

AUD_2014_0065A Lester Ostoyic – Malden-on-Hudson, New York. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 24, 1991. Transcribed by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum, 2024

Marguerite Holloway: So first of all just introduce yourself so people listening to the tape

Lester Ostoyic: All right. I'm Lester Ostoyic and I'm one of seven out of the family and my father was a commercial shad fisherman all his life.

Marguerite Holloway: And you were born when?

Lester Ostoyic: October 3, 1935 in Malden-on-Hudson.

Marguerite Holloway: And that's where you fished primarily.

Lester Ostoyic: Right.

Marguerite Holloway: Who taught you how to fish?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, my father taught all of us.

Marguerite Holloway: All seven?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: Wow. And who taught him?

Lester Ostoyic: I really don't know. He just picked up himself I guess going to war.

Marguerite Holloway: So that's when he started commercial fishing during the war?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah. Going to war he was the only one allowed on the river

Marguerite Holloway: Why?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know. At that time you needed a permit and nobody had one. He had one from Governor's Island and the Coast Guard.

Marguerite Holloway: Was that for security reasons?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, during war time, like I say he was also an Air Raid Warden and he made sure everybody's lights were out and everything else.

Marguerite Holloway: So what did he catch primarily?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, shad and sturgeon really. You got a few species of other fish like striped bass and you got other things. That wasn't the biggest catches. Shad and sturgeon were the main goal.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you eat fish all year round?

Lester Ostoyic: No at that time the season was March 15 to June 15. We used to live on what we made for the three months plus we did part time plumbing on the side.

Marguerite Holloway: For the rest of the year?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: But you could live primarily off of what you made during the season?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yes.

Marguerite Holloway: Wow. Not today.

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, you could still do it today.

Marguerite Holloway: Really?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh yes.

Marguerite Holloway: I thought that shad

Lester Ostoyic: But you'd have to get into it big, you know. The demand is there.

Marguerite Holloway: How many people were in your operation?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, I would say we had 20 at that time. We had our own boats and everything.

Marguerite Holloway: And you said in the questionnaire that you actually made your own boats?

Lester Ostoyic: Right.

Marguerite Holloway: Wow.

Lester Ostoyic: My father, he was more or less the builder and we were helpers. But we learned it ourselves, picked the trade up ourselves, built all our own boats.

Marguerite Holloway: Did he follow a plan or did he just it according to certifications in his mind.

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know, he had the knowledge to build them. And we did it step by step and we did them. We did sometimes one or two a year.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you have any of them still?

Lester Ostoyic: I have some of the plans still. I have some of the plans. I've built one since then, quite a few years ago. We do all our own.

Marguerite Holloway: How did the shad fishing operation work? Let's talk about that first.

Lester Ostoyic: Well, it was a 24 hour business, day and night. And you more or less went with the moon, the tides. Like I said, you learn the best times to go.

Marguerite Holloway: When was that?

Lester Ostoyic: Well like I said more or less when the tide was done and was starting to come back in. Ebb tide if you want to call it that. You knew when the catch was coming in. You knew the best time, the blossoms. And you went more or less a lot with nature. The blossoms on the apple trees, you knew when the good heavy runs were coming.

Marguerite Holloway: So when the blossoms came out on the apple trees.

Lester Ostoyic: Had a lot to do with it.

Marguerite Holloway: Really!

Lester Ostoyic: Believe it or not, the snow on the mountain top we used to watch.

Marguerite Holloway: What would you watch it for?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, it wasn't really that good. It meant the sturgeon were more or less deeper. They were there all the time but they were always deeper. They were more a bottom fish.

Marguerite Holloway: So when the snow was gone then you would go after the sturgeon?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, well we were doing it anyway but the catches weren't heavy.

Marguerite Holloway: And the blossoms were for the shad.

Lester Ostoyic: Blossoms for the shad, right.

Marguerite Holloway: What kind of technique did you use for shad fishing? What kind of gear?

