Interview with John Remsen Sr.

Narrator: John Remsen Sr.

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

Transcription Team: National Capital Contracting

Abstract:

On October 1, 1988, Nancy Solomon interviewed John Remsen, Sr. as part of the Long Island Traditions oral history project. John is a skilled boat builder who has dedicated his life to constructing garveys. John's passion for boat building began when he observed other individuals constructing garveys, a type of boat commonly used in shallow waters. In the early days, John primarily used cedar wood for his boats. He would visit mills in New Jersey, particularly New Gretna, to purchase oak. The boats were initially constructed entirely from wood, but the practice has shifted over time, with the introduction of fiberglassed boats. Aside from garveys, John also built other types of boats, including gil net boats, which were designed by Brewer in Deer Isle, Maine. John mainly focused on constructing outboard boats but did build a sailboat on one occasion. John's boat designs have a distinct style, featuring higher bows compared to others. The sterns have a standard cutout, and the interiors of the boats were customized based on the customers' specific usage requirements, such as for clamming or eeling. He developed a good understanding with customers before starting construction and was selective in choosing his clientele. Although there were occasional mistakes, such as using stainless steel bolts to secure the ribs or experimenting with different notching techniques, John's expertise allowed him to overcome these challenges and improve his craft. To streamline the boat-building process, John implemented the use of patterns, which he kept in his shed. These patterns, ranging from 20 to 30 years old, varied depending on the boat's length and desired bow and side heights.

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon of Long Island Traditions. I'm talking with John Remsen Sr. of Freeport. Today is March 9, 2016. So, the purpose of what 'we are going to be talking about today is about how storms and hurricanes have changed your life on the water, both in terms of the fishing industry, as well as your bay house, okay?

John Remsen: Right, sure.

NS: So, first, why not just tell us a little bit about yourself, where you were born, how old you are?

JR: I was born in Freeport, actually on Maple Place. That's down by BJ's. Actually, we lived on Maple Place till I was five years old about, and then we moved one block west to St. John's Place. We stayed there till I was in the tenth grade. When I went into tenth grade over that summer, I helped my dad. Part-time we built their house on South Side Avenue in Freeport. We built the whole house with local friends, carpenters, plasterers, electricians. All gave my pop a hand. When school closed and when school opened in September, we moved in. Actually, I made a couple of good friends through school. They lived in the neighborhood. (Lou Carrillo?) moved in at the fifth grade, and we became buddies. He was my best man. We still go fishing. He's in South Carolina now. He comes up Tommy (Rosees?) in Las Vegas. He comes out. We had a few fishing trips every summer, and it ends up with – about four or five of us left Haunts Bay. They're all local folks. We keep together. By every couple of weeks, we call and keep everybody abreast to what's going on.

NS: When were you born?

JR: I was born at…

NS: When?

JR: When? 1933, February 5. My mom had a midwife, which was my aunt. The old ladies raised me. So, I was a spoiled kid. I was the first boy and I don't know. I guess I benefited by it. Then we lived on St. John's Place. I went to kindergarten. We would walk up in the morning to Grove Street School, walk home for lunch, get a nickel, and stop at one of the candy stores, walking back after lunch. Then we walked home in the afternoon. The whole neighborhood, the kids, we all walked kind of a group. It was a great experience.

NS: Can you tell me about some of your early adventures in fishing?

JR: In 1938, one of my mother's cousins was the Freeport Fire Chief. He took me for a ride in a Buick Fire Chief's car in Freeport. We went down to Jones Beach. My great-grandfather, they were allowed to haul the surf net with dories. They would row out of Freeport, the men, four or five guys in two dories, and work all day and then row home. My great-grandfather, Orlanson Ellison, on his ninety-second birthday, he rode from Freeport Creek to Jones' Inlet and back. He told us he was proving to be a man. Unfortunately, later on he fell down and he broke his hip. He never really overcame that problem. That's what knocked him out.

NS: So, can you tell me one of your earliest memories of fishing for fun?

