boat and go out into the bay to go crabbing or to go clamming. Like I said, whatever it is that I can make a little side money on. So, the bay has helped me. If it wasn't for doing all of it, like I like to stress to children – if I wasn't an educated fisherman and you could just try to do one thing, you would be phased out like the boats. I wear many hats. I am able to do many things. Because I do many things, it's the only reason I can make a living now in the millennium. No way could you just do it. If I had to work for these one of four boats that go out once – these guys are retired. They go out once a blue [moon]. “Let's go out and catch fish.” All right. We had a good day's pay, but I couldn't survive on that. The clam boat I could survive on. But I need a little bit more. So, I do other things. So, whatever's around me. You know what? I thought about it. My young friend. He's now twenty-eight. [inaudible] used to work on the boat with me – Kevin – and he still goes out. I was actually thinking of taking a trip with him just to give me a refresher course to see if I still got it. Hell, I got him by twenty years. Like I used to tell him right on the deck of a boat, “What's the problem? Your back hurt? Come on. I got you by twenty.” There's no problem. We still feel pretty good, so we'll keep going.

NS: There are a lot more licenses now. What are some of the licenses you have to get now that you didn't have to twenty, thirty years ago?

CW: You mean as far as because of the regulations?

NS: Yes.

CW: Actually, I have them all inside. I have to have a horseshoe crab license and report every month. Then, when it's hot, I have to report every week, which there's no real need because we don't catch killies no longer. I have a mussel license to catch rib mussels, which I need because I catch bait. I have a digger's permit which I need because I work on the clam boats. But I don't get the food one from the town, which you would need to dig food clams. I have a commercial food fish license only because I catch eels, not because I go trawling with anyone. But if I did want to catch any other fish, I would need to have to hold this license. I used to have a lobster license, but I let that lapse because I didn't feel that I needed it any longer. But if I did want to go do it again, I couldn't because I let it lapse. So, there's a lot of things that are messed up. Say, if I had an offer to use a guy's boat with traps, which I did, I couldn't renew my license because I let it lapse.

NS: They are not issuing new licenses?

CW: No, they're trying to phase everybody's license out. They want to phase this all out. But if they phase this all out, what are they going to do for a living? I'm trying to figure that one out myself.

NS: [laughter] Oh, they'll find something. I'm not worried about them.

CW: There's so many more state around here. The old saying is the mean greenies. But at the same time, a lot of them are good friends of mine. Linda lived in a mansion. Actually, Escobar–

NS: You don't have to mention anybody's names.

CW: It's good friends of mine, so it don't matter. Then, they announced they're game wardens, Linda especially, which was on this canal since I grew up. Now, she's the head in the area. I have a question. Now, it's that type of talkative because she's [inaudible] I have that kind of – how would I say it?

NS: Rapport?

CW: – rapport – I'm bad with words – with her because she sees me teach, and I introduce her. Because of that, I can ask her about licenses and things in this area. Believe me, we're friends. I have no bad sentiments towards any of them. They are doing their jobs, and at the same time, I help a lot of them out on the bay because they are not knowledgeable about the bay. They're book smart. There's a big difference between them and me.

NS: So, did you need all these licenses? When did the licenses first start coming in – being required?

CW: Yes, I don't even think – geez, the '90s.

NS: Okay, so pretty recent.

CW: Yeah, the '90s. I don't even remember when I got my first license. I'm sure they'll tell me. Now, we're computerized, but I think the '90s, the late '90s, I think. Because back in the '80s, who thought about holding a fluke license? I wish I still had the fluke license from my little trawler. That thing would have been worth fifty thousand dollars just holding on to it and selling it to another boat because they're phasing it out. [inaudible] still has the – well, had – the fluke license from the (*Christopher John?*), which I ran. He still had the license on it, so when that boat sank, it didn't matter. He could still sell a license for that boat and make his money back. (Richie Richard?), who was a fisherman and good friend of mine. I fished with him, and he is now clammer full-time. All he does every single day is go clamming, steaming, or hard clamming. God bless him; it's a tough life. I can't do that. I have other things that make life tough.

NS: Have you seen more competition, more anger among baymen and fishermen?

CW: No. As far as fishermen, no, because you got your gill netters, you have your trawlers, and there's not much around anymore, so there's no competition or anger. No, that's years ago. Years ago, you'd fish next to a guy; he'd be right like my next-door neighbor, that house, and we pass net to net or going to get the hotspot. In the '70s, forget about it. The guys race for the spot down the lightship to set in first; I don't know. The Guineas, as I would say. The [inaudible]? Forget it. Full-steam. That boat will leave. You go first. If there was ice, they'll let you go first. They break the ice. No joke. No joke. I worked on all these boats. "Oh, okay, I go now. I go now." Full steam. Clarence, the guy that I worked for now, worked for Charlie [inaudible]. That's where he worked. I worked for both [inaudible]. Full steam ahead. Tony even. Tony, I worked for him, and he goes, "Full Guinea set," as they would say. They wouldn't make the second turn with setting the net because they [inaudible] rushed one turn.

