

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The magazine we chose for you is standing on the back down here.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever fish with Charlie White?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: With Charlie?

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, I fished with my brothers, we were four brothers into it together.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I was going to tell you, you should have got some old pictures out.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Got 'em. They laughed at us. We were like a joke. But we caught our fish.

Marguerite Holloway: You were like a joke to the community?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, well we had to go because at that time you had no motors. They were back breaking rollers and what not. And we were using the stake nets at the time. You had to go out there with a raft and poles that were maybe about 75 feet long. You'd raise them up and they'd tie a rope around a piece of board to stand on, jump them to get them down into the mud. You had about 25 or 30 poles. That's a lot of work.

Alfreda Letteri: Him and his brother Angelo.

Marguerite Holloway: That's great. When did you stop doing stake netting?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: When we got educated. I used to work over in West Nyack you know. And I says you know, I don't see Bob Gabrielson with as many poles as we got. He must be fishing different. Find out, find out. I says, how come you're setting your nets. Well, he was setting ring over the pole. So that came into the idea where you put an anchor net. So he put the ring over the pole and let the buoys float back and forth. And when he hauled, he hauled and bring them all up together. But then we done the same thing with an anchor net and that served the same purpose. Even better, no poles to put in, it was much better. (side conversation offering a glass of wine) So it was quite a thing.

Marguerite Holloway: And you just, did you fish just for shad? Or did you fish for other fish as well?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Did you fish for just shad or bass or? You fished for bass too at that time.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, well stripers, set the season. First the bass came, then the shad came. We were getting plenty of them. We done very good. We were going out in the fog. We had to go 4 hours on and 4 hours off. It was terrible. One day we were out in the fog. Well, we started out in the fog. And my brother Angelo says come on Jim, don't be scared. I can't even see the net, how are we going to do it. He says I got a compass. Okay, you know how to read it? Yeah. He started, we were going about 20 minutes, we hit the, Holy mackerel what'd we hit? We were back on shore. (laughter) I thought you could read the compass. This thing is no damn good it always points north. I said Jesus, it's gotta point north.

Alfreda Letteri: Excuse me, can I offer you a glass of Pepsi.

Marguerite Holloway: Yes, Water would be great.

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Vincent Letteri Sr.: So we limited ourselves to going out when the fog lifts and a little bit. Then we had them flashing lights out on the poles. They could just faintly see.

Marguerite Holloway: Out on the ends?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: On the end poles. That's what gave us our course. We went by that. We headed for it. It was quite an ordeal.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You fished the net through the ice too.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, oh that was incredible, quite a time doing that. We used to go up there to Fleischmann's at that time.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Standard Browns

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Where the Charles Point is. That was off Fleischmann's where they make the whiskey and stuff like that. We entered, one time we used to go through the woods to get to the nets. We had to climb the fence, go across the brook and me with this leg here, he wants me to hobble along with them.

Marguerite Holloway: What was wrong with your leg?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: He got wounded in the war.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I got wounded in the service. And then when I come back we were fishing.

[TIME STAMP 5:00]

Marguerite Holloway: So you scrambled through the woods and you did all the fishing.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: One time we went out to haul our nets place nets. For that one we had long poles in the ice. About 10 foot long, each one. We done about 7 or 8 of them for perch. And one time they went to haul, they get out there and the ice started to break. One went down. Now the other one pulled on him, he went down. Then Frankie grabbed a hold of my brother and my brother just stood behind him. There he was smashing the ice with his hand to get the both of them up from underneath the ice. One day, we never done that again. Take them home. I swear my mother gave them a whole shot of whiskey each, about that big, and they swallowed it and they never, never caught a cold even. And they were under that water for quite a while.

Marguerite Holloway: And it works for so many things.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That's right.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We used to catch the perch. On the ice they were frozen by the time we'd get them home you'd put them in the basement in my mother's house they'd wiggle all over the place, they all came back when they warmed up, they were dormant and when they thawed out they started jumping all over. We used to catch sturgeon, bass, small sturgeon we used to throw back in the water. This lady got caught one time by the game warden.

Alfreda Letteri: Shhh! I did not!

Marguerite Holloway: Tell me!

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Alfreda Letteri: (unclear) right underneath my.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: She didn't think he would search her. She had her shad under her coat.

Alfreda Letteri: You're making me blush, stop it! (laughter)

Marguerite Holloway: You were running a black market in

Alfreda Letteri: Don't listen to him!

Vincent Letteri Jr.: She see it?

Marguerite Holloway: I didn't yet

Alfreda Letteri: I'm sorry, get me in trouble! This was schrapnal he had in his leg for 48 years.

Marguerite Holloway: Wow.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They just took that out two years ago out of his leg, out of his butt and leg.

Marguerite Holloway: Really? Why did they wait so long?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They didn't know it was in there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They didn't know it was in there. He went to the hospital, they thought he had two great big tumors on his leg. They cut across this way about this far and down his leg about this far and that's what they found in there.

Vincent Letteri Sr: At Sloan Kettering.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh my God!

Alfreda Letteri: A piece of schrapnal.

Marguerite Holloway: Were they hurting you the whole time?

(Crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I do an awful lot of crabbing, you know. And I'd ride in the boat and I kept moving my leg like this. So evidently what happened, it was cutting its way through.

Marguerite Holloway: Ai yai! They're huge too.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I'd feel the pain but I didn't think it was that.

Alfreda Letteri: 48 years it finally started to fester inside of him.

Marguerite Holloway: Man, you would think they would have looked with an x-ray to see before.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They said they saw two big things in there, they didn't know what they were.

Marguerite Holloway: So they figured they'd just leave them? Wow.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: So he says to me, let's go in the examination room. We'll tap you and see what kind of a tumor you have and we'll shrink it and then we'll take it out. So when he stuck the needle in he said

you've got all fluid in there. I quick ran and called my wife. The whole town called me up. I had the phone ringing off the hook.

Marguerite Holloway: One of them is the size of a little arrowhead, it's huge.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, I had quite a time of it.

Marguerite Holloway: When you and your brothers fished did you fish all year round?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Like I went from shad fishing, see I don't shad fish now because my brothers all passed away.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: When you did fish though, when you were all fishing together.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, we all fished together. We went from fishing into crabbing. Then we went into something else, I can't say.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh, come on. (laughter)

Alfreda Letteri: (unclear)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, we don't mention it, they're illegal.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh yes.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: At that time it wasn't illegal. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We were going to go into eeling.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: No one knew about PCBs.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: But now you can't touch them. You can't touch them now. They hang you if you touch anything like that now.

Marguerite Holloway: So did you support yourself entirely by fishing?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Excuse me?