JR: For fun – actually, we grew up on St. John's Place. We were small. I was a six, seven-year-old. Our street, St. John's Place, we probably had – fifteen, eighteen kids lived on there. We were all pretty much together. We were allowed to go down to a building on the town of Hempstead property. It was called the Oyster House. That's where all the old men hung out, and the fishermen and the clam diggers. The oyster boat would come from around Delaware with a big load of oysters on. They would dump them out in the Great South Bay. They had different pieces of property. I had been out in a row boat with my pop, just to see them do things like that. We grew up, basically at the head of Freeport Creek. In the winter, we could ice skate on the ice. All the old men hung out there. We do have some pictures of my father and my great-grandfather all hanging out at the Oyster House. Actually, they were all fishermen. That was their business, and they were allowed to haul along the surf and in the Bay. At times we would take some of the fish like flounders and things like that, and they would tie them on a string. The kids, we'd take them down the block and sell them to the ladies on the string, four or five flounders for $0.35, $0.40, whatever it was. [laughter] I can't remember how much, but it was minimal. I would go with my dad jacking at night with a spear and a light. I would get crabs and conks. Most of the old women in the area, if they like conks, I would save them a conk and they would buy them and crabs. My pop would do eels. They would spear eels at night. It wasn't a surprise that they would maybe some nights get a hundred pounds. It was profitable to my dad. My mother's cousins, all had gone into service for the Second World War. The three that I could remember, one was killed on D-Day. (Artie Bette?) came back home and he became the line foreman working for the village. Timmy Ellison was a heavy equipment operator for the village of Freeport, which he had learned that in the service and all. They were the battle or the balls. They were in major battles, combat. But Roger was killed on D-Day.

NS: So, it sounds like 'you have been around fishing your entire life.

JR: My entire life.

NS: What was the point in which you said, I want to try and do this for a living?

JR: That's the only thing I knew. Actually, I remember one time I got in trouble. I was going to grow potatoes. I went and took my mother's potatoes and cut the eye off them, and I planted the backyard. I turned it over and I planted like fifty or a hundred potatoes. I don't know if they ever [laughter] finished growing. But we did a lot of things like that, the boys that I paled with. They were both white and black. There were a few black kids in there. We all would walk to school to Grove Street and walk home again and so forth. We became friends. I mean, they're my friends yet, ones that are still alive and around.

NS: So, tell me a little bit about how you first got into commercial fishing. What were some of the first things that you remembered doing?

JR: My great-grandfather, he lived with us. Artie Bette lived with us when he came out of the service. Timmy stayed with my mom. We had the big house on St. John's Place. They worked local in Freeport, and then they got jobs on the village, working for the village and so forth. So,

it was like a pretty tight clan. Like (Sunday?) was the old-fashioned big meal. The women would cook a meal and we'd all end up in the backyard with the kids and so forth.

NS: You 'have not answered my question. Tell me how you got into the fishing business.

JR: My great grandfather would knit the nets. They would actually sew them on a block, and they would make maybe eight hundred, nine hundred feet of net and hang it in. I remember I was in high school, I took a day off and I went into Manhattan to this company that sold the twine and alleged the corks. They'd be at [inaudible]. They were in downtown by the Fulton Fish Market in Brooklyn. I remember I went in on the train and I had to get corks and things for them to put the net together. Then I was allowed to go with my dad if he went with the net, and we would haul in the bay. Again, it was flounders in the spring, fluke, weakfish. We didn't go too much further. The Wantagh Parkway, I can remember, we'd go just east of that. That was at Great South Bay then. [inaudible] Island, Dash Creek, I went with them there. We had a gas motor. It was a Palmer engine, which was made up in Cos Cob, Connecticut, because I had driven up there with my pops a couple of times to get parts because they were so hard to come by. Again, we hauled the net. Then all of a sudden, when the war came along, we were allowed – we had big numbers. My pop had to put on the boat – our boat. We had a boat, the Johnny Boy, and they hadn't carved the name out of an oak block. I still have it. Actually, as I got older – I say when I was about fourteen or fifteen – I was go, when they hauled and I was on the cork line. We had a man on the lead line pulling the bottom of the net. I would pull the corks, and the corks would never pull the ledge. You'd always have to be behind to trap the fish forward. The net had a big pocket at the end. Probably the biggest thing I ever remember was when I was about sixteen. One day we caught 1,400 pounds of striped bass in the Bay. It was in the first full moon of June. I'll never forget that. My pop shipped them into Fulton Fish Market by a crew that was Roger Smith. They had trucks. They would come around and pick the fish up and take them in to the left Fulton Fish Market every night, except Saturday night. The market was closed. I became part of that. Then I went to high school and I was close to the stadium. As a little kid, I would go to football practice in the fifth grade with the varsity. The coaches were Joe Devlin, Bill Ashley was the head football coach. I became like, I guess a ball boy for them. When I was a freshman, I went out for football and they put me on the varsity because I had played with the big kids all the time. We had a couple of guys that were freshmen and were on the varsity team. I enjoyed playing football, and then lacrosse came along and that really was great.