The net would be down on the bottom with the doors in front of the other guy. I mean, from here to my truck. I'm talking fifty feet set right in front of you. "Oh, What's the matter? What's the matter?" *Bang*, just to get the jump. Oh, man, competition? [inaudible] Come right here. Or they'd push you where they knew the wrecks were. These guys were sly dogs. I worked on these boats. Frank, you go back down, go in the back cabin, go to sleep because he didn't want you to look at his LORAN because you might remember the numbers. I still remember the numbers, only because he didn't want me to look at them, because that's why I remember. Because that's where the wrecks were, and he'd go deeper than anybody else. Yeah, lots of competition. "We got more than you" – dah, dah, dah. That was great. That was always great. The guys coming next to – one boat next to the other, flagging with the hats. I got six bushel that tow. Don't talk on the radio. Super-secret channel number thirty-eight. That was a great time. It was great. It was always competition like that. As long as everybody came home, it was always good. These were the beach buggies. The beach buggies are great. Every thirty, forty boats going back and forth, up and down the beach. It was great. Fluking. Standing on the rig all summer long, getting a tan. Great. Go fishing. Pick the deck every two hours. Everything you see. You never knew what you'd see. I love telling kids about the whip rays come jumping out at a pile, six-foot whip tails or a whale come up onto the boat. It's not baloney. You'd see it. This winter alone. Something I've never seen in my life was a pair of humpback whales come right up on the beach while I was steering the *Sturgeon* home, and I was going, "Yo." If I didn't see it on the Discovery Channel, I wouldn't know what was going on. There they were. The male's tail slapping on the water right there forty-foot right off of Deb's Inlet on the forty-six-line. I was calling people on the radio, "You ain't going to believe it." I wish I had a camera. That was this winter. So, you never know. Running out of tape?

NS: No. We are okay. Sorry. I was just checking the volume level.

CW: No problem. Anyhow, yeah, things have changed dramatically. Now, we're kind of subdued, clamming, now and then eeling. Everything's almost done. We're in winter now. It'll be time to put all the traps on the dock or crab until they go to sleep. The waters dropping down to about forty-seven right now. We had fifteen bushel the other day, but things are changing all the time. The white crabs are moving in. Pretty soon, traps on the dock, haven't clammed in a week, I'll smoke my salmons for Christmas, my eels will all be sold, and that'll be that.

NS: I asked before about new kinds of fish that you have not seen in a while. Have you seen anything disappear?

CW: Yes, over the years, the codfish has disappeared. The codfishes disappeared. The whiting has disappeared, yellowtail flounder. Everything was beat up. Everything was pretty well beat up ...

[RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: So, we are talking about things that have disappeared. What is your theory about why these things have disappeared?

CW: I don't feel that it's any real theory. I feel that it was strictly overfishing. They were just beat up. Technology caught up to man where you had a net that could catch X amounts of fish

to where you have nets now that can catch fish so efficiently that there'd be none left.

NS: So, overfishing. Did you see boats coming from other places?

CW: Oh, sure. Fishing boats used to – where we had laws that used to – our fish here and had to be fourteen at the time, which everything changed – now, it's seventeen – to where they could just go over the line in New Jersey and sell it for thirteen. On the water, to go to New Jersey is a matter of twenty miles. Let's just jump from Long Island to New Jersey. What's the problem? So, you could catch fish, they could come into New York waters, catch the fish off in New York waters and bring it back to New Jersey and sell it, where the man in New York could not catch it or he was limited to seventy pounds or what have you. To where the man in New York could make a living, that's why there is no boats. But meanwhile, you go to New Jersey, there's plenty of boats because of the laws. So, they forced the commercial fishermen out, pretty much. The only boats that are still around here are the bigger boats, and there's so many laws. It's over-regulated. It went to being overregulated now.

NS: End of side one. [RECORDING PAUSED] This is Nancy Solomon talking with Cory Weyant, December 8, [2003]. This is tape one side two. December 8, 2003. [RECORDING PAUSED] What would you change in the bay and in general to make things better?