Marguerite Holloway: Did you support yourself entirely by fishing.

Alfreda Letteri: No, you didn't. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Oh, no, no, no. No I worked. Fishing would never support me. You couldn't make that much. We had four guys, how can you make that much.

Marguerite Holloway: Splitting it four ways, even though fishing was more lucrative then than it is now.

[TIME STAMP 10:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: (unclear) I worked at West Nyack.

Marguerite Holloway: What did you do?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I was a oiler in the (unclear) plant. I maintained the whole plant. Anything breaks down, I'd repair it.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you take time off from work to fish? Or did you do it in your spare time?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We figured our times that one of us would be home to go haul the nets. Like on a weekend all four would go, especially with heavy winds. Two guys would row, two guys would haul. When the guys rowing got tired then the guys who were hauling, they'd switch. But if the wind is blowing you don't have time to switch with the stake nets. With the anchor nets you can do it very easy. Now when the wind blows we don't even go out. It don't pay. You're gambling with losing your life for something like that.

Marguerite Holloway: What year was it that you switched from the stake netting to the anchor netting?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It was back in 1955.

Marguerite Holloway: Okay.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: 1954, along those years. I got discharged from the hospital, it was in 1947 and from then on, I fished with them. We used to have big seines, we used to haul seines down by the hospital. It was a big, about 200 to 300 foot net. Make a big loop and put two guys on each end and pull the seine. We used to do that to catch crab bait. And we used to catch a lot of crabs also, all different kinds of fish.

Marguerite Holloway: When did you stop doing the seining?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: When we bought a motor I bought a boat and a motor and then we started using that. At that time there was no more anchor nets. No more pole nets, you had all anchor after that. I tell you, it was quite an ordeal.

Marguerite Holloway: Were there a lot of other fishermen in Verplanck?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yes. Down by (unclear) the house that's all lit up down here.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The lights when you come in.

Marguerite Holloway: Yes.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That used to be the main (unclear). A guy by the name of Fred Martin. Him and his brother, name was Deacon. They had, oh, my god there was upteen fishermen out of there. At that time there were old time guys that used to fish for, one guy used to have a liquor store or a bar. They fished for him, just to have a drink, so they had drift nets, stuff like that. Oh, I remember all them. One time I wanted to fish so bad, when somebody asked you for a favor, can I have one of your fish. Get out of here you little rat! Okay, we opened the bucket and took a fish anyway. (laughter) and we left \$2 on the top of the thing, that's for your fish. It was quite a thing. I started doing a lot of crabbing now by (unclear) up by the wire and bring home my cutter. I saw one one time, I cut them all out, then during the winter I put them all together. There's about 20 pieces that you had to put together. And then ropes and whatnot and baskets and bait traps and all that stuff you had to make up. In the summer time I'd take them and I'd dip them in tar and that prolongs the algae from growing. All lot of the algae would grow onto them. And it keeps them nice and clean. Other than that, you keep them in about 3 weeks, you had to keep taking them out and cleaning them and put them back. With this thing that I bought you don't need to do that.

Marguerite Holloway: How are the crab doing in the river? Are there lots? Are the population doing well?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: This year there was an overabundance in crabs. I've never seen so many crabs in my life.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It started out slow, didn't it?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, when I first, partly for the heck of it. I wasn't going to do the crab, you know. I just had the knee replaced, besides this thing. Now I'm only out of the hospital say about a month and the crabs started to come. And Charlie says come on, people are calling me everyday for crabs. Even the priest says, when are you going to go. (unclear) crab partner. I'll tell you a little story about that. Well anyway, I got going and the first day, I put six nets off the dock here. Just playing around. I got 6 dozen crabs the next day. Oh, my god, look at this. I put 20 more nets out.

[TIME STAMP 15:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Just out a little more from there and I caught a lot of crabs. I would go home with maybe 10 – 15 dozen a day. If I'd go back out and haul I'd get more. I got so many that I'm not selling them, what's the sense in bringing them in.

Marguerite Holloway: Is there a good market?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Let them stay in their own environment. You know, instead of killing them. But at one time, I used to have my nets off there at Montrose Point. And I used to take the mayor of Buchanan, his name is Webb Pierce. He used to come fish, crabbing with me, helped me haul. Then when he couldn't make it, I called Father Nolan and he'd come with me and he'd help me haul. So (unclear) and they buy the crabs and you've got political crabs and you've got religious crabs. (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Take your pick, which one you want.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We had a lot of fun.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you fish crabs also?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I just give him a hand once in a while, that's all.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah we work together with it. The hardest part is taking them off, taking the nets out of the water towards the end. It's easy putting them on, because you're in a hurry, you can take your time, you put a couple of nets on come back, get more. Then when you want to take them off, you want to take them all off at once. (cross talk) Sixteen nets at a time you try to get 16 on the boat, it's a little rough. So just take 8 or I was going to go for a swim.

Marguerite Holloway: How long were the nets that you

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They're two foot square.

Marguerite Holloway: Two foot square.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Well, exactly 21 inches square. 21 inches high and two foot across. 21 by 24.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It has four throats on it, a middle section on it. Slots cut out of it.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It's got to have a center section like this or you'll never get no crabs. And like a funnel. Here, this the shape. This is the bottom. Then there's a funnel on this end and a funnel on this end, or you could put 4 if you wanted, it's doesn't make a difference. They have what they call a bait trap in the middle. They come in here, they go for the bait but they can't get it. They hang on, sometimes they get some, you feel sorry so you give them some. So then there's a little thing that goes up the over the (unclear) with two holes cut in the top. The crabs hit that and for some reason they always go up.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They always go up to go out, to escape.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They take the bait and once they get up there they can't get out.

Marguerite Holloway: They can't go back the way they came?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They could but they're always going

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They only got (crosstalk) they touch something. As soon as they touch something they go off. Some we never know why they done it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Every time you haul a pot between 95 and 97% of the crabs will be up right at the top.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I was getting 25, 30, 40 crabs at one time. Holy Cow, I can't even lift this thing. (unclear) And other times I was here a couple of years ago and I caught maybe a dozen or two in a day I was lucky. Then I was getting 10, 15 dozen a day. Beautiful. I had so many here I had to bring them back down there. Otherwise they'd die up here. Then when the people would give me the order I'd go down and get them. I'd keep them fresh.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It's a stronger tide we had over here. Where we had them before it's almost like a slack tide at times. But down on this end it's a very strong tide all the time.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: There was a ton of guys.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It's brings more bait in or more food for them.