NS: So, how long were you working as a commercial fisherman before…

JR: Out in the Bay, I worked all the way till the Korean War came along. I was a senior and one of my best friends, (Normie Holter?), and I knew (Lon McAllister?), they were drafted a year ahead of me. They graduated a year ahead of me, and they were both killed in Korea. That bothered me. So, I went and volunteered for the draft, and I went right into service upon [graduation]. I graduated in June, and I was in the army July 17th. I was glad, and I wasn't afraid. Artie Bette, those guys, they were all veterans. I really went to the top of the heap with those guys. That's why I did that.

NS: So, when you returned from the war, did you go back to fishing?

JR: I was in Korea, and they said, "Well, what do you do?" I said, "Well, I graduated from high school, but I know how to run boats." I said, "I could steer the boat to Captree and so forth." So, they said, "Well, we don't have any boat jobs." So, they made me an infantryman. That's what I did in Korea. When, I guess, the Vietnam War started, they said, "Look, if you want to sign up for a year, we can put you on a boat in Vietnam." I said, "No, I just want to do my two years and get home and go fishing." I worked two years when I came out of the service. I clammed. I clammed during the summer and during the winter, we had a haul net. We could haul in the bay. We had certain locations. My pop followed all the rules and we did well. Actually, as a senior in high school, Joe Devlin said, "Why don't you build one of those Garveys as a project?" He says, "We got all the lumber." He says, "You could use everything here in the shop and build a Garvey." He said, "Do you know how to do it?" I said, "Yes, my father had one built, a big one in the yard and I know how that fella built it." It was a fellow named Jack Burke. The Combses, they had built a couple of big Garveys, and I would always walk over and look at them. I was, I guess, pretty handy as a kid. So, I built a Garvey and it came out well. What I used was fencing cedar. It was like $0.15 a foot, so it only cost like $35 or $40 to build this Garvey. We used it. My father bought me a Montgomery Wards engine outboard, seven and a half horsepower. My senior year, I was using that out in the bay. That was quite a joke, but it was an outboard. That was our first outboard. Then Al Grover was in the business. When I came out of the service, I got a fifteen horse from him. We bought all our motors from Al and Artie Grover in Freeport.

NS: Now, were you still working on the water at that time?

JR: Yes, I worked there two years. Then my father said – he said, "You have to get a job." I was going with Grace through high school. He said that, "You have to get a job. You want to get a job with the village? Go apply," and so forth. I had taken drafting in school, and then I went to Farmingdale for six months or whatever to architectural school and drafting. I knew of a man from the phone company. So, he took me to Hempstead with him, and I interviewed, and I got hired as a draftsman for the phone company in 1957.

NS: Now, when you were working at the phone company, were you also working on the bay part-time?

JR: Yes. We had probably fifteen draftsmen in Hempstead. Fortunately we were all around the same age. They hadn't gone into service. They had gone to college and so forth like that. So, they didn't have to go into service. But we became good friends. We had a mussel business – gray mussels for flounder fishing. My father had retired from the village, and he delivered mussels as far as Montauk. He bought a big truck, and they delivered, him and my mom. What we had to do on the back of the truck with all the bags, it was a flatbed [laughter] we had to put two signs on a rope hanging that it was mussels for bait. That's what they drove around town, just to tell everybody they weren't clams, [laughter] because they would've thought we were doing something illegal. [laughter] It was funny. But most of the phone company guys were looking for a part-time job, and we had five or six phone company guys that had never been on the water. We would go out and dig mussels in the spring. Then I got into the killey business.

NS: Now, tell me about that.

JR: That killey business, I was about fourteen or fifteen. We built six pots and I killied, and I caught them. I got a quarter of quarts. I had to take them to the Atlantic Beach Bridge from Freeport. We had a twenty-eight-foot Garvey that I would put like a hundred quarts on the Garvey in the morning, and I would go to the Atlantic Beach Bridge.

NS: What was there?

JR: The bridge going over from Rockaway.

NS: I know. What was there that you had to bring it there?

JR: The bait, the killies. They were live killies. They had a hundred rowboats there at a fishing station and we delivered the bait there.

NS: What fishing station?