Lester Ostoyic: Years ago like I said, we were using 600, 700, 800 foot long nets. And they'd have like a ring, an 8 inch ring on the bottom for weight. And every 20 feet. Then opposite that would be a float which we call a buoy, a cork buoy or a wood buoy, made them yourself. Then you'd throw the ring one way and the float the other way. When the net sunk it would stand straight up and down. With the tide there would be a little curve in the net but that's how you would catch them, you get them with the tide against the fish. A lot of times we'd fill the boat up.

[TIME STAMP 5:00]

Lester Ostoyic: we had to go ashore on the other side to level it off to get back.

Marguerite Holloway: In the years that you were fishing did you see the population of shad go up or go down?

Lester Ostoyic: When we started to get out of it, it was going down.

Marguerite Holloway: When was that?

Lester Ostoyic: I'm going back in the 1960s.

Marguerite Holloway: When was it best?

Lester Ostoyic: Well the 1940s and 1950s were the highest. The 1950s were really at its peak. Then the river started to get polluted, a lot of oil.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you remember how much you would get for a shad?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, we used to get anywhere from 2, 2 and a half to 3 dollars for a roe shad, which is the female. And we'd get 80 cents to a dollar to a dollar and a quarter for a buck, which is the male.

Marguerite Holloway: You would supply the A&P? I didn't know that the A&P sold shad.

Lester Ostoyic: Oh sure, we used to take care of the warehouse on Fuller Road in Albany at that time. We also had all the stores from Hudson, Rhinebeck, Kingston had two stores, Saugerties. We supplied all the stores even in Catskill.

Marguerite Holloway: That's amazing.

Lester Ostoyic: You couldn't supply them enough. You couldn't get enough. Private sales, we sold a lot of private sales, a lot of peddlers.

Marguerite Holloway: And so you had no direct competition, right?

Lester Ostoyic: We were buying shad off our competitors that fished down the docks from us. We were even buying their shad. So we did good.

Marguerite Holloway: You did very well.

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you remember how much you'd make on a season or how many fish?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know off hand. I do have records of it somewhere. I'd have to dig them out. They're probably up in the attic. At least I did have anyway.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you father, did he like fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh yeah, we all did.

Marguerite Holloway: So were you eager to get out on the river when you were little?

Lester Ostoyic: Yes. In fact I've fished since I've been 11.

Marguerite Holloway: Since you were 11?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, at the age of 10, 12, 14 in them days you were a good oarsman you were as good as any of them today. Because that was your livelihood.

Marguerite Holloway: So that's what you did?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, I can remember my father writing notes for me to keep me home from school. Write notes to the principal of the school Larry Keough and said he'd kept me home. We told the truth, we never lied. He kept us home to help him take the fish to Albany and everything. I remember Mr. Keough saying would your father come down and do your tests for you. I said yes, if you'd let him. (laughter) But they were good people.

Marguerite Holloway: So how long did you stay out of school?

Lester Ostoyic: Sometimes 2 or 3 days a week.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever take the whole season off?

Lester Ostoyic: No, we didn't dare do that. Our education meant a lot too. My mother made sure of that.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you're mother like you fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: She was one of the best menders. When you go down with the shad net and sturgeon net in the spring we used to fish the bottom. A lot of times you'd tear a net, sometimes the tugs would

go through it and tear it in half. She was one of the best, better than the men or any of the fishermen along the Hudson Valley, I've gotta say that. She could mend a net in a day or two.

Marguerite Holloway: Where did she learn?

Lester Ostoyic: From my father, but she would up better than my father, faster. She was terrific, you couldn't beat her. In fact in the winter time, like now, when we lived down by the docks, she'd have a big nail in the corner of the wall. And you'd tie your net up and do it in four foot sections. And she'd ruffle it through her hands and her legs after supper and she'd sit there mending it with needles going through that. She'd have all the nets would be in shape when it come March. I've never seen a lady do that really, but she was the best.

Marguerite Holloway: I've never heard of that.

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, she was.

Marguerite Holloway: Did she get involved in other aspects?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh yeah, she'd rack the net up as we called it when you come off the boat, they're all in a big heap with the fish. She'd rack it right up. We'd just dump the trays, just like husky as a man, you know, but she'd rack them up with us, set the nets ready for the next drift. She participated in almost everything except going out on the water.

