

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 Investigators: Nancy Solomon

Transcript 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.

John Remsen: – I would say probably when I was about 15, so 40 years ago.

Nancy Solomon: Did somebody get you into that? I mean, it's not everyone who just...

JR: No. I just wanted one when I was a kid. I had taken shop classes during high school. They were building one there, and I thought I could do one at home. I tried that one.

NS: Did any of your friends help you? No?

JR: Yes. I would say yes. [Lou Carrillo]. In fact, he started to build one when I built one.

NS: Really?

JR: He's a local from [inaudible].

NS: I know your grandfather was a fisherman.

JR: Oh, yes. Yes, my grandfather.

NS: Did he help you?

JR: No, not really. They gave me a little advice.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: But they just let me build it.

NS: So, is this something that you really wanted?

JR: Yes. It was like a need and a want that resulted in building a boat.

NS: When you first built one, did you look at one that was already...

JR: Oh, yes, yes. My father had one built by a professional in Long Beach. I sort of copied the good points and the bad points off that one.

NS: What were some of the things to build a good Garvey?

JR: Well, we used cedar. We went to New Jersey, to the mills and bought it there and things like that.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: Right. The oak mill out in Commack, getting the wood. They were all wood boats, cedar plank. They weren't plywood. Now, they're all plywood, and then they finally do this.

NS: They use that marine...

JR: Right, right. The marine plywood.

NS: But do you...

JR: The first boats were cedar.

NS: The ribs were also made of cedar?

JR: No, they were oak. That was Long Island oak from Commack. So, we'd go to a mill down in Jersey, down in New Gretna, New Jersey, the oak mill.

NS: Is there any particular reason you went to New Jersey?

JR: Pardon?

NS: Any particular reason you went to New Jersey?

JR: That's where the woods were. There was no local cedar here. That's where they had it. I had heard different people had gone down and bought lumber there. My pop had a truck, and we went down and we bought cedar.

[Break in audio]

NS: So, you and your dad would go down in New Jersey and bring...

JR: Right. Pick the wood up. They would cut it and then we would dry it local. Then you would...

NS: How would you dry it?

JR: Air dry. Just stack it up outside and let the air blow through it.

NS: Do you have to do something to make it bend?

JR: We'd steam the ribs, right? We learned that.

NS: How do you steam it? I've never seen this.

JR: We made a piece of pipe and we put either – the cedar comes from trees that are barked. When you buy the wood, you just buy the wood on mill. So, you have to trim it. There would be a lot of bark and the edge of the tree left. So, we saw that off.

NS: Then you would have to plane it?

JR: So, we had to plane it and saw that off. So, we always had a lot of, they call them "rippings." What we would do was put that in a 55-gallon drum and burn that. Then that would heat the...

NS: What shape was this drum? I mean, that is...

JR: That was a 55-gallon drum. We'd cut it in half and we'd put the wood in there and burn that. Then put a piece of pipe in there and it would heat the water to steam the oak. That's the way we steamed.

NS: So, would the oak be resting on something?

JR: You'd have to bend it to a template. You have to cut it to a template. But once you steamed it, it would hold its shape once it cooled down.

NS: How long would it take for you to steam...

JR: If an hour, an inch of thickness.

NS: To steam it?

JR: Usually, we work with two-inch oak and all the parts of the ribs and so forth. So, it would be about two hours in the steam. It was green oak.

NS: How would you get the water boiling? You would just...

JR: To heat that pipe and then that would boil and it would make the steam.

NS: Was the pipe attached to something?

JR: Yes, it was attached to where you put the wood inside of a box, a steam box. The steam would come from the fire into the steam box.

NS: So, this box was...

JR: It wasn't big. It wasn't big. It was long, but maybe it was a foot square and maybe 15 or 18-foot long. You just put the boards inside of it.

NS: So, it would take you about two hours for each plank?

JR: For each thickness, you could put two in together if you wanted. But each thickness of oak, one inch would take approximately an hour. It was green oak. You had to use green oak.

NS: How come?

JR: Because the dried oak would crack when you put the water back into it when you steam. It would just crack.

NS: Was that something you would be able to tell when you went down the mill? This looks good.

JR: We would only buy green oak for our boats. It would be a tree today, and we'd be using it tomorrow.

NS: [laughter]

JR: That's how quick we would use it.

NS: Wow. Was that something that you had to get special from the mill or...