Marguerite Holloway: They like it.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Then there was a fish house just in from that house I told you was boarded up a Captain McCron (sp?) used to run that. That's where we used to leave all our fish. Gave them to him, he'd weight them all up and he'd send them to the market. Then we'd wait and we'd get our checks from him. It was quite a thing.

Marguerite Holloway: What happened when the ban for bass went into effect? Did that changed everything?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That changed everything. Now I think you can take one, 30 inches. I have some of the brochures on that. What are you going to do with one?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They figure for your own personal consumption that's the way they're going to. If you're taking more than one then you're doing something else with it, you know. If you're taking 20 fish,

15 fish, then they know, you're not going to eat 15 at home. I think one, they only advise you to eat one serving per week if you're going to eat it anyway.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I'll go for one a week. I enjoy them.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you think that the PCB thing was overblown by environmentalists?

[TIME STAMP 20:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I honestly think so. This happened up in Troy. Okay the tide the does carry some down, but it doesn't carry that much. You know, you get all the way down from Troy, now that's quite a ways. And by the time the tide gets that's all settled down into the mud. (crosstalk) I'll tell you, the water is immaculately clean. I'm catching, in my crab net (unclear) like a flounder in my crab net. Fluke, all right. I caught blue fish in my crab net and I even caught a sturgeon.

Marguerite Holloway: Short nose or Atlantic?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: And then they get in that little hole there and then that's it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Was it a snub nosed sturgeon?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, no. He got stuck in there and the crabs started to eat him up. He was pretty well chewed up. It was hard to tell what it was, you could see the tail, I knew it was a sturgeon.

Marguerite Holloway: So the river is much cleaner now than

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Much cleaner, much cleaner. As a matter of fact, as long as you don't have no heavy rains getting runoff that river will stay clean. When you get a lot of rain (unclear) and the saline was way up here with no rain. That's why I think most of the fish were up here (crosstalk) It's real salty the water.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I think it's a hard body of water to keep clean anyway because it's a muddy bottom. If anything else, you know, sand bottom or something else, it's easy to keep them clean but a muddy bottom the big ships go up, they stir it up, anything stirs it up. There's much more traffic on the river now than there was

Vincent Letteri Sr.: When this whole bit started quite a while ago, you know, everytime I pulled my net up you could see oil slick where you're disturbing the bottom. The last couple of years I didn't see it at all. When you pull up and it's the little mud in the bottom short little oil slick on the water.

Marguerite Holloway: Even back during the 1950s also?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No,, no, no, we didn't have it then, it didn't happen then.

Marguerite Holloway: When did it start? When did it become really dirty?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: About 15 years ago, no more than that, more than that. I'm just talking recently since that mud's been settled, that oil's probably way the heck down now. Or whatever it was, the PCBs and whatever. I used to tell the people, Christ, you get more PCBs in a loaf of bread from the plastic than there is in that river.

Marguerite Holloway: There are some fishermen who were fishing for bass anyway. Do you think that that was a fine thing to do? Even after the ban?

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Vincent Letteri Sr.: Do I think it was fine thing to do? Some people had to make a living, you know, and it's a popular fish. And people love to eat them fish. If it's against the law, it's against the law but that's like taking a loaf of bread away from guys that want to eat.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It's also a migratory fish, it doesn't actually stay in this river, it comes here to spawn.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It don't stay here.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: So how much is it going to ingest coming up to spawn and then it goes back out? I think if it does then it's just very minimal.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They had the law here one time to catch the fish it was no good and other years it's all right. How do you figure that? It's the same fish. They don't stay here, they come up to spawn and go back. It's the same thing with the crabs and all the other fish.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I started to say before with the salmon up in Lake Ontario.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They even caught clams, I've caught clams in my net.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They made you buy tags because they were building a hatchery up there and the State was running out of money. They didn't want to finish it. So now they started something where you had to buy a permit and you had to buy the three tags. You could only take three fish. That went on for years and the hatchery was built. They tell you the same thing, don't eat this, don't eat that. But you cut the V in the back bone and cut the fat off the stomach you're fine. That's where 90% of the PCBs are concentrated. They're right in the back bone.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: And in the fat and the skin, you don't eat the skin.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you think if the ban were lifted on bass that a lot more fishermen would start fishing again, or do you think the days of

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Absolutely.

Marguerite Holloway: You do?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Oh, sure.

Marguerite Holloway: Really?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The bass are so thick out there in the spring, you can walk on them. You can actually walk on them. I don't know how many, I can't tell you how many I threw back in. I don't want to get caught with one in the boat. You can keep one, but I've got all kinds of them and it's a shame to throw a dead fish overboard.

[TIME STAMP 25:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: All you're doing, you're fattening the crabs. Why can't you take it home and eat it? There's so many out there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You know the hatchery has been down there for years, right?

Marguerite Holloway: Right.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Are they still working on that?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: As far as I know they are.

Marguerite Holloway: Some of the fishermen were saying that the bass were so thick that it was making no sense at all to even fish for the shad because it was just too much of a waste of time,

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You couldn't get through the bass.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The shad didn't bring any money. The bass they were bringing a few dollars a pound.

Marguerite Holloway: When was the last shad season that you fished?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That I fished?

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Probably 1979 or 1980.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: What's that?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The last time that I commercial fished for shad.

Marguerite Holloway: What made you stop fishing?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: There was no money in it, the shad. We were working for like 25 cents a pound, 30 cents a pound and by the time you (crosstalk) you get gas for your boat, you had to get them down to the city.

Marguerite Holloway: You had to transport them yourself?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Until we found somebody that was going down with a load they'd take ours down. Boxes, you had to have boxes.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: One day we sent 600 pounds down. I sent 600 pounds down in one shot, one haul and that was a long, long time ago. And never got paid for it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Shame on you the first time. (laughter)

Alfreda Letteri.: That's right.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That's what happens when you fish with your own relatives. They take them down, they don't pay you.

Marguerite Holloway.: Who taught you and your brothers to fish?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: My brothers Angelo and Joe and Frank.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: How'd they learn?

Alfreda Letteri: Who taught them?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Oh, oh, Joe and Ang started, we learned it from all the old gents down here. There was all, my god, like you know, the old drunks.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Joe Glenn

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Joe Glenn and Ritchie Ryan and all those guys. They used to tell us to come on out. We used to be buoy boys. So instead of being a buoy boy for them, we went and did it ourselves. So Joe and Ang were doing it and then they said, why don't you come in with us.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Tell her, she asked you the question.

Alfreda Letteri: I don't want to interrupt him talk to her Jim.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I'm only interpreting.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He says to us once, why don't you come with us, we did. And that's when the Letteri's went together.

Alfreda Letteri: Arguments?