JR: All I know, it was Bill and George. [laughter] They were iceman, but they bought this property right by the Atlantic Beach Bridge on the Rockaway side. They put rowboats and they anchored them off. Then again, they bought some surplus boats, and they towed the rowboats out. In Merrick, Nicks, they would tow rowboats out. You could rent a rowboat for like a buck and a half. The people would, and they'd tow them out. Then in two or three hours, they'd come out and anybody wanted to come home, they'd tow them back for the same price. Then we had that as a customer. Then Jones' Beach had a hundred rowboats, and we had that customer. That's when I ended up with about sixteen pots that summer. We killied, my father killied, my brother-in-law. We all did bait and we worked with like Jack Combs, the Combses. They were catching killies [inaudible]. We had the bay house at Horse's Creek, and we sold bait there. My sister got married and she married a fellow [inaudible] who had [inaudible] Marine in America eventually. But he wanted to buy our bay house that we had at Haunts Creek, my pop had. So, I was working in Hempstead in the phone company. I went to the town of Hempstead, and I picked a spot right across from Guy Lombardo's at the end of Woodcleft. I gave him $25. We entered the spot and we built the bay house. I was busy. My brother-in-law was busy killeying, and my father, so we built the bay house like part-time. My wife, Grace, and my sister, Joan, I can remember them. We taught them how to shingle the roof. Gracie was a nurse, but she got up on the roof and my sister, Joan, and they shingled the roof. Everything, they could do. We built that house. We started like in early maybe March, and we opened up July 4th. That was a house. It had three bedrooms and a gigantic kitchen. Then Captree came into the picture with bait. We had them for a customer – live bait and squid. We were really involved in the bait business. But my father says, "I don't know how long you could do this." But he says, "You have to get a full-time job." I got hired by the phone company and worked part-time.

NS: So, with the killey business, how long would it take you to say catch a hundred quarts of killies?

JR: I think my champion day was off Merrick. I caught 250 quarts off Merrick in the grass because nobody would killey that way. Like George Combs, he went a different way, Jack

Combs. We were all friends, but we didn't step on each other's toes. That's what I guessed. But I hit a spot. I couldn't believe. I couldn't carry what I had. I had to go home, get another boat, and bring them with me to bring the killies home.

NS: What were you using to catch the killies at that time?

JR: The horseshoe crabs. We used horseshoe crabs.

NS: But you were using killey pots that…

JR: In killey pots, yes. Then we built pots. Actually, the pot we built at first was a square pot, but we found out that if we made them lower and wider, they fished much better. I could honestly say some of my killey pots, I would have seven or eight quarts. Killies were very plentiful, and we raised the price to $0.30 or something like that. It was fun. When our kids were born, I would take them and they would go with me. On a Sunday, Gracie would make a couple of sandwiches and we'd go killeying. We'd spend most of the day, like on Saturday, on the weekends and Sunday catching killies. My father had a couple of guys going, Charlie (Works?) from Freeport and Blink.

NS: Now, I know 'we will get to Sandy in a minute. But I wanted to know, were there any big storms that hurt your killey business before Sandy?

JR: I guess storms were high tide. Right after the high tide, it was extremely hard to catch killies because they got scattered out and they got up on the land, on the Bay Islands and so forth. I think a lot of them were killed that way. But they would bounce right back. The next year, we would have killies like a quarter of an inch, then a half inch by July. By the beginning of August, they were good fluke pay. They were inch and a half maybe.

NS: So, what about like Hurricane Gloria or the North…

JR: We did pay the price, and that was everyone.

NS: Tell me what happened.

JR: They were scarce. We had a couple of years where actually if you could get seventy-five to a hundred quarts in a day, that was a sufficient day. But then they picked up again in another year, and we had no problem whatsoever. It just kept going. We delivered to Captree. My pop would take three, four hundred quarts a week to the Captree bait station.

NS: What do you remember about Hurricane Gloria in terms of securing your bay house, your boats? What were some of the things that you did?
JR: The bay house never got water in it inside. So, we didn't put the hatches in because we never got water in it. Actually, our old bay house in Haunts Creek was a houseboat that my pop, when the bayman (Maynard?), Smith and myself, we were towing it from Freeport. We were going to go to (Farmingville?), the town of Hempstead and the town of Oyster Bay line. If you got close to that line, you didn't have to pay a lease because no one knew where the line was.

Jack Combs was up there and George. The old guys got together, [laughter] I guess, and that's where we were headed. We towed all day Friday with our boat. We had a force on the Palmer in that boat, and we made it to Haunts Creek. The wind came out of the east and it was blowing pretty good. Haunts Creek was an ex speakeasy hotel out on the bay that stored liquor, but it got knocked down. But it had a well, it had part of a dock. So, there was a little creek there. At Haunts Creek, we pulled in and my father said, "We'll put the anchors out here and we'll tie the boat in the creek," and we went to sleep. I mean, it was blowing pretty hard and everything. We woke up in the morning, the tide was high, and the houseboat we were towing – was about twenty feet by maybe fourteen feet or something – blew up on the land. Maynard, Smith, and my father were talking, and Maynard said – well, my nickname was Hike. He says, "Hike, God put it here, and God said we should leave it." We left Haunts Creek houseboat there. With it, we added three or four rooms. Every time we would go out, we'd get lumber from – there was a fire at sea, Milton Foreman's lumber yard. My pop got a cleanup and he got some of the lumber and we built onto the house. So, we had like a five-room bay house when we sold it to my other brother-in-law.

