

**Robert A. Brestolli**

Haverstraw, New York

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**Tape One, Side One**

INTERVIEWER: I just want to ask you first just where you were born.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Haverstraw. Nyack Hospital, but we lived in Haverstraw.

INTERVIEWER: And what year were you born?

MR. BRESTOLLI: '39.

INTERVIEWER: And who taught you how to fish?

MR. BRESTOLLI: My uncle, Charlie. And when I was in high school in '57 and '58, we had a cruiser up in Thompkin's Cove, and the guy up there used to fish in the winter for white perch. Did you ever hear of a t-net?

INTERVIEWER: No.

MR. BRESTOLLI: You see Timmy's cross over there in front of the boat?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. BRESTOLLI: They used to make up a thing like that, and it would be 10 feet long across the top. And what they do is take a 10-by-10 foot net and tie it onto there, and take an anchor and anchor it out in the river and tie the net onto there, and they would just go under water with the tide, and it would be under the ice and everything. And then when the ice moved away, they would go out and pull it out. They call them t-nets. They used to bring the fish in and sit around like we're doing here. And all winter long, bring a net in, take one net off, put the other one on, bring it in, we're sitting around taking fish out of the net.

INTERVIEWER: So they would cut a slit in the ice to be able to go-

MR. BRESTOLLI: It depended. If there was a lot of ice, they would cut a hole in the ice and take it out. Either that or just wait for the wind to blow a little bit and go out there and take the net off. You might fish 3, 4 days. The water was so cold the fish wouldn't go bad.

INTERVIEWER: And it was just white perch?

MR. BRESTOLLI: White perch.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a market for white perch?

MR. BRESTOLLI: You could sell them locally. People used to go out and eat fish a lot more than they do now.

INTERVIEWER: It seems like it's sort of gone up and down with popularity. Like it went way up, and then suddenly now everyone is worried about contaminants.

MR. BRESTOLLI: That's what's happening. You know, people only want fish from the fish market, they want everything from the ocean. The river has got a very bad rep.

INTERVIEWER: So it was just your uncle?

MR. BRESTOLLI: That was Hanson, Oscar Hanson. My uncle, he used to fish in the '40s, during the war, and they fished stake nets, what they called a bucket net. You never heard of a bucket net?

INTERVIEWER: No.

MR. BRESTOLLI: They used to put the poles 40 feet apart. You fish a bucket net, they put the poles 40 feet apart, and on the end of the outgoing tide they would go out and put the net on, and then the tide is coming this way. And then as they put the net on, when the tide stopped, if the weight is on the bottom, it would hold the net down, and then as the tide came up, the net would just lay against the poles, they tie it on top and leave the bottom loose. That's the way he used to fish.

INTERVIEWER: And when did he start fishing, just during the '40s?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Oh, during the war. I don't know when he started and when he quit, but he fished with Rotella (?) down there, they fished like the '40s, probably into the '50s, and then they quit.

INTERVIEWER: And who taught him how to fish?

MR. BRESTOLLI: I have no idea. I never really asked him. I guess Rotella (?)

INTERVIEWER: What attracted you to fishing? What attracted you to go out with your uncle and get involved in it?

MR. BRESTOLLI: I never went out with him. I was only a couple of years, 3, 4 years old, when he was fishing there. Just the freedom and everything of being out in the water, whatever you want to call it, the closeness to nature or whatever, the human instinct, you want to be out in the wild. Not for the money, that's for sure. You don't do it anymore for the money.

INTERVIEWER: So when did you start fishing on your own?

MR. BRESTOLLI: We started in '58.

INTERVIEWER: And how many people?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Harry, did you start with Tucker and I?

HARRY: Yeah.

MR. BRESTOLLI: My two brothers, Tom and Harry and myself. And then my uncle just kept teaching us how to fish. So we started, in '58.

INTERVIEWER: And for just shad?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Just for shad, shad and striped bass. Back in the '50s shad, you didn't get that many. In the '50s, what did you catch, Jimmy, maybe a dozen shad in a season? The bass weren't worth anything then.

JIMMY: The shad you didn't catch, but the bass...

MR. BRESTOLLI: I meant the bass, we didn't catch that many. There really wasn't a market for them, just the local people would take them.

INTERVIEWER: So they weren't considered a good eating fish?

MR. BRESTOLLI: There really wasn't a market for them then. It wasn't until the '60s and everything, they were coming down to New York.