Marguerite Holloway: Arguments between the four brothers? Over what?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Over this is half full or half empty.

Alfreda Letteri: This fish is this big, this fish is this big, this fish weighs this.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It's kinda tough, you're trying to row a boat against the wind. He'd say move that way. I'd say, I can't I'm try to get that way. Well, get it over there!

Alfreda Letteri: But then they'd be friends the next

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: It wasn't serious fighting.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We'd have a glass of wine and that's it. We done pretty good today, yeah yeah (unclear)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: He lives right around the corner, in the white house, they're all born over there. They used to make 500, 600 gallons of wine.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: And then some.

Alfreda Letteri: 20 barrels of wine

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That's about 800 gallons. And all these guys he's talking about, Ritchie Ryan and Joe Glenn they used to come over

Vincent Letteri Sr.: A lot of old timers.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I used to serve them. I used to get a water glass of time for a quarter. They used to sell wine out of the house there. They used to go there for the wine.

Marguerite Holloway: You had very close access to the fishermen. (laughter) I can't help it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The IRS will come and get you, bootlegging.

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Marguerite Holloway: They don't have access to these tapes. Where there lots of other fishermen that stopped fishing at about the same time that you did in 1980? Because the price of shad was so low?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I don't think that many did because like Jim Carey and Charlie White and a couple of his companion.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Cal Greenburg, that's the guy I'm thinking about. Have you?

Marguerite Holloway: Yes, I've interviewed him.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I couldn't think of his name.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That was the only thing they did. They didn't have anything else to do. A lot of them were retired. And they fished and crabbed and so for them it didn't make any money, it was a past time, really. They made minimal amount but they didn't need that much.

Marguerite Holloway: They didn't drop out.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: No.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They'd go for those big sturgeon, I don't mess with that. I'm all alone, how could I do it. If I had another guy with me then you could do it.

[TIME STAMP 30:00]

Marguerite Holloway: With your brothers did you do sturgeon fishing?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Well, yeah, we did it but then that didn't, the big sturgeon weren't there at the time or we didn't know about it. They were probably there. We used to get a lot of sturgeon, 2 foot, 3 foot, nice ones. I never liked the females, they're too sweet.

Marguerite Holloway: Too soft.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, too soft. I always like the males, the pointy nose, not the round nose. That's the one with the caviar, the round noser. I never did like them.

Afreda Letteri: Do you fish?

Marguerite Holloway: I've gone out and fished with a bunch of different fishermen. But I've never done it commercially on my own.

Alfreda Letteri: No, no, I meant, you just fished?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Any kind, fresh water perch, trout fishing.

Marguerite Holloway: Just shad fishing and sturgeon fishing, that's all.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He does a lot of trout fishing.

Marguerite Holloway: Trout fishing? No I haven't.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I do a little with the fly rod at most of the reservoirs and stuff and the rivers, also some stream fishing.

Marguerite Holloway: There seem to be a lot of fishermen who are going back into doing sturgeon fishing now that there seems to be a big population of Atlantic sturgeon in the river at the moment. I don't know whether it's part of the cleanliness that you're describing or something. But they seem to be here pretty strong (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You haven't got too many fishermen now have you?

Marguerite Holloway: There are about 11 or 15 or so of them

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Because I don't fish no more and this other fella down in Ossining he don't fish no more either, he died. A lot of them.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: But they're still illegal also.

Marguerite Holloway: The sturgeon? The Atlantic?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Well, 4 foot you can get them 4 foot I think they have to be.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah, they have to be. They've just limited the season a year ago.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: 7 foot isn't it.

Marguerite Holloway: I think it's above 4 foot, right?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: And you can only do it for 4 weeks at this point because they started to be very concerned.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: (unclear) 7 foot.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: (unclear) bottom feeder.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Sometimes of course you get a big 18 inch fish. And a lot of them they catch them up high. Caught them, the tide takes that net down like this. But they can't (unclear) you've got the buoys holding it up. That's why we put a lot of extra weight on the crossline. And what we're using now is sash weights that will hold the net down real good. They were using bricks and stuff. A brick would weigh about a pound. (crosstalk) A sash weight goes about 2 or 3 pounds and that holds the net down. As a matter of fact Tucker asked me for 10 sash weights. He gives me a couple of sturgeon. But everytime he gives me a sturgeon he gives me a round noser. I don't want them. He gives me the one he don't want.

Marguerite Holloway: Is there a good market for crab? Can you do well?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: There sure is. I've done very, very good with the cuffers that I've had. Just my own state cuffers. I have more doctors, Filipinos from the VA hospital, they love crabs, they go crazy for them. My god, they buy 5, 6, 7 dozen at a clip. And they come back next week, they try and get some more. There what do they call it in therapy, she wants 4 or 5 dozen every week.

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Vincent Letteri Jr.: We'll sit down and have a couple of feeds during the year. My mom makes them once or twice with spaghetti. It's like going out to dinner, the climax of the year.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You ever had them?

Marguerite Holloway: Yes, I have. I've had them with Bob Gabrielson.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: With the spaghetti?

Marguerite Holloway: Not with spaghetti, no. It sounds wonderful.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: in the sauce.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: She cooks them right in the sauce, the spaghetti sauce.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh, Yum.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I shell them all, and I wash them and clean them beautiful, nice and white. Then she takes and she soaks them again. And then puts them in the sauce, 20 minutes before we're ready to eat, she puts them in the sauce. They're just nice. You ask Bob, you ever see him again?

Marguerite Holloway: I will see him again, yeah.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Well tell him, ask him about me. He's one of the nicest guys going. Him and Hank

[TIME STAMP 35:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I used to kid them all the time. Hey Hank Bob's going to take your share away from you (unclear) Now I don't know whether he sold his share or what he done. It's quite a long time now.

Marguerite Holloway: When you started fishing with your brothers was there a lot of competition for where people staked?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yes, there was a lot of people fishing at the time. Like I told you, these old gents used to they had what they called drift nets. Do you know what it is?

Marguerite Holloway: Yes.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Okay, they'd start up here and they'd just tow the nets out. There wasn't a much traffic as there is today. The river wasn't as busy. They used to tow the drift nets out and drink their beer and what not and be happy, merry old guys and then when it was time they'd haul. As a matter of fact that where a guy got killed out here, got drowned. Gerald McGuire and then the Blakeley boy the (unclear) brothers hit them. Now you notice all the tugs they've got a tower up above so they can see. That happened on Mother's Day. We'd just got home from Massachusetts (unclear).

Vincent Letteri Jr.: When did they start assigning different areas? Like you had an area you could fish.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, they did that at first so one didn't conflict with the other. And you had to be better than 600 feet away from your fishing partner. In other words like you had Area A

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Space.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: When then had the anchor and the stake netsd.