NS: When was that, roughly?

JR: That was probably in 1949/1950. The killey men, they would leave their killies sometimes at our bait station in the killey cars. It was like everybody was good friends – not great friends, but good friends and respected each other. If Jack Combs was there, I wouldn't go there that day. I wouldn't actually shed on top of him or anything, and it was good. But there were several bait men. There was probably six or seven of us doing this full time. Actually, during the summer, they were.

NS: So, these storms 'did not do much damage, it sounded like?

JR: They did damage, but it always recycled. The clams…

NS: Would come back.

JR: The clams came back, so forth. Like up by Haunts Creek after a good storm, and the clams were really small, all the mosquito ditches that the mosquito fleet had built in Nassau County, they dug them. The water would push into those little ditches, and you could go get good clamming in the mosquito ditches all around Haunts Creek and Crooked Creek. It was just a known fact that whatever the waves did, they pushed the little clams, really small ones like grit, into those ditches. You could always clam every year in the ditches.

NS: Now, were there things that you did when you had the bay house down at Woodcleft? Before Hurricane Gloria, what did you do to protect the bay house?

JR: What did we do? We put anchors out. We had anchors from Theodore Bedell. I still have two of them here. They weren't galvanized. Our anchors were rayon, and they were actually fluke anchors. I still have two. What we would do is just tie off with anchors.

NS: Are you talking about your boats?

JR: Our boats we would bring home.

NS: So, what were you using the anchors for?

JR: The anchors we used for our floats. Because when we built the original bay house on Smith Island here, we had fifty-foot dock and two floats attached one to each side with ramps. Actually, my wife, Grace and Joan, Grace would take off at the summer with the kids, and we lived out there. I went into Brooklyn, I was working with the phone company. I would have to come home in the morning from the bay house, get dressed, get on the train, go into Brooklyn and the subway to Manhattan and wherever I had to go to work with the phone company.

NS: So, you would anchor the floating docks?

JR: We would just anchor and every winter we pulled our horseshoe pens and the floats up on the land. We had rollers, and we'd laid down some planks, and we had block and tackles. We would pull everything out and we never lost anything. It never actually went over that island.

NS: Were there other things that you would do like with your boats? You said that you would bring your boats.

JR: We'd bring our boats up here.

NS: What would you do with your boats?

JR: I would tie to my neighbor across the canal dock, and he would tie to us. That's what we did for the safe of the boats. Again, you had to be ready to go out and bail them out, if it was really raining hard. Somebody had to go put a life jacket on and go over. My pop would bail them out, and we never lost a boat.

NS: That's good.

JR: Never lost a boat.

NS: 'That is great. So, now 'let u talk about Sandy. So, the first thing I want to ask is about how much were you making as a bayman before Sandy, you, and your son?

JR: When I went for my interview with the phone company, they interviewed me, and they said, "Okay, we're going to hire you. You're working out?" I said, "I'm working out in the bay," and everything. He said, "You are going to start at $46 a week."

NS: 'I am not talking about the phone company. 'I am talking about your income as a bayman.

JR: That was $46 a week. So, I said, "Okay, that's good." One guy said to me, "What do you make working in the bay?" I said, "Between $100 and $200 a day at least."

NS: Wow.

JR: The poor guy, he lost his teeth. [laughter] He was surprised. He says, "Well, what are you leaving it for?" I said, "It's seasonable, and my father doesn't want me to be a bayman." He says, "Do it part-time, you'll enjoy it." He did it, and there were several guys. The [inaudible] they were working linemen for the village. Actually, it was a part-time job. I said I could work Saturday and Sunday and buy a new wash machine and buy a [laughter] store. We built the house. I built this house.

NS: Now, I know you also work with your son, John. So, about how much were you making before Sandy on a yearly basis?

JR: I had sometimes $1,000 in a week if I had good days and I worked seven days. We didn't take a day off because the bay was our hobby. It was something we enjoyed and we could bring people with us. If they worked, I would pay them from the phone company and so forth.

NS: So, about how much would you take in, in a year if you had to guess?

JR: In a year?

NS: Yes.

JR: I don't know.

NS: Roughly.

JR: I never really kept track of it. We built the house, I bought…

NS: 'I am talking about right before Sandy.

JR: Oh, right before Sandy?