INTERVIEWER: So through the '60s and then the early '70s, just before the ban, that was really the only time that stripers really had a big market.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And did they go down to Fulton?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Fulton, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever catch sturgeon, or fish for sturgeon?

MR. BRESTOLLI: We fished for them 2 years. I think sometimes you would get two or three a week, that's about it, you know, 7-footers, 6-footers. The biggest one we got was 8 foot, 8 foot 2 inches.

INTERVIEWER: Did you sell them?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Yeah. They went to Fulton also.

INTERVIEWER: Did you take things down, the catch down, to Fulton, or did someone come up and...

MR. BRESTOLLI: We did it both ways. Sometimes we took them down on our own, we had a pickup truck, we took them down. Most of the time we just shipped.

INTERVIEWER: What was Fulton like?

MR. BRESTOLLI: A madhouse in the morning. I mean, once the market opened, you couldn't drive through. I mean you had to deliver everything before the

market opened. And you would go down there, like we used to go down like at 2:00 in the morning, drop everything off, pick up our boxes, and then get out of there. And a few times we went down when the market was open, like at 5:00 in the morning, just wall to wall people.

INTERVIEWER: Were there lots of people around at 2:00?

MALE: Just the workers.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Just the workers, the unloaders, a couple of guards. You put the pen down, the mafia was down there.

INTERVIEWER: A (inaudible) could down with the tape still on.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have any trouble down there? Was it ever uncomfortable or (inaudible)?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Just one time we were picking up empty boxes, and a big Cadillac pulled up, the window down, and asked us what we were doing, and I told them we were picking up empty boxes, and we thought they were no good because they were burning them anyway, and the guy says, "There's no such thing as garbage down here, so go around the corner and pay so-and-so for the boxes." So that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER: But it was easier to have someone pick them up?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we were paying a nickel a pound to take them down. Lately we haven't sent anything to market, they've sent the truck up here to pick them up.

INTERVIEWER: Still Fulton?

MR. BRESTOLLI: No, down in South Jersey. We haven't dealt with Fulton Fish Market for about 6 years now.

INTERVIEWER: What made you change?

MALE: Money.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Money. We started fishing in '58, the price for shad was 25 cent a pound, we stopped sending the fish to Fulton 5 years ago, and we were still getting 25 cent a pound.

MALE: Plus, you never knew when you were getting paid and if you were getting paid.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Every time you would go down there, you asked them what the price was, and they would say it would depend on what came in today, they would never tell you what you were going to get before you sent them, you were always at their mercy. And then one year we got hung up for \$4,000, it took a year

to get our money. I've still got about six rubber checks (inaudible). They would give us a check, and we would go down and deposit it in the bank, the bank would send us a statement back that the check was no good, it cost me \$10 for the check. I would call up the guy in the market, he says, "Oh, I'll take it out of another account, don't worry about it, the check is good," go down, he writes another check, and deposit that, that would bounce, it would be another \$10. We got one from his wife's account, that one bounced. Finally I just told the guy, "Don't send me any more checks, it's costing me money now." I went down to the market and talked to the guy, and he said he was having problems, just bear with him, that he would make it up. It took a year, but we got our money. I mean, there was no sense in going to the police or anything like that, the guy, he was just in over his head and he couldn't do anything.

INTERVIEWER: How did you initially find the guy that you sold it to? Do you just go down there and see — or is it through friends?

MR. BRESTOLLI: No. You just go down there and ask them who is interested in buying shad, and you talk to some of the other fishermen, they would tell you so-and-so was buying them and he's reliable. This one guy that hung us up, we were dealing with him for about 15 years.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name?

PREVIOUS MALE: He not there anymore.

MR. BRESTOLLI: He's not there anymore.

INTERVIEWER: So he was there when you left, though, and changed?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Yeah. Yeah, he was still there.

PREVIOUS MALE: But he sold. He sold out to the Japanese.

MR. BRESTOLLI: He's in partners with a Japanese buyer. In fact, that's how we got the money, the Japanese backed him up and gave us our money. Otherwise his name wasn't the greatest down there.

MALE: It's still the same.

INTERVIEWER: It's still the same way?

MR. BRESTOLLI: We sent fish down last week and we still don't have the check, and we don't know how much we're getting for the fish, last Tuesday we sent fish down.

INTERVIEWER: To Fulton?