Marguerite Holloway: So I'm confused, they switched from drifting to stake netting?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They would do both. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You were each assigned an area. Now when I applied for a license I tell them Haverstraw Bay and they write the license and that's it. Get put on south of Rondout and coming down and he put me in Haverstraw Bay that's the area that I'm fishing. Now I only put up for two nets and they charge you \$5 a net. So \$5, \$5 a foot. So now I'm down to one net where I'm just basically I'm looking for bunkers now for bait. I get the occasional little striper (unclear) and I try to squeeze them through and let them got. But a lot of them are dead, you know, you can't help it. So sometimes I either try to put them on the bottom, I use them for crabbing. What the hell am I going to do with them? They've been dead overnight and their gills are white so forget about it and they're starting to smell. If they've got nice clean, red gills then I'll take them home and I'll fry them up. I've had 2 or 3 like that, you know, when you haul the bait net. It's only 2 or 3 inch mesh stretched. (unclear) but bass don't take much to get caught. You caught them on that little gill on their lip. Like a sturgeon, they get caught real easy. Like the sturgeon got them little hooks on the back, you know. And that's what hooks them. We caught some real big bass at the time. We used to call them big cows and they're all ready to spawn. A lot of times we would throw them back in. They're no good, once they spawn they don't weigh nothing. A lot of times we'd us 3 or 4 brothers we'd usually get a big one, just ready to spawn let it go, it would weigh 10, 15, 20 pounds. We caught one weighed 35 pounds one time. Let him go. What the hell am I going to do with it. You can't get nothing for the roe.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you think that the bass population would have really dwindled if the PCB ban had not been put in effect?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I don't know, I think

Marguerite Holloway: It would have been fine?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I don't think there's really that much PCBs in the water now. And I can't see why they can't let them have the fishing.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: No. If they never put a ban on fishing for stripers because of the PCBs do you think a lot of people would have fished for stripers and stripers and stripers and the population would have gone way down?

[TIME STAMP 40:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yes, it would. I tell you, that's the sport fishing, they love that (crosstalk). They love to go for stripers. You know off shore and what not. Not us commercial guys (unclear)

Marguerite Holloway: Do you think they

Vincent Letteri Sr.: But there's so many of them now, my goodness.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you think they will open it up again?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Well, I hope so, I hope they did.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I hope they will but I don't know

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It's going to be too late in the season for us, we're getting older now and what good is it?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I don't know if they'll open it full force like they had before. There might be restrictions. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I doubt it.

Marguerite Holloway: I was glad to hear what you said about being sure that there would be a lot of fishermen that would come into the fishery if they opened it again. Because a lot of people seem to feel sort of pessimistic like sort of the heyday has passed.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, if they ever opened that again, no, you know what they're going to do if they ever open that up? You've have trawlers out there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That's one thing that might happen.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That's what they're afraid is going to happen. There's so many, the trawlers would clean the river out.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Then it would devastate the bass population. They only way they could do it was not even let them in with trawlers.

Marguerite Holloway: Right, and maintain the kind of traditional fishery that you guys

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The bass population would go way down to nothing.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It'll take years for it to come back.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: But the trawlers will clean up. That's what's going to happen. Not us small guys. The big guys with the big gigantic nets that would clean that up in no time. Especially with the price going to \$2, \$3 a pound. So that's something they're probably thinking about also.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You know with the trawlers they take everything. They kill the sturgeon and everything.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You put 2, 3 trawlers out there forget about it. Once they open it up if one guy goes out there, 2, 3 guys go out there even more. Like if you had for clams, lobsters all those sorts of things like that.

Marguerite Holloway: Would you go back into it if they opened the bass?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah, I would.

Marguerite Holloway: You would?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, they've got the equipment, they can do it.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you miss fishing?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: To a certain extent I do. It's a nice extra buck, subsidize income. It's a sport too. I enjoy fishing, period.

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, me too. I always enjoy doing it. Not so much for the money, but I get a kick out of doing it.

Marguerite Holloway: How old were you when he started to teach you?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I was probably around between 12 and 14 when I started?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I can remember skinning the poles with the hand drawn knife. And like you said going out with the poles on the two boats. Setting them up with a rope around it (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He used to sit on a pole. He'd put a thing across there like this. And tie it to the pole (crosstalk) and he used to take on there and jump it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Jump on it (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The pole is about 10 feet over your head. And he'd jump it down until it was almost in the water. Then he had to take and move the pole up more. Then jump it again to get it down in the mud.

Marguerite Holloway: How much Angelo weigh?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: He was probably 100 and, he was short, 180, 200 pounds.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Coop?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: And so you just used two of the regular fishing boats and then

Vincent Letteri Sr.: When we put these things the poles in you had to do it off a raft.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Pull them out with a raft.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It's a big raft with a groove cut in it, with a groove cut in like this (crosstalk) and we'd get the pole in that slot with a rope across this way. So when we go to push up is hit the rope and go up, you know what I mean? Then under the raft you have an anchor way out that way, one out this way. And you pull it the way you want it to adjust it. After we got that one, we'd slack off on that one and pull on this one and move yourself out.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh, cool

Vincent Letteri Sr.: It's quite a system.

Marguerite Holloway: Did the other fishermen in the area use the same raft? Is there one that sort of everyone shared? Or?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: How's that?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Did everybody use the same raft, did everybody have their small raft?

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Vincent Letteri Sr.: (laughing) You had to get your own raft. (laughter) You had to get your own. We had to make one up. You know a lot of the fishermen were all for themselves.

[TIME STAMP 45:00]

Marguerite Holloway: Where did you get the poles?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: In the woods.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: In the woods.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: There were all different woods. They had to be 60, 70 feet and only about 4 or 5 inches in diameter. Something light. Mostly used maple. You couldn't use (unclear) it would break. Maple or hickory. That's what it was. The hickory will bend. And sometimes the maple would snap if you hit it just right. Then we had to take them home and take all the skin off. We used draw knives. Then we'd have to sand all the knots. Sand them smooth as silk or the least little thing the net will get caught on it. It will hang it right up and the fish will go right underneath it.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you store them in the water during the winter?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The poles or the?

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah, the poles.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: No we pulled them out.

Marguerite Holloway: You pulled them out.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Then you have to take them, put them in the water, leave them soak. Let them get water logged. Otherwise they'll pop right out.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: But at the end of the season you pull the poles out.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You tie them all together and you put [several seconds of silence, blank tape]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Where do you live at?