CW: You can't change what was because that's the way it was. Hell, I wish it was like when I was growing up, and just be able to walk across the street and get on my little dragger and go out for the day, go fishing, and come back, unload – I love it. I love it the way it was when I was growing up. The bay [inaudible] everything's changed. I don't know. We got so many laws now to protect us and save our environment and save this and save that. I could say to you that it's too much, too late. It's not too late. It just seems like it is too late. As you can see, some species, such as striped bass or the fluke, has made a major comeback. I don't know where they come up with their measurements of how they know how many fish were caught or how they know this or that. It's only what's reported or what's brought in. So, they come about with all their paperwork, what have you. But it's just what you can see with your eye or how it's been. If you've been a fisherman, you'll know when fishing is good and fishing is not. But as far as their regulations now, the commercial fisherman as per se, the way I grown up with the little nets, the small trawler, the set liner, what have you – those are all gone by the wayside. But at the same time, now, I've learned to adapt to being a person that catches bait because now it's no longer a commercial fisherman. It's now, quote/unquote, the "commercial sport" fisherman. So, in other words, the sport fisherman is now going out and go commercial fishing, but he's a sport, and how much can I get for this? So, it has changed to now we have people that are all catching rod and reel. Things have changed dramatically. If you don't learn to change with it, you stop or get another job.

NS: Are there things that you would like to see change?

CW: I'd like to see the bank erosion stopped up and down our marshes with all the erosion from all the massive yachts. You go to any other state, and I've been up and down from Canada to Key West. My dad's driven boats from here to Florida. When you get out of New York into New Jersey, even Virginia, like that, there's laws. There's always been nautical laws. You have to pay attention. You have to abide by these laws, pass somebody on a certain side, you beat the

one, you slow down for them. You let them know what side you're passing. This is New York. Mine's bigger. Mine's faster. And everybody flips each other bird, and it's not a peacock. Anyhow, that's how it is around here. There's no respect, very little, if any. If you're a man working on the side, good luck to you. I'm hauling trap, I'll turn around, and I have a six-foot wake [inaudible] over the back of my boat, and my dog's getting launched off the front. So, as far as that, okay, let's use some of the laws we got. How's about getting somebody to –? Excessive wake? Yo, there's one. It just wiped me out. Where's the copper? Where's the guy that's enforcing that? We have these laws in place, but nobody is enforcing them. So, how about enforcing some of the laws that are already here, and then maybe we would have a bank or this or that. It's tough. Things are lax. They've stiffened up laws all on the fishermen to regulate the sizes, their limitations. Okay, that's all well and good. The people that abide by it – and the other ones that don't get caught. That's good to make the fish come back. But as far as anything else, they've let it go lax – bank erosion, excessive wakes, [pollution], bags, the garbage [inaudible] marsh. If it wasn't for SPLASH [Stop Polluting, Littering, and Save Harbors], you'd see ten times more, which is all good. Everybody just gives a twenty-dollar bill to SPLASH, and they'll pick it up for you. But that only helps the situation; it picks it up, but at the same time, it's still there. So, pollution. You can't stop how people are. You can only tell them about it and try to change their mentality, and maybe they'll think about it next time. Anything I do in my life, I try to stress that, such as doing the seal watch, and I tell them about how pristine the bay is in the winter because Mother Nature cleans it out and washes the marshes, but you can still see the junk up on the high tide line. The birds are coming – oh, in the winter, it's great. You see the geese, the osprey, and the seals. It's like my bay all over again. I remember waking up when I was a kid out in the bay in the bay house. Look out, and you'd see nothing. Maybe a boat. The ducks would wake you up. I love staying at my houseboat nowadays. It's like that. It's brand new. Everything's brand new until you hear a boat come by. "Oh, what are they doing here?" I love being out in the bay [inaudible]. It's my favorite place. My [inaudible] with the water. Actually, I'm going down there now and haul some traps because I got to catch some crabs, and I hope they don't freeze. How cold is it? Thirty-five, thirty-six?

NS: It's warm.

CW: We'll put a blanket on them. Miami Beach. Whoa. [RECORDING PAUSED]

NS: Over the last twenty years, how many more recreational boats have you seen?

CW: Since I'm a young boy, twenty years ago, boats went from wood to fiberglass. As they were mass-produced, things became cheaper, now everybody and their brother has a boat because it was somebody's old boat. Now, the new people got new boats – tenfold because I pull them off the marsh regular. I wish that they all got the book and teach them how to drive. Because I'll tell you, I yank off more boats than the Coast Guard. I do it in a good grain of salt. I've come up, and there'll be somebody stuck on this side, and there's line. Actually, I felt bad. There was this colored man sitting there with a life preserver on, stuck. I said, "This guy isn't in the right spot [inaudible]" because he was on the wrong side of the poles. I was going, and I said, "Is your motor running?" He goes, "Yeah." I said, "Well, hold on," and I hooked up and I pulled him into the deep water. "I got nothing to offer you." I said, "That's okay. I was a Scout. That was my good deed for the day." It's only about a month ago, but he would have froze. So, it's their lack of knowledge about the people and the water. That really bothers me because

people have no knowledge, no respect. The ones that do, we know them. So, things have changed dramatically. Otherwise, anybody [who] can buy a boat, buys a boat. "Hey, I got a boat, so I own the world." No, it's just a matter of they just don't understand about what has been around us.

-----END OF INTERVIEW -----
Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/27/2024