MR. BRESTOLLI: The only reason we sent them, we didn't have enough to send down to Jersey, and we didn't want to throw them away. In fact, Bob Gabrielson took them down on his truck for us. We put them on Bob's truck, and we told Bob to bring them to the guy that's taking Bob's fish. But we're still waiting for a check. So things haven't changed in 30 or 40 years.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a lot of competition between different fishermen?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Now you can't count the fishermen on your hand anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Did there used to be?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Oh, yeah, a few years ago. There wasn't much competition, there was just a lot of fishermen. I mean, when I first started with our poles, we used to borrow Timmy's scows up here to put our poles in and everything. He would put his in and we would borrow his scows to put our poles in, use his scows to take them out. Before that, down in Haverstraw it was Bo Gulkey(?) And Smitty(?).

MALE: Yeah.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Yeah, his last name.

MALE: I don't know.

MR. BRESTOLLI: At any rate, there used to be like one set of scows for six fishermen.

MALE: (Inaudible) types of fishermen (inaudible). He was here the last time Marguerite was here.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Who is that?

PREVIOUS MALE: Sam (inaudible).

MR. BRESTOLLI: But not a lot of competition, like we would cut each others' throats or anything like that. We would help each other out. It's always been that way.

INTERVIEWER: Did you take time off to fish the whole shad season?

MR. BRESTOLLI: No, just one week at a time. I would take a week. In fact, this year I took last week off, and next week my brother is taking off, and (inaudible) day tides, and then at night we'll go out together.

INTERVIEWER: What do you do when you're...

MR. BRESTOLLI: Maintenance manager in a church. You see most of the fishermen are always mechanics anyway. (Inaudible) is a maintenance manager, I'm a maintenance manager. The guys that used to fish across the river, they were into maintenance, either a mechanic or something like that, all the trades.

INTERVIEWER: Who was across the river: Your cousins are over there, Tim. What were their names?

TIM: Bleakleys.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Bleakleys.

TIM: Jimmy Carey.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

TIM: Do you know him?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Are you related to him?

TIM: Who, Jimmy?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

TIM: No. But he's a nice old guy that was a friend of mine.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

TIM: I wouldn't want to be related to him, but he's a nice guy.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I went and interviewed him maybe about 2 months ago. He was with his partner, a big, very tall fellow, had just moved there.

TIM: I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any black marketing out of Haverstraw?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Any what?

INTERVIEWER: Black market bass?

MR. BRESTOLLI: No. The federal government, when they put the Lacey Act into effect, no black marketing.

MALE: Unless you want to pay 40,000 big ones. And possibly lose your house.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Yeah. You lose your house, you lose your car, you lose everything. There is not that kind of money out there to take that chance.

INTERVIEWER: So it wouldn't be even tempting?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Huh-uh.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you're going to see the ban on striped bass lifted?

MR. BRESTOLLI: We're hoping that, but deep down I think we don't have enough clout to get the river open again. My personal feelings are the sports fishermen have more clout, and they'll keep it closed for themselves. They're trying to pass a law now to make a game fish in Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Rhode Island. So it's only a matter of time before they do the same thing in New York.

California, they banned gill nets altogether. Commercial fishing is a dying business.

MALE: Well, let them eat cake. To hell with them, let them eat cake. Somebody once said that.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Look in Florida, right now they're banning the trap netting. California banned gill netting.

PREVIOUS MALE: How are you supposed to catch fish? Go out there and, "Here, kitty, kitty"?

(Laughter.)

MR. BRESTOLLI: Up in Alaska, they open the season for hours at a time, not days and weeks, but open for hours.

INTERVIEWER: How would you feel if you couldn't fish?

MR. BRESTOLLI: It would just be like losing another part of your life. Do you know what I mean? It's hard to explain how it is, the feeling that goes into it. There really is no money into it. We built our own boats, which depending on your boats and your motors and your equipment, you've got \$3,000 or \$4,000 invested in it, at least that, and you don't make that in a season, not anymore.

INTERVIEWER: What do mean a season?

MR. BRESTOLLI: By the time we take expenses out and divide the money up, we make \$1,000. That's a lot. \$1,000 apiece, that's a lot. Getting out there, working, I can make more than that on the job, believe me. You could go and paint a room in a house for \$150, painting, and you can do that in a couple of hours. Out here, \$150, it would take all day. A lot of times you go out and work, just setting up, and you don't make anything.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know young people who are interested in learning how to fish, or no?