NS: Yes, like ten years ago. About how much were you making?

JR: I bought a dragger. I bought the Ms. Renee.

NS: Yes, 'I am not talking about the dragger. 'I am talking about you and your son, John…

JR: She was working too, so it was just the bucket. Whatever they made on the dragger, they threw in the bucket. I probably would say $800, $900 a week for the summer. Then in the fall we'd do flounder mussels. I could get twenty-five bushel of mussel. I tied by myself. My father and I, we were like the best pickers.

NS: So, how about now? How are things after Sandy?

JR: After Sandy, the mussels were hit with some kind of a blight and it became scarce. We used

to get $2 a bushel and then they went up to $2.50. That's what we sold them for, out at Captree and so forth. Now, they get $17 a bushel. My son, they still do it, but at a very low scale. Whereas my nephew, Karl…

NS: Is it about a half, what they used to be able to make or?

JR: Oh, not even half.

NS: Not even a half?

JR: Yes. Jones Beach pulled the rowboats out. They took them to Belmont Lake State Park, and it became just rowboats out there. So, the business started to go – like Nicks, they had a hundred rowboats, it was Rainer's. Had rowboat in Merrick. There was four or five bay stations and rowboat station. They bought these little army boats and they towed them out. Actually, they would make a good living, get by.

NS: But you think 'it is a fraction of what it used to be?

JR: Yes. In a way, I was glad I was working for the phone company. I was making $46 a week and taking a train and wearing a white shirt and tie. My boss in the phone company, he used to laugh because he said, "Oh my God." He says, "Do you wear a white shirt and tie when you go out in the bay?" [laughter] They would tease me, but that's what I started with. I worked my way up. I would say probably when I retired, I had four or five guys from the phone company who would still be working. We'd go clamming, musseling. They'd come with me to haul for bait, whoever was available. We had fun.

NS: Now, your son John, has he taken over your killey business, your mussel business?

JR: Yes, he did. I got out of it, but I'd go. When I retired from the phone company, I killied every day. The kids were small, I had to build – my Garvey used to be eighteen. I had to build a twenty-foot Garvey because I had four blonde-headed [laughter] girls and a couple of boys in the boat with Grace. We would go killeying. They would tease me. They said, "Man, you got some blonde-headed kids." [laughter] But it was a joke on me.

NS: So, when did you turn your business over to your son, John?

JR: Oh, I would say while I was working in the phone company. He was home and he went to college and so forth. He would work the summer. I was fortunate enough that my salary was good enough that I could live on whatever I wanted to live. I started building a couple of Garveys. One year I built five in one winter. So, that was profitable. You couldn't make a fortune, but it was profit and it was fun. I enjoyed it. I had a pressure job in the phone company eventually. We would get calls at night if a pole got knocked over and I had to get guys out and so forth. So, I would really look forward to what building a boat by myself in the garage.

NS: When did you stop going out on the bay with your son, John? Doing the killies?

JR: Never.

NS: You still go out killeying with him?

JR: If he goes, I'll take a ride with him. Sure. I'd go, yes. My daughter Linda, her three girls, they would go. They all had their seats. Then they didn't want a gray Garvey, they wanted a yellow one. I had to build good twenty-footer and paint it yellow, and it still is yellow. Grandpa, my father, had a gray boat, and they wanted him to paint it red. He painted [laughter] it red. That's the one that was in the Freeport Museum. The Red Garvey. That boat is still around. I gave it to a fellow out in Sayville. He restored quite a lot of it, and he clams in it yet. It is 30 years old.

NS: So, getting back to how things have changed before and after Sandy. Before Sandy, how long would it take you to catch, say, a hundred quarts of killies?

JR: You could do it in a day.

NS: Nowadays, 'what is it like?

JR: You get five, ten quarts. It's that drastic. Actually, I would say it changed the whole bay. The whole entire Great South Bay and town of Hempstead, all the mosquito ditches that were dug by the county will always end up not really mucky muck, but it was mud. They were mud. When that tide came in with Sandy, if you go out in the bay, the day after by our bay house, it was a beach, it brought sand in. Actually, one fellow on Woodcleft told me that behind his dock, it filled in three-foot on the Sandy tide with sand. If you go out in the bay now, every ditch, if you go down Long Creek or Swift Creek state boats, they're all sand. Where the tide had to be tremendous to raise that high, it brought sand in. Skimmers were all over the place that were out in the ocean by themselves. They got cut out, they call it, they got washed out and pushed up in the bay, and then they died off. They're starting to rebuild now. Actually, it devastated the fishing industry. Last year, John did not sell a quart of killies. People are shying away from live bait. The foxy guys that really are fishing for a hook and lining for a living, they'll use killies and stuff. But probably ninety percent of the bait now is spearing and squid. The killey business is a thing of the past. In fact, I had built thirty traps. I got thirty new traps down the basement. [laughter] So, it actually devastated the bay. Then we lost the house. I mean, the house was in perfect shape, it was solid, everything. It got knocked right off the piling it was on and collapsed.