JR: No, they cut oak. That's all the cut out there. They're still in operation now. It's the son. It's Harned Oak Mill in Commack.

NS: Was this somebody you knew personally, or why...

JR: Everybody that had worked around boats, that's where – they still go there to get oak today.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: Yes. Off Commack Road in Commack.

NS: Now, after the oak is steamed and bent...

JR: Then you...

NS: How many planks would you need to do a Garvey?

JR: Well, that'll depend on the size of the boat. The biggest boat I built was 28-foot.

NS: Wow.

JR: The smallest would be about 18.

NS: Wow.

JR: It stayed in that range.

NS: So, for an 18-foot boat, how many?

JR: An 18-foot boat, probably a couple of hundred square feet on the bottom. Then the cedar on the sides – from the cedar mill, the longest boards we ever got from them were 30 feet long. We had to bring them home on a trailer.

NS: Oh, boy.

JR: That's why we went to the mill. You would need no [butt?] blocks when you build your boat. It would all be one-piece lumber wherever you needed it.

NS: Wow.

JR: So, that was one of the benefits.

NS: Wow. So, about how much would you end up spending just for this?

JR: When we first started, that was about 1958. It would probably take, I'm going to say, approximately \$350 to build a boat.

NS: Wow.

JR: Now, it's probably 2,500.

NS: Wow. So, how many boats do you build these days?

JR: Now, I'm really slow. But I could build a lot, but I don't have the time. But that's probably close to 100 I've built.

NS: Wow. So, would make about three or four a year?

JR: Yes. Now, I build one a year. Yes. Yes, three or four a year, five a year, sometimes maybe one.

NS: How long would it take you to build one?

JR: An 18-foot Garvey, I could build in approximately 60 hours.

NS: Whoa, that is pretty fast.

JR: Yes. Again, that's all part-time. I work in the evening and maybe Saturdays and part-time on Sundays.

NS: Have you ever thought about doing it for your living?

JR: Yes. If I retired, I think I could make a living. I know I could if I wanted to make a living. There's enough demand for Garveys.

[Background noise interference]

NS: This is not my day. Your son works with you occasionally.

JR: Right, right. He's come along pretty good now. Yes, he could build a boat now.

NS: After you are done with steaming the wood and bending it, what are the next steps that you...

JR: Well, you plank it, turn it over. You have to put it all on a form. You have to build it, so it's straight. So, you have to set up all the patterns and a jig to put it on. You build the boat on a jig. Then when the bottom is on, you can pop your frames all out to jig out, and the boat will hold its shape. Then you put the decks and the interior.

NS: Those are also made of cedar?

JR: Yes. We had cedar deck, sometimes oak, whatever really the person wanted. Sometimes, they'd want it a little wider because they were doing something, like clamming. Someone else was going to use it for potting, they want a little narrow. If they were going to fish, they wanted more seats.

NS: You make mostly for the fishermen around here or...

JR: Well, now, it's anyone really. A lot of people use them recreationally.

NS: How do they get in touch with you?

JR: Word of mouth. They know I build boats. I get called all the time. If I could do it, I'll do it. If I can't, I'll just say no. I build duck boats, too.

NS: Really?

JR: The hunting boats. Right.

NS: Is that a similar process to building a Garvey or...

JR: Yes. But it's much smaller. They're about 12-foot long. They're all covered over.

NS: With the grasses?

JR: Well, you would have to put a little skip where you can put the grass on the side and so forth.

NS: The slabs?

JR: The thatch rail. Right. They call that a thatch rail.

NS: A what?

JR: Thatch rail. Where they put the grass and they put the thatch.

NS: Is that also made of cedar?

JR: No. They're made of plywood. No.

NS: Marine plywood?

JR: Right, marine plywood.

NS: Do you still make your Garveys out of cedar and oak?

JR: No, I haven't. In fact, the kids want me to build one out of cedar for them now.

[Break in audio]

NS: Do you go duck hunting or...

JR: No. I used to hunt, and I have no desire to shoot a duck. I have all the gear to do it, but I just...

NS: Did you make your own decoys?

JR: Yes, yes. We painted decoys. I hunted with my pop and [Nick Harmon?, Manard Smith?], like the old times. I've hunted with them. But now, more or less, I feed the ducks. I'm just satisfied, take a picture. I'll look them over and let them go.

NS: When you were building Garveys at first, did you go clamming and eeling?

JR: Yes, part-time. I've always been around the water.