Marguerite Holloway: In Manhattan on the Upper West Side. 100th Street and Riverside Drive. It's right off the West Side Highway.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Holy cow. You've got to drive down there.

Marguerite Holloway: It's only about 45, I mean if I hadn't gotten lost it would have only been 45 minutes.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No traffic.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah, and a map.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You couldn't find Verplanck on a map could you?

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Marguerite Holloway: I found Verplanck but I went through Buchanan on down to Montrose and had to turn around and come back. I'd gotten on, I was on 9 and got onto 9A and I usually come the other way on 9A so everything was backwards. I probably would have gotten lost even if I had come the other way.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That's about the size of it. This year, when I went to haul my nets I could see the crabs coming out of the water. I'm pulling the pot, about 2 foot down, I can see the crabs, that's how clear it was.

Marguerite Holloway: So who do you hold responsible for the cleaning up of the river?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Who do I hold responsible?

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah, who is responsible?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I thought the federal government was going to do something on that. Weren't they allocated 20 million dollars at one time? Back in 1979? From the Hudson Bay all the way up to Troy or somewhere's along the line. They were supposed to dredge it all. Whatever happened to the money?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I would say

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Somebody needed a pack of cigarettes.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Didn't GE blew most of it? Then I would say they're too lenient with them.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I think the government was going to give them 20 million.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They're very lenient with them. Give you a \$2000 fine for what. They did it, the river should be clean until it's acceptable and they should pay the whole cost. Whether it's GE or from Love Canal up in Niagara Falls or some other outfit that dumped mercury or whatever else in the river. They knew what they were doing. They knew they couldn't get rid of the waste. They dumped it in the river. I'm sure their scientists knew what long term effects were going to happen.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: (Unclear.)

Alfreda Letteri: Yeah, I know.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: And I think they should be totally responsible for the whole thing.

Marguerite Holloway: So you think it was good that people were protected from the PCBs in someways. I mean, GE should have cleaned up but since they didn't, did it make sense for the environmental organizations in the state to close, to try and protect people? Or

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Oh sure, sure.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They knew this was happening, why did they let it go so long?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They're not protecting

[TIME STAMP 50:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They should have nipped it right in the bud.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Not only protecting the people but protecting the whole ecosystem. I mean it goes right on down the food chain once one thing starts dying the plankton and everything else starts dying the fish start dying the water starts dying and where are you left. They knew what they were doing. And they still know what they're doing and they're still doing it.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you see a lot of dumping?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I don't see it personally, you know I can watch the Discovery Channel or something they talk about some of the cruise lines throwing their garbage overboard, throwing their bottles overboard. When the tankers washing out going up the river. It still goes on.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah they dump they take the water down to Florida or where ever they're going. For ballast, they want it for ballast and they're stealing our water.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Look at the Exxon Valdez, what'd they do? How many millions of dollars did they give them? That won't be clean for another 100 years. (crosstalk)

Marguerite Holloway: That was very sad too because when they tried to do clean up they just made things worse because that hot water just killed everything that had actually survived the oil spill.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I think I saw just about 6 months ago, 8 months ago that they came up with some micro organism that actually eats the oil. They were experimenting with it and hopefully

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You know, I bet a good thing for that, dump a whole load of sawdust on it.

Marguerite Holloway: On the oil spill?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, and that will suck up the oil and scoop it right up.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: and float

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The wood will float and it would cling to the oil and scap it right up.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Anythings worth a try at that point.

Alfreda Letteri: Why don't you send it in? Send a recipe. (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You laugh but it's a very simple thing that might work.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: If you use it try that.

Alfreda Letteri: We have a friend and every time he wanted a recipe for doing green tomatos or peppers or whatever preserving them you know. He'd call me and say "Freda" and I'd say "Yeah" "I'm calling you for my prescription." He could never remember recipe he would always say prescription.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Ask some more questions.

Marguerite Holloway: I want to know, when did you start. So you started learning when you were 12 and 14 and then you started fishing full time during the shad season after then? You were like 14, 15?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I fished the shad season and basically that was it, just the shad season. And then I did some crabbing with him and then it just wasn't worth it anymore. The markets flooded and the prices fell right out of the bottom. I just didn't do it anymore.

Marguerite Holloway: So you guys always worked together doing this?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, I had 600 feet of net down in one place, down by Croton. It wasn't deep, it was nice, but I was getting a lot of bass down there, my goodness. I had to leave it all, dump them and come back and get another load. That's how plentiful they were.

Marguerite Holloway: Were the game wardens watching this area very closely because of Tucker's activities? Did it get troublesome? (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: (unclear)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: They were around quite often.

Marguerite Holloway: They were? (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He can get them anytime he wants them.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah, they were on the river.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you remember any of them in particular?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Cook

Marguerite Holloway: Cook. And what was he like? What is he like?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I never had

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I never had a run in with him.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No never in my life, only one time he was out checking Tucker and I was hauling my net, the bait net. And I seen him and I didn't have my license on the buoy. My license was at home. I said Holy Shit, he's going to give me hell, you know. But I was afraid if the buoy sinks and something like that you'd lose your license. I have my license in here. At least I had them. I see him, I dropped the net overboard, I thought hell, I'll go home. All at once he made a beeline for me. He was coming. I turned the boat quick and I went out towards Tucker. (laughter)

[TIME STAMP 55:00]

He caught up with me and he says, Hey Vince, how'd you make out. I said I didn't get too damn much, I got a couple of bunkers. Oh, okay, see you later. (Sigh of relief) I couldn't believe it.

Alfreda Letteri: Sweat, sweat, sweat.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Just at that time, that was quite a while ago. Somebody had stole two nets off my brothers Angelo and Joe. And Joe had the fish market out here (unclear) And he used to go out there all the time. And he knew Joe was my brother. So he says to me, how's Joe doing. I said, oh pretty good. He said, okay see you later. Holy Mackerel. (unclear) But I had the license, in fact I've got all the licenses from all the years. Some guy from Texas wanted to know if I had any licenses. He called. What was he doing that for? I wondered. He called all the fishermen, wrote letters, can he have the old license.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: There's people that collect old licenses, old

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I know, but I wasn't going (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It used to be buttons at one time, duck stamps, all that stuff. It's a big collectors item.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Well I have all mine in the top cabinet. But that's the only time I ran into Cook. I have nothing against the man, he seems like a helluva nice guy (unclear) like Tucker does. Like Tucker says, I'll give him \$100, \$500 I don't give a shit what these guys charge me. I made \$1000 that's a bad attitude. He put the books to you and he don't know one of these days he's going to do it.