NS: Are you going to rebuild?

JR: Yes. Actually, the state has just about given us all our paperwork for us to rebuild. Since we stayed there, some of the boys had a bunkhouse out in the back and that was only for the boys. We had our two daughters, and then they'd bring their friends or something like that. The girls stayed in the house with us. We had an extra bedroom. But the bay house was collapsed, the day after we couldn't find the bay house. Then in the weeds, about the third day we could see a roof. Actually, the roof stayed together, but the house collapsed in. We saved the boys quarters there. It's still there. We've moved that and we've jacked it up in the air. That's our tool

shed and we leave our equipment in there for building out. The dock is all done, and the poles are in for the floats and so forth.

NS: Are you building the house differently to protect against a bad storm?

JR: No. We have to build in the same location and the same footprint of the house. We've got the plans for that and so forth.

NS: In terms of the framing or those little hinged floorboards, are you doing anything to help protect it against?

JR: Oh, yes. We will raise it up higher than what it was. The last time we had forty poles we had dug in, telephone poles. Again, being a phone company guy, I could get the poles and we put forty poles under it. But now the rebuilding will be up probably two-feet higher, and actually less poles. Actually, when we had the caretakers, when we didn't go out and the firemen were taking care of it and so forth, they did cut hatches. We had hatches. But the tide was actually so high and the waves coming on to the island, they peak up. As the water gets shallow, the waves peak up and they just knock the house off that pilot.

NS: Do you ever go fishing for fun?

JR: Yes.

NS: Can you tell me about a fishing story?

JR: I will tell you the greatest story ever to break my wife's heart. We had taken care of Causeway, probably thirty years of bait. We still do. If they sell killies, they'll take them from us. They take frozen bait from a squid, whatever, mussels. Whatever bait we have, they'll buy it, Causeway. We're friends. The striped bass rule was about probably ten years ago, eight years ago was three-foot. They had to be thirty-six inches. I talked to Bobby, one of the owners, and I said, "We're going to go bass fishing." He says, "Oh, I'll go with you guys. Who are you going with?" I said, "Grace." "Oh, I'll go. You, Gracie, and I, will go to the Wantagh Parkway high water at the drawbridge. We only have to fish an hour and we'll catch a few bass." Well, we went and we anchored and we got clam bellies in the right bait and everything. We were all set. We had good fishing poles. Grace caught, she thought was a six-foot bass, but it was thirty-five-inches. She fought it and she fought it all the way back to the boat and we were all laughing. Bobby and I were laughing. Come on, pull him, get him. She boated him, Bobby grabbed him. He had a cloth tape measure, and he laid it on the bass. The bass was thirty-five. So, he unhooked the bass, we never took it out of the water. He unhooked it and let it go. Grace looked at him. Gracie doesn't have a bad word [laughter] in her body. She says, "How could [laughter] you do that to me?" [laughter]. He said, "It was only thirty-five-inches." We still tease her. She gave away the thirty-five-inches there. But yes, we go. I go first, I talk when they're around.

NS: Do you have another story?

JR: Another story. At night, I would go out jacking with the spear. I caught a fifteen-pound

bass by myself. They were in shallow water, like two or three-foot. I was up by Haunts Creek where the old bay house was and I heard a lot of splashing in this creek. I went in and there was a big fish in there, and I got a fourteen-pound striper. A couple of weeks later, I went right behind our old bay house, was a creek and it went all through Haunts Creek and came out over by the fishing piers in Jones' Beach. They all hook together, these little creeks. I got a twelve-pound weakfish up in the creek with a spear. But both times with the bass, I had to jump in the water [laughter] and hold them. Otherwise, he was going to break the handle on the spear, had broken. So, yes, I would go jacking. Jacking was fun. I take the kids crabbing, but now town Hempstead passed the law that you can't go jacking. I don't know why, but there weren't many people jacking. It was only three or four people, nobody doing it for a living. Years back when I was little, there was guys who made their living. They went every night 2:00 a.m. in the morning, the wind stops, they were on their boat and then they'd get off and go out jacking. So, actually, they made a living jacking. Gab Rainer, Purse Burden, they were all old guys and they had old cat boats and they would tow their boat out and go jacking.