NS: In your spare time?

JR: Right.

NS: You grew up here in Freeport?

JR: I grew up right here where we are sitting. I was born on St. John's Place.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: The next street over. We used to play right here.

NS: Wow.

JR: This was woods.

NS: Does anybody, any of your brothers or sisters helped you with the boats or...

JR: No. No, I have no brothers. I'm the only boy, and I have three sisters.

NS: Just Jones?

JR: Right. I have one passed away, Joan. Janice is in Florida. They all have boats, but they never got into boats over there.

NS: When you were growing up, what kinds of things you would do besides build boats?

JR: Well, I worked out in the bay, helped my pop. That was about it. Mostly all around the water.

NS: Did you go treading for clams?

JR: Oh, sure, clamming. I went with them when they fished with a net out in the ocean, things like that.

NS: Oh, really? What kind of net?

JR: A haul seine.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: Right, right. Yes. My father did that for years until it was outlawed and then they stopped.

NS: Your grandfather did that?

JR: Right, right. My mother's father that he's living – that's where he made his living. That's right.

NS: I did not know they were together.

JR: My pop helped grandpop, Ellison. That's how, I guess, he got involved, was being around grandpop.

NS: Were there any particular things you remember that your father and your grandfather passed onto you as far as being on the water?

JR: No, not really. Just be careful, respect it and things like that as far as safety. That would be about it..

NS: Did you build any other kind of boats besides Garveys and gunboats?

JR: Yes, duck boats.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: I built a couple of gillnet boats that go out in the ocean.

NS: What is a gillnet boat?

JR: Well, they were designed by a fellow up in Deer Island, Maine, Brewer. I got his plans and I built two of them. They were 28 feet long.

NS: Did you change them at all?

JR: No.

NS: No?

JR: No, no. It was a designed boat. So, we had to stay pretty much to the plan.

NS: I know, but I was just wondering if there were some things that you needed to do here that they did not do in Maine or...

JR: When we picked out that design for that type of work, it was a gillnet. So, it was designed.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: The interior, maybe we put the bumps in a different spot or a little smaller – or something like that. The general design of the boat wasn't changed.

NS: What did you build it for?

JR: I kept one and I sold one.

NS: Do you remember who you sold it to?

JR: It went out east. It went out to Shinnecock. I forgot the guy's name.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: Right. Yes, whoever it was. Yes.

NS: How was the design different than the...

JR: Well, it was a (Maine built?) boat. It could work in the surf. It had a very high bow and it was kind of wide. It was actually built for working in up under the beach, putting the gillnets in the surf. It was a nice boat.

NS: Was that a rowboat or was...

JR: No, that had power.

NS: You had an outboard motor?

JR: Yes. That had a Flagship engine that was made right here in Freeport.

NS: Really?

JR: Right.

NS: Over at [Colombian Bronx?] or...

JR: No. Right here at Flagship by Tommy Fileman. He had the company that made the engines, and that's what we used. They were a Chevrolet engine inverted...

NS: That was an inboard motor?

JR: The inboard motor. Right. Same as a Chevy car engine, but he put marine parts on it.

NS: Wow.

JR: They moved out of town, I would say, five or six years ago.

NS: But for your Garveys, were they for outboards?

JR: Mostly outboards, yes. We had a couple of inboards, but mostly outboards.

NS: Were any of them just used as row boats or...

JR: A sailboat once.

NS: Really?

JR: I made one. I put a sail on it. It worked out pretty well, I guess.

NS: [laughter]

JR: I hadn't seen it. Usually, as soon as you get done, they're gone. You see them once in a while. I could always pick my boats out.

NS: How?

JR: Just the way I built them. That's all, when I see them. In fact, we passed one on the trailer and I said, "Well, that's a pretty boat." I had my wife with me and she says, "Yes, you built it." She would know the design of my boat. They just have a cut, a certain style.

NS: Did yours have more...

JR: A higher bow. We put a sweep in the bow. It was a style, and people liked it. It made a nice-looking boat.

NS: How about the stern? How was that shaved?

JR: It was just standard cutout for an outboard. The standard height, 17 inches and things like that. The interior usually made according to whoever wanted the boat for whatever they wanted to do. If they were clamming, they may want a little pilot house. If they were fishing, they may want a couple of seats or a console to stand up and steer. It's all different.

NS: Did you always find yourself wanting to do one thing and your customer wanted to do another? Did that ever happen?