Marguerite Holloway: Did she ever do that?

Lester Ostoyic: No she never cared for the river. But she did everything else.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you have any sisters?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, there's four boys and three girls. There were 7 of us.

Marguerite Holloway: And did your sisters like fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, some of them participated

[TIME STAMP 10:00]

Lester Ostoyic: in. We had one there that lives in Kingston today she never really cared for it. Her husband did, he worked with us. But she never really got into. She'd come down and watch us, but she never got involved with it. It just wasn't her style.

Marguerite Holloway: Even the mending part of it?

Lester Ostoyic: No, she never got into it. She'd eat them and everything else, no problem with that. She didn't want to dirty her hands. (laughter)

Marguerite Holloway: What about your wife?

Lester Ostoyic: I wasn't married until 1954. She'd come down and she participated and that but not like the rest of the family. This was new to her. She stuck by me though. Brought lunches down, brought hot coffee down. She was more or less just like my mother, she took care of all of use when my mother wasn't there. In fact I always said she was the better half.

Marguerite Holloway: When you went sturgeon fishing what time of year was that?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, as soon as it opened, March 15. If the ice was out of the river, we were ready to go.

Marguerite Holloway: And how do you fish for sturgeon?

Lester Ostoyic: You use the same type of net, only you'd fish bottom instead of more or less the middle or the top of the water. We fished down the bottom. What we called ebb tide. You'd wait for the last half hour to an hour of upwater. So when the river comes to its ebb it stops. What we called slack tide. Then your nets would be dropped to the bottom and that last half hour you're scraping the bottom of the river. And we knew our bottoms, we knew the depths, we knew if there were any trees, any hooks, anything. We knew the bottom as good as the top. We used to fish the whole bottom that last hour and you'd pick up everything that was there.

Marguerite Holloway: So the net would actually move

Lester Ostoyic: Drag along the bottom. The net would actually go with the tide that last hour. But it's slower, it's not a swift tide. You might just barely move along but you could see your buoys every once in a while going down, you knew they were hooking on whether it was fish or a drag on the bottom sometimes trees will tear your net up. But we knew the bottom so we didn't have to worry.

Marguerite Holloway: And this was all right around Malden?

Lester Ostoyic: Actually its across what we call the Little Channel over by the Dominican Sisters and Clermont State Park. It would be the east side of the river.

Marguerite Holloway: So you would also put the rings on the sturgeon net?

Lester Ostoyic: Same thing, same set up

Marguerite Holloway: Same mesh

Lester Ostoyic: Yes, 4 inch mesh.

Marguerite Holloway: And you caught Atlantic or short nose?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, we caught all of them. They had what we called the Atlantic sturgeon, you had the short nose sturgeon which we call pelican which is a sturgeon.

Marguerite Holloway: Why'd they call it pelican?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know, it's just a name you pick up from the old timers. As time passes it's handed down and you right along with it.

Marguerite Holloway: Was one better than the other in terms of market?

Lester Ostoyic: Not really, they're all the same family. Just a little different style, like one would have a straight rib across the back, the other one would have a sharp fin. You could actually cut your hand on it. And what we called the sea sturgeon.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you sell the meat

AUD_2014_0065A Lester Ostoyic – Malden-on-Hudson, New York. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 24, 1991. Transcribed by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum, 2024

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yeah, we used to smoke it. My father taught us that also. We had our own smokehouse. And you couldn't get enough of it.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you sell that to the A&P also?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, but a lot of it went to your locals like politicians, Judge Moon in Catskill used to take all we could smoke. He'd be mad if we sold it to somebody else. Back in that time it was \$4 a pound so you can imagine what that money was in the 1950s. But he would take every bit you could get.

Marguerite Holloway: And who is this?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, he's passed away, Judge Moon used to be his name in Catskill. And there were other customers like that. Even the game wardens used to come down and buy it.

Marguerite Holloway: Were there other fishermen around here who fished for sturgeon?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yeah, sure.

Marguerite Holloway: How did you prepare the eggs or did you?

Lester Ostoyic: Those we, the caviar we sent to Fulton Fish Market in cans. We'd strain them, and do all the processing and ship them down there.