NS: Now, I forgot to ask you. I know for killies you use horseshoe crabs for bait. How has it been since Sandy hit? Are there still the same number? What's the horseshoe crab situation?

JR: Horseshoe crabs, they're solid, but I can't believe the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation let people take them during mating season. They come in and they must lay ten thousand eggs and maybe twenty hatches. They don't protect them. They close them down on a number. They say, we're going to be allowed hundred thousand or two hundred, or whatever the heck it is for the area, and they let them go. I say that, I wouldn't want to tell all the commercial guys this, but they should close it down when they're spawning.

NS: But how would you be able to get the crabs that you need for the killey business, though?

JR: You get them ahead after and put them in the freezer. Actually, when we were killeying from Captree and everybody, we would keep two thousand. Thanks.

Female Speaker: Oh, 'you have shed it up?

NS: No. So, after Sandy, what were some of the things that you were used to seeing, birds or fish in the bay, that you 'do not see any longer?

JR: Actually, after Sandy, I didn't see stripers, I didn't see weakfish, I didn't see fluke. Killies were non-existent. In fact, in Bellmore, one of my friends called me and he said, "I'm doing you a favor." I said, "Yes, what's that?" He said, "My oil burner was underwater." He says, "I got eight killies in the oil burner in the tank, the firebox." He says, "I got some guys working here." He said, "I made him walk down to the Wantagh Park, which is fairly close too, and dump them in and make sure they got away." That [laughter] we saved eight killies.

NS: Now, what about birds? Are you seeing different kinds of birds?

JR: Yes. We used to have cormorants that would come up here. On the yellow boat, we had one that came four years for the summer because he was missing one of his tangs on his toe. He

would land – the first time I got him, my father let him pick killies out of the car. He would help himself and he'd ride on the boat. My father would leave the door open and he could get killies. Actually, what had happened, he would follow us all the way up and he would ride on the front of the boat. He would put his wings out a little bit and just keep his balance. He'd come all the way up and when we got here, he'd jump off and stand on a float. Then we'd have to give him more killies. He came back four years. I never seen him since, wherever the heck he ended up, but he did come back, but not recently.

NS: What are some of the other changes 'you have noticed in the bay since Sandy?

JR: Birds, the tangs come back, seagulls come back and so forth. I don't know if they're the same ones that were here. Usually they live in an area.

NS: Are you seeing more people fishing or?

JR: No.

NS: How has it changed since Sandy?

JR: I would say probably one of the worst businesses to get into would be the bay business right now and boats. You can look in the boatyards, a lot of them are still covered, people lost them. They got their insurance, they were auctioning them off. They still are. I would say just looking around at the boatyard, the big one up here is closed, several of them are closed, and most of them aren't full. I would say ninety-nine percent aren't full. They have room. Whereas before, you had to actually get a number to make sure you were going to get hauled out, they had room for you. It's disappeared. Everybody's looking for an insurance job on a boat. The price of boats, the high end is going around $100 for a boat. It's probably better to sell than your $5, 000,
$10,000 boat. They'll want to buy a boat that's got a couple of scratches on it, or a hole or something. It's really devastated the water.

NS: Are you still building boats?

JR: Yes. I'm getting ready now. We got all wood and I just have to have an electrician. I had thirty-eight-inches of water in my garage, which is my shop. All my power tools, not all, but all the big tools, the planers, and the joiners and so forth, table saw, they all went under because the water was thirty-eight-inches. So, we had a rebuild up and then we ripped the sheet rock off the whole garage because it all got wet. We had to put, actually, closed shell Styrofoam for insulation up four-foot. So, if the water came, it wouldn't suck it in like the old insulation. Then we reinsulated the top and Rishi rocked it with waterproof out there. We used four-foot cement wood and then from there up to the ceiling and so forth, we used waterproof sheet rock.

NS: How many boats have you built since Sandy?

JR: I would say two. Tom got one, yes. I enjoy building the boats because I can do it by myself. If now I need a lift or something like that, the boys are around. John's coming along pretty good. He's pretty good, he's handy. Matt, the other one of the grandsons, Kyle, they

teased me. They built that red boat. They copied. They had to work a week, [laughter] four of them. But they made the paddles that you use to shove the boat and so forth around in the shallow water. They put killey pots in it, they made little ones and so forth. But the bay has changed. You can go out of Hudson where we go out of, and probably more than half of it is empty. That's how bad it is. The dock spaces are empty. It's going to take time.

NS: I think we are going to stop. Thank you very, very much for this interview.

JR: Oh no, whatever you need, yes.

—----------End of Transcript----------
Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/22/2024