Marguerite Holloway: Are there other fishermen who have the same attitude as Tucker.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He more or less tried to educate them. (laughter) He got away with it, what the hell, he got away with it, I'll get away with it. (unclear) how the hell he's doing, he's a pretty sick guy. Does he have cancer?

Marguerite Holloway: I don't know.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Somebody told me he did. Skin cancers and see it's sores that weren't healing. I asked what's that, he said sunburn and that's from the sun. He's a good egg though.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you build your own boats?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No I got an aeronautic aluminum.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: No, when you first started.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yes.

Marguerite Holloway: You built them?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We didn't build it, Frank Weezy built the first and I can't tell you I borrowed a pole to go out to haul my net and Pete Smith came with me "Come on, Jim we'll take a ride over across the river we'll have a beer." I said no I've got to get home. Come on I'll tow you over. Holy Jeez he tore the front out of the boat. Ripped the front right out of that boat and now I'm getting flooded. Jeez Crip what am I going to tell Angelo and Joe, they'll kill me, the boat belongs to them. "Aw don't worry about it I'll figure it out when I get home." That's the way he talked he had a bullfrog voice. Don't worry about it! (unclear) What a time.

Marguerite Holloway: What happened? Did your brothers kill you.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The bowsprint wasn't nailed in right and the whole bow got pulled off and the port went flinging like this and the water's come in to me. Holy Jeez, what do I do now?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Get in the back of the boat.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you know Henry Gourdine at all?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Oh, yeah, I spoke to him quite a bit. Henry's a nice guy. He's quite a mechanic. He's good with the needle, very, very good. As a matter of fact, he used to make a lot of net for (unclear). And I suppose if I asked he would do mine. I'm trying to think of, oh Salazo, that's guy, Mr. Salazo who used to fish down in Ossining, but he's passed away. He had a heart attack.

[TIME STAMP 1:00:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: They found him slumped over the boat. Or did he drown? He drowned they couldn't find him. The boat (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Didn't he fall off the boat in the rough weather?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, the boat was still on the poles, tied to the poles and they couldn't find him.

Alfreda Letteri: They found him what, 5, 6 days later.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I tell you what, it can be one of the nastiest rivers.

Marguerite Holloway: How so?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Very quick.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You could be out there hauling within 2 minutes I've seen the sky get dark (crosstalk) and the waves started to come and yo Jim get going. I just through the line over the bow and just as I get in boy it looked like all hell turned loose up there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: (snaps fingers) Like that you be calm (unclear) forget it. Within a minute it'll be right on top of you.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You'll get a little northwest, you're finished. Or a direct south, a south wind, especially the tide going down and the wind blowing up, a south wind blowing up, boy, you were in trouble.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Most times you can just watch it come.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That's why I tell you we used to haul to row the boat, God Almighty was it terrible. Rocked the boat, bouncing up like this. Pull over here, pull over here, move her there. Oh Jeez, come on Ang, give me a break.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Couldn't get the oars in the water.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You couldn't. You caught it wrong, you couldn't get it in the water you almost fall over. Honest to God. It's funny when you think of it but at the time, my god it was just awful. A hard way to fish.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You're talking about at night also, no lights, or a Coleman light or something if you had it.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You had to catch the four hour tide and so maybe it would be like 6:00 tonight, tomorrow it would be 7:00. It's always an hour different, every day. We'd put a brick on the water, we'd mark the tide. And when the tide was just right that's when we'd head out. See the tides up too high it's no good. The tide's just starting down and it's still going strong out there. But when the tide got down to about a foot off the brick then we'd start out, then the tide is on the slack. You had to figure all those things when you're fishing. Otherwise, if you go out there too late, your net is slack and the fish were dumped. See a lot of the fish don't get gilled, they just lay there, the tide holds them in there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The tide holds them in.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: So like bass and sturgeons they get gilled. A shad it won't. Sometimes one of them would get caught, that happens. A lot of them are just laying there and you flip them and they come right out.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever feel really scared out there? Did you ever get trapped out there.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I did once with his brother Joe and we were hauling two different nets. I was out with his brother Joe, Angelo and Coop was out hauling the other net. And we had, we were about halfway through the net and all of a sudden. The wind just came up and Joe was scared, he was really scared. I was popping some bubble gum.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: And when he's scared

Marguerite Holloway: You were popping what?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: I was popping bubble gum. And it started lightening and everything else too. And the lightening was coming I popped a couple of bubbles. "Stop with that goddam gum will you" he said. I was doing it on purpose cuz I knew he was getting scared. He panicked and threw the net over. He threw the net over the back of the boat because he wanted to get out of there. And when he did

Marguerite Holloway: It was anchored?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: He pulled the motor, we had a motor, and pop! Dropped the whole motor. So we had to pull the motor back up on the boat and there we are in the wind, lightening, everything else and you couldn't get it off.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You had to cut it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: So I said, get out of the way, so I got my knife out and I cut. He said don't cut it. I said how are we going to get out of here. You can't get the net off, so I cut the net off the motor. And we started going, he got the motor going, we started going in with the wind. I said, Coops out there, we've got to go get him. What he did was, he faced the bow of the boat into the wind Coop and took the main line and put it over the bow of the boat and it held him, right there. And he crawled up in the bow of the boat and waited the storm out.

Alfredi Letteri: Who did this?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Coop, Uncle Angelo.

Alfredi Letteri: Oh really?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Otherwise, if he didn't have the line over the boat, forget it.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He'd have been gone. It don't take much (crosstalk)

Marguerite Holloway: Why? What would have happened to him if he hadn't had the line over the boat.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Well, if he was back, if his bow wasn't into the wind the waves would have just knocked him right over. That's how rough it got. You can't believe how rough.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You've always got to put the bow into the wind. So she'll ride the waves. If you have it sideways it'll slam you over the back. It'll go in the boat over the back.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Right over the back

[TIME STAMP 1:05:00]

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It's unbelievable, a lot of people don't realize how rough the river can get.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: See the back here, the back of your boat, the stern because it drops down for your motor. And the motor drops because it's a short stem motor. If it's got a long stem motor then you've got a straight wall back there.

Marguerite Holloway: When did you switch from rowing to having the motor?

Alfredi Letteri: When they could afford it.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: You take that question. (laughter) (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We bought Fred Martin's launch and we used to towed the rowboat out. And we tied the launch to the end pole and then we'd all get into the rowboat. And that's where we started rowing from there. Now that's all rowing, no motor on that. Then, after we'd get done hauling then we'd bring it over to the launch. We'd hook up to the launch and bring us in.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: When did you make the change from rowing? Who bought the first motor?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: After we bought the launch from Fred Martin.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: About what year was that?

Alfredi Letteri: 1902 (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Was it a new motor? Second hand motor?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: About 1968.