Marguerite Holloway: What was the process?

Lester Ostoyic: It's a regular screen, just like a window screen and you run it back through slow with your hands to get all the slime that protects the eggs.

[TIME STAMP 15:00]

Well, all that would be taken out of it so the little black BBs were just caviar. It would go through the screen, that's the only thing you would have, all clean. And then you'd pack them. We used to have Karo Syrup cans, gallon cans. Then we'd ship them and tie them all up and label them and ship them out to the post office and they'd go to Fulton Fish Market.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you have to salt them at all?

Lester Ostoyic: No, they'd be there the next day so they would take care of them. Then you'd get your check in the following 10 days or so you'd have a check in the mail. It was an honor system. We never had a problem.

Marguerite Holloway: Who did you send it to in Fulton?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't recall the names. But that's where it went, directly to Fulton Fish Market.

Marguerite Holloway: And this was again both kinds of sturgeon?

Lester Ostoyic: No just the sturgeon which is caviar.

Marguerite Holloway: The short nose and the Atlantic?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, right.

Marguerite Holloway: How much would you make for the eggs?

Lester Ostoyic: If I can recall that was around \$6, \$6.50 a pound. Which was big money back in them days.

Marguerite Holloway: So do you know how many sturgeon you would catch in a season?

Lester Ostoyic: We were catching a couple of thousand. It was nothing to get 150 in a drift.

Marguerite Holloway: Really?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah. And there's some big ones we never got. You could tell when you had a big one because he would take, see there's 20 feet between buoys and you'd see 8, 10 buoys got right down quick. And all of a sudden come up and go again. And first thing you'd know they'd jump up flat and lay on the water for a minute. Well, you know he'd made a big hole and went right on thru. But the guys below us have gotten, we've gotten some big ones, you know but the guys below us have gotten 200 and 300 pounders.

Marguerite Holloway: What was the biggest one you've caught?

Lester Ostoyic: I think it was 126 something like that.

Marguerite Holloway: How many people does it take to pull in.

Lester Ostoyic: Just the two of us. There would only be two guys in the boat, sometimes three but very rare.

Marguerite Holloway: And how many boats would go out?

Lester Ostoyic: When I was a kid you had go out an hour early to get a drift into the river. Because you had to go up more or less, it was an honor system again. You've got to wait your turn. Whoever got to the stake first, we had stakes on each end, low tide or high tide. You'd go over with your boat, waiting for the right tide. If there were three boats ahead of you you had to wait for them to go in and get a certain distance down, say 500 feet. And then another boat would throw in and as he's drifting away, you'd wait another 500 feet and the third guy would go. That's the way it went.

Marguerite Holloway: So it was like a staggered system?

Lester Ostoyic: Right.

Marguerite Holloway: Would anyone miss the slack because of that?

Lester Ostoyic: No but once in a while what we used to call some of the old timers, I mean when I was you, these guys were in their 60s and 70s they'd plug you. They'd go in between two of you. It wasn't a written law, but it was a no-no. Later on they'd come back, in fact they'd wind up sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less than you did and you wouldn't have as much. But they'd get in a dispute and they'd holler at one another. But fishermen's language, you know. It was good times.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you remember the names of any of these old timers?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, sure, at lot of them. Most of them, I think almost all of them are gone.

Marguerite Holloway: Are there any that are still living that you can think of?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah there's a few. In fact I admired every one of them. I learned a lot of knowledge between my father and the other old timers. In between all of them you come out with the best knowledge you can possibly get. I got one today, a very good close friend of mine, I admire him, is Albert Cutler. He still lives in Malden.

Marguerite Holloway: How old is he?

Lester Ostoyic: Albert's gotta be late 70s maybe early 80s.

Marguerite Holloway: What did he teach you?

Lester Ostoyic: Well like I said, different knowledge, everybody has a different system and you pick up little bits and pieces that you don't use, that you didn't have of your own. Everybody had a little different style. You like some of theirs better. You more or less adopted all of them, put them together.