JR: No, no. Usually, I had to kind of agree on that before we started. Because once you start changing things, it just became a hassle to change something. I'd rather not give them the boat.

NS: Did that happen?

JR: No. I never really ever had a problem. Usually, I could always sell more than I could build anyhow. So, I'd pick my customers.

NS: You would pick them just through your friends or...

JR: Right. Well, whoever, yes. Al Grover had sent me a couple of people. The word was just out.

NS: Obviously, it wasn't when you first began.

JR: Oh, no, no. At first...

NS: But how far into it did you start getting known for?

JR: I would say probably when I came out of the service, maybe about 23 or so, 24. Then people...

NS: It took you about eight years of practice?

JR: Yes, yes, yes.

NS: Did you make many mistakes when you first began? [laughter]

JR: Well, I would never admit to it. No, I don't know. [laughter]

No. I'm sure a couple of times, we had some problems. But we always worked it out with that boat.

NS: I know some of the men used rivets when they [build boats?] and some men used notches for the ribs. But how did you...

JR: We bolted did everything. We used stainless steel boats. At first, long time ago, it was galvanized. Then now, it's all stainless steel.

NS: Did you have to notch the ribs to...

JR: Yes, we notched. Yes, we fit the ribs to the boat, sawed them.

NS: Is there a particular name for the notching?

JR: They were just the regular rabbit cut, what I called it. What I was told they were (rabbited it?).

NS: R-A-B-B-I-T?

JR: Right.

NS: Do you know why it was called that?

JR: That was the type of joint you were making. That's a woodworking term, you rabbit it.

NS: Could you draw me a picture back at the office...

JR: Yes. Cool.

NS: – what that looked like? That would be interesting. Were there any other particular kinds of notches that you have to use?

JR: No. Everything was, basically, square cuts and good fits.

NS: Now, is your son learning to make Garveys?

JR: Oh, yes. He can build a boat now. He used all my patterns.

NS: [laughter] Do you have patterns that you have written down?

JR: Yes, I have patterns. Yes, right.

NS: But how many different kinds of patterns do you have?

JR: Well, probably 20 or 30.

NS: Wow. What makes them different?

JR: Well, the length of the boat and how high they want to make it, how high they want the side. Some people want a low-sided boat if they're clamming and they're going to climb over the side all the time. Then if they're going to carry a lot of weight, they want a high-sided boat. So, you would have to...

NS: So, the clammers would have a much lower bow?

JR: Yes. Try to keep the bow high because that's always going to get you home with a good high bow. But if they're going to tread clams, stand in the water with their feet, they'd want a low-sided boat, so they could climb over the side.

NS: Now, what about someone like Cory who goes eeling? What kind of Garvey would he need?

JR: He'd want probably a high-sided boat and kind of – maybe 20 feet and not much in the way so he could dump his pots and everything and carry a lot.

NS: So, there wouldn't be a bench or anything like...

JR: There were no seats. Maybe a bench in the back for him to steer, and that would be it.

NS: Now, I know some of them also have a covering at the front, on the bow.

JR: Oh, the front deck.

NS: Why is that?

JR: Well, that gives you the strength. As the boat's coming up, you can't stand there anyhow because you'll run out of space. There's boats around and you'd be standing out in the open. You'd fall out of the boat.

NS: Now, is that...

JR: Now, we put Styrofoam under that.

NS: Really?

JR: That's flotation. Yes. If she fills up with water, that would float. You're going to fill it. Take half of the compartment in the front and maybe two feet square in the back. You could fill it with water and she would never go down. That's a good safety feature.

NS: When did you start doing that?

JR: Oh, about 10 years ago, we put the foam in it. So, they wouldn't sink, just a good feature.

NS: What other kinds of changes have you made? Have you been using fiberglass?

JR: Yes, fiberglass now. Yes.

NS: When did you start doing that?

JR: I would say probably in 1960s, the middle 60s.

NS: How come you started using that?

JR: Well, it was much quicker. Whereas when you plank the cedar boat, some of the boards would be seven inches wide or six inches wide. Now, with plywood, you get – I have a machine that will join the plywood. I could make it as long as I possibly want it, one piece. So, it became much easier. As soon as you put plywood in the water, it wouldn't leak. Whereas a cedar boat, you may leak. So, it tightens up.

NS: Oh, really?