Marguerite Holloway: 1968?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The time when Gerald died.

Alfredi Letteri: No.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: That's late 1968.

Alfredi Letteri: Earlier than that.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I'm sorry, yeah, yeah, yes, it was 1979 I retired.

Alfredi Letteri: It's got to be about 40 years ago.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: 1979 I retired.

Alfredi Letteri: We're here 39 years and it was before that. Before that, we've been in this house 39 years.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah.

Alfredi Letteri: So it's got to be over 40 years.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, right.

Alfredi Letteri: So it can't be 1968.

Marguerite Holloway: Okay, I'll take 1958. (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Now you've got me all screwed up here.

Marguerite Holloway: So it's been a long time.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: How'd that question go again?

Marguerite Holloway: I was just curious when you had switched from rowing to using a motor on the boat. What year? How far into your fishing career that had been.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: All right.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: It had to be the early 1950s.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, 1955, 1956.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Do you remember the name of the first motor?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: The what?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: The name of the first motor? Evenrude? Johnson?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Evenrude.

Marguerite Holloway: And you and your brothers had two boats or one boat.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We had the launch and the one rowboat. And the one rowboat, it was so bad, we kept corking and corking and putting cotton in it. Then we finally had this guy Weezy make us one. That's the one I tore apart. He made the boat inside of 2 weeks. He made it all out of pine. It was very, very weak. But it served the purpose. Until I damaged it. He put some Rube Goldberg stuff to it. It was really something. So around 1958. See that all comes back after a while.

Marguerite Holloway: Is Weezy still around who built boats?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, no, god no. There must be about 900 gallons of paint on it.

Alfredi Letteri: Jim.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: What?

Alfredi Letteri: She didn't ask you that.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Is the builder of the boats still around?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, he passed away.

Alfredi Letteri: Is that the Mr. Weezy that (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Marie Weezy's father Joe (last name unclear) Frank Weezy, he passed away. Jim (unclear) a whole bunch of them.

Alfredi Letteri: What is the Weezy, the gentleman that's sick now?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: That's Joe, that's a brother to this guy.

Alfredi Letteri: Oh, oh. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: His brother is Frank.

Alfredi Letteri: Okay.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He never built, I don't know what he ever did.

[TIME STAMP 1:10:00]

Vincent Letteri Sr.: So I was glad when that was all over but then we went to the anchor nets. Then I was tickled. No more pushing and shoving and fighting the tide. You went out whenever it was right and you put in nice and easy. No problem at all. Then I got to the point where I was putting my net in all by myself.

Marguerite Holloway: Once you switched to the anchor nets did the other fishermen in Verplanck start doing the same thing? Did they copy the idea?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yes, every one of them. Copycats. They're going to tell you he was the first one.

Marguerite Holloway: Yeah, you just answered the next question. (laughter)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He's going to tell you he was the first one, that was the first one, the other guy was the first one. I'll tell you how it happened. I saw Bobby Gabrielson, because I used to go across the bridge everyday. And I'd look over, I'd see Bob and Bobby were fishing. One time he had a lot of poles, then he had a little bit of poles. Then again I look and he ain't got no poles. Bob, I says, how the heck are you fishing? He told me they're anchor nets. But he uses the pole for the anchor. Which he didn't have to, he used the weights. And then you have to keep a mooring out, a buoy out so you know where the weights are. So right now I've got 6, I've got 8 buoys out there. I never give it a thought. I pulled my boat out so fast I should have gone around the taken the buoys off. Pulled the line up and wrapped them around the line. So instead of, if the ice would come in, the ice would grab ahold and pull them and you know how strong the tide is and move the weights and all. So very fortunate last year there wasn't too much ice and I found them.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Plus with all the traffic on the river the river doesn't freeze solid that much anymore anyway. You get a piece of drifting ice that will go around by it.

Marguerite Holloway: Was there a lot of communication between fishermen at different places in the river? Like you would talk with Gabrielson but would you talk with fishermen further north or down

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We'd (unclear) we'd meet each other.

Marguerite Holloway: You would have big meetings?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, we'd meet, how do you do this, how do you do that

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Local guys, though, right?

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Yeah, yeah.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Local.

Marguerite Holloway: But not the whole, there was no sense of it on the whole river.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No, no, it was, you know amongst ourselves.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Yeah. (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: We'd go down and visit Gabrielson, we'd go down Tucker's and what not and we'd all gather up. But Tucker's very much by himself now. He sits up in his room. Was you up there?

Marguerite Holloway: Yes and with his binoculars and oh yeah.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He says to me. I hauling I says how'd you see me. He got that spyglass there.

Alfreda Letteri: Oh!

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Was it all nice and clean up there when you went up?

Marguerite Holloway: No.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Jesus Christ, what a mess. Did you see pots upstairs?

Marguerite Holloway: I saw just the crab pots. I didn't see eel pots.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: He don't have crab pots, he's got all eel pots up there. I was up there the other day, oh, god, the dog had the paper all over the place.

Alfredi Letteri: Jim.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you want me to turn it off?

Alfredi Letteri: No.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: Don't put that in the paper, don't put it in the book my god. We went right into crabbing after that.

Vincent Letteri Jr.: (unclear)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: No I don't bother with the bags and stuff no more. I tell you Vinnie is busy up in the mountains, he has a trailer up there and he spends most of the time up there and he goes fishing for trout. A lot of time he goes for salmon. He can't stay and help me, so I can't do it alone. That's why I don't bother to bait net, there's only one 25, 30 foot net and I use that for just basically crab bait. And then I do my crabbing and that's it. Let's eat.

Alfredi Letteri: It's slowed down some before he had the operation and then last year he was sick too.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever get involved in fishing? No?

Vincent Letteri Jr.: Cooking and eating (crosstalk)

Vincent Letteri Sr.: I couldn't get her out on the water.

AUD_2014_0054 Vincent (Jim) Letteri Sr and Vincent Letteri Jr 1995-12-05. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 5, 1995. Transcribed 2024 by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum

Marguerite Holloway: You don't like the water.

Alfredi Letteri: No.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you mind them fishing?

Alfredi Letteri: No.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: She set the crabs for me though. (unclear)

Alfredi Letteri: (unclear) but that didn't bother me, them fishing.

[TIME STAMP 1:15:00]

Marguerite Holloway: Thank you very much.

Vincent Letteri Sr.: You going to stay for supper?

Marguerite Holloway: No I'm going to start my long, long drive back.

Alfredi Letteri: Where do you have to go?

Marguerite Holloway: I just have to go back to [silence on tape to TIME STAMP 1:23:39]

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