Marguerite Holloway: Can you give me some examples of how you made your own special system out of

Lester Ostoyic: Well, I tell you, like with Albert Cutler, he was the first one to my knowledge anyway, he was the first one that had a well in the boat. Now what I call a well in the boat, we always put our motors on the back. And then you've have the tray, you'd slide it up to the front. One guy would sit in the front, the other guy in the back would run the motor and go across the river. There's a lot of work involved, especially if you've got rough water, you could easily fall over. Well he's the first one, what we call a well

[TIME STAMP 20:00]

Lester Ostoyic: He would cut a 6", 8" trough up through the center of the boat and have your sides come up like that and he'd have the back tray like this here. And the motor would set right in front of the guy in the back. The tray would stay like this here and you'd never have to move it. You put your net on the back and the motor would set inside the boat, the well, the water comes right through the well. You set the motor down in, you get started and away you go. You could even put your net out by yourself, one man operation. So we shut it off, one guy would row while the other guy threw the net out. And he was the first one that I can recall in our area that had one with a well in it.

Marguerite Holloway: Did he build it himself?

Lester Ostoyic: I would have to say he did.

Marguerite Holloway: That's great, that's very ingenious. So did your family then

Lester Ostoyic: Everybody eventually went to it, adopted it. Everybody more or less built their own boats. And they all went to the wells. And that's back in the late 1940s.

Marguerite Holloway: Is it harder to build a boat with a well?

Lester Ostoyic: No, I like it better. It's more convenient for anything, duck hunting or anything.

Marguerite Holloway: Why is it more conven – oh because

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, you leave the motor right there. You don't even take it off the boat when you come back in or anything.

Marguerite Holloway: Before there were wells in the boats was the front of the boat made sort of flatter or straighter so it was easier to

Lester Ostoyic: No, ours, one end was right to the point bow and the other one was square. In fact, I've got pictures that I can show you. And before that you used to, like I said, slide the tray down, slide it half way up the boat and then the one guy would get in the front end and the other guy in the back and run the motor. And when you got to the other side, you had to take the motor off. You'd pick it up and lean it over a lot of times guys have fell overboard with motor and all.

Marguerite Holloway: Why did they have to move the motor?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, you have to slide the tray back, when you're rowing the net out, the net has to go off the back of the boat. The rings go one way, like I said and the floats the other. After you're done, you can put the motor back on if you want. We never did. You'd row back to the other end and one end of the net you would pull and go along with the tide. But then when you were done picking up the same way, the guy stands up on that platform a lot of times if the guy ain't steady with them oars, like when you're going up and down waves, calm water's okay. If you jerk a little bit and this guy loses his balance, he ends up in the net. It's happened many times.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh my god. Have people lost their lives doing that?

Lester Ostoyic: No, not really because you're fast, your partner's always with you. But it's cold in the spring. Before you got back you got pants that were all iced up. You were cold.

Marguerite Holloway: When you fell in did you immediately take the person back to shore or did you keep fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: No you'd get him out and get him back in the boat and he'd be back up there pulling that net again to get it in. Because you've got to get it in and get out of there. Because you only had so much distance before you ran into the shoals. So you had to more or less work with the tide and time.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever fall in?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yes, many times. (laughter) Yes I have. I'd like to have a dollar everytime I've been in. I don't know anyone who hasn't fallen in. We all went through it.

Marguerite Holloway: So, because you're sliding the tray back you have to get the motor out of the way and that's why you have to lift it up. I see. And then you hold one end of the line while the net is drifting?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah. You more or less what we call tow. It's not even the size of that candle there. Maybe the size of a pencil is your tow line which licensed buoy was on that buoy all the while. So if you threw it over and you had to go to the other end of the net to pull up from the bottom or something. The licensed buoy was always on your net. So anyway, you'd tow with that. More or less, your net would come along with the tide after your rowed it out like that in an arc. And then it would come around like

that. And you would hold on that and make sure it didn't straighten out. You're more or less sweeping up along the shoals to keep that net in a hook all the time. We'd hang on that one end.

Marguerite Holloway: So it would curve so the fish go

Lester Ostoyic: So as you're sweeping you're sweeping everything you can possibly get.

Marguerite Holloway: How many people would be on the river at that same time? How many other operations?

Lester Ostoyic: I've