JR: Yes. You couldn't trailer a cedar boat because of the fact that the boards swell so much. When we first built them, we used to have to take a quarter and put a quarter between each board. That's the space you're left that you could see through. Then as you put it in the water, it would swell right up. If you plank it tight, the boards would buckle. The pressure was so great on the swelling. That's why you use cedar because it swells so quick.

NS: The fiberglass, what role does that serve in...

JR: Well, that gives it a lot of strength. Again, when you fiberglass, you can put the color in. You don't have to paint it anymore. You never have to paint. You can buy gel coat and mix it right in. It almost becomes like a maintenance free boat. Just paint the bottom.

NS: Before they had fiberglass, how long would the boat last if it was used...

JR: Some of my boats are probably 20, 25 years old.

NS: Wow.

JR: They're still around.

NS: Do fiberglass boats last about the same amount of time?

JR: No. Well, the fiberglass boat, people beat them up because they think they're indestructible. They'll put a 100 horse motor or a 150 horse motor. They'll put them through a lot of punishment in their lifespan. That's what uses it up. They'll break them. They'll overload them. They pound them up.

NS: So, they'll last, what, maybe five?

JR: Yes, 10 years.

NS: Five to 10 years. Does it cause any more or less to build the cedar plank bed or fiberglass bed?

JR: No. Now, it's patterns. Once you have the patterns made, that saves you a lot of time. It can become pretty fast.

NS: How long does it take you to design a new kind of boat, or most of your patterns are fairly similar?

JR: Mine is all patterns. If someone says they want a 16-foot boat, I can pretty much pick out all

my patterns for a 16-foot boat. Tell them to go look some place because that's what a 16-foot boat looks like and base it from that.

NS: Now, these patterns, I assume you keep them in your garage?

JR: Yes, over in a shed over there. Right.

NS: Are they written on paper or...

JR: No, they're in plywood. They're actually wooden patterns.

NS: Wow. You must have a lot of room over here.

JR: Yes, yes. We used grandma's yard up. [laughter] Some of them are old, believe it or not. To make the bottom flat, I have a two-by-four that, I would say, is probably 30 years old. We've had it that long. It's a straight green two-by-four with no knots. We had that one for 30 years, I would say.

NS: How long does it take you to make a pattern? I mean, it sounds like...

JR: Oh, no. Not long.

NS: No, it doesn't take long?

JR: No. But you use good material in the pattern because if it's a good design, you're going to keep it.

NS: Have you ever built something that you did not like the design on?

JR: No, no.

NS: You can tell...

JR: Maybe the first V bottom Garvey I built.

NS: What's a V bottom Garvey?

JR: Rather than being flat, it has a keel on it.

NS: Oh.

JR: The first one I built, I didn't like.

NS: How come?

JR: I don't know. It just never appealed to me, the boat. It's still around and people have it. They like it, but it didn't appeal to me.

NS: So, all of yours are flat bottoms?

JR: No, I build V bottom. I changed it a little bit from that time.

NS: How did you change it, so that you did not like it?

JR: Well, I had some rides in that one. We went down to Virginia and looked at a couple down

there. That's where they build V bottom boats. We just, basically, designed it from –

NS: Had anybody built a V bottom up here before or not anymore?

JR: Yes, I would say so.

NS: But it wasn't very common?

JR: Long time ago, it wasn't. Now, it is a common boat because the people use them for fishing, sport fishing.

NS: About when did it start becoming more popular?

JR: I would say probably 15, 18 years ago.

NS: These were all recreation...

JR: Yes, some recreation. Some commercial guys use a V bottom. If they're going to work, clamming in deep water or something like that, they can use a V bottom. The Garvey is good because it only draws a couple inches of water. You can go just about wherever you can see, you'll go there.

NS: During low tide.

JR: Right.

NS: Who were some of the fishermen that you have built boats for around here?

JR: The Verity's.

NS: Fred and Dott Verity or not?

JR: [Hike?].

NS: [Hike?].

JR: Elwood, Jacki, and the Millers. They're clammers. They still use them. Billy Miller, Al Miller, his pop.

NS: Where are they?

JR: Oceanside.

NS: I do not know them.

JR: Who else?

NS: What about Danny Koch? He built his Garvey. That's right.

JR: I never built any boats for Danny, no. Steve on his *Saint Peter*, he's out of town. A couple of people from Island Park. Out east, quite a few clammers, out around Amityville.

-----End of transcript-----

Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/22/2024