MR. BRESTOLLI: My two sons go out, they'll go out and help us haul, but as far as painting the boats and making the nets up in the winter, and all the other things that go with fishing, they're not into it. The only reason they go out on the river is to make a few dollars. They enjoy riding around in the boat and everything, but to really enjoy fishing, they don't.

INTERVIEWER: Do you enjoy all the other things, I mean, the fixing the nets and painting the boats? That's all part of it?

MR. BRESTOLLI: That's all part of it. We used to fish with the stake nets, we used to go there in December and January, cut down poles, bring them down to the river, skin them, point them, that would take like 2 months, sometimes even more. You go up in the mountains in November and December and mark the poles, and go back and cut them. Rent a truck, bring them down to the river, skin them, point them. That was almost a full-time job.



MALE: Then we took them out of the river, we found it was easier. You don't need them poles. You don't need poles.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Now we're using anchor nets, it's a lot easier. We don't have to take any poles, put them or take them out, we just go out in the spring time, grapple them up.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still have poles lying under the water somewhere?

MR. BRESTOLLI: No more.

MALE: They all went (inaudible).

(Laughter.)

MR. BRESTOLLI: Cut them all up for firewood.

INTERVIEWER: So when did you switch from poles to anchor nets?

MR. BRESTOLLI: About 8 years ago, 6 years ago.

MALE: Did you see Bobby and his crew up there on the wall?

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

MALE: I set that up for Bob.

(Laughter.)

PREVIOUS MALE: I set that up for you for Bob.

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

PREVIOUS MALE: You know how I was always telling Bob, "I'll pay you for the buck shad."

(Laughter.)

MALE: That's about as close to the truth as you can get.

(Laughter.)

PREVIOUS MALE: People had more fun then.

MALE: We had one go in the next day too.

MR. BRESTOLLI: As far as making the nets up, we used to buy our nets and send them in, in the winter.

INTERVIEWER: And send them in the winter?

MR. BRESTOLLI: Send them in the winter.

INTERVIEWER: Did you change (inaudible)?

MALE: (Inaudible) conversation at all.

INTERVIEWER: There is some confusing times (inaudible).

PREVIOUS MALE: Huh?

INTERVIEWER: There are some confusing times on the tape when there are five people here.

PREVIOUS MALE: (Inaudible.)

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: Well, I'm going to bring Henry Gourdine over here one day.

PREVIOUS MALE: That old piece of fish bait?

INTERVIEWER: I'm going to play that for him.

(Laughter.)

MALE: How old is he now?

MALE: 87, I think.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see the documentary?

PREVIOUS MALE: On him?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PREVIOUS MALE: I told him he was a big ham. I called him, I told him I wanted his autograph.

MALE: I don't think I saw that.

PREVIOUS MALE: Oh, yeah. They had it on there about every 3 or 4 days, they had it on over in...

MR. BRESTOLLI: They used to alternate, Gourdine, and then Gabrielson. And then they had the...

PREVIOUS MALE: (Inaudible) documentary coming out soon on HBO from here. Last year. Remember? Called "The Last Fisherman." All these sob stories.

INTERVIEWER: The one that (inaudible) worked on?

PREVIOUS MALE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But you haven't seen it yet.

PREVIOUS MALE: Have you?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I saw it.

PREVIOUS MALE: I was supposed to get a copy of the tape.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

PREVIOUS MALE: That ain't right. How did you get (inaudible)?

INTERVIEWER: I went to that, yeah.

PREVIOUS MALE: Where was that at? I was invited.

INTERVIEWER: It was down at the HBO center in Manhattan.

PREVIOUS MALE: (Inaudible.)

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: But Henry came down.

PREVIOUS MALE: How was it?

INTERVIEWER: It was very nice. I mean, it was very well done, very nice.

PREVIOUS MALE: Who was the guy who did the narration?

INTERVIEWER: Alec Baldwin.

PREVIOUS MALE: Yeah. He's got a very good voice.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PREVIOUS MALE: That's why I want to get it. I told John, I said, "Don't you forget my - - I don't give a damn who has got the rights to them, I want a tape, or don't ever knock on my door again." I'm supposed to get a tape, now it's been over a year, it's been a year, and I haven't gotten it yet.

MR. BRESTOLLI: Yeah. It was last fishing season.

PREVIOUS MALE: If I don't get one, I don't care who it is, I'm going to chase them all away, people that want interviews, stories, anything. "Fine. Get out of here."

INTERVIEWER: I'll send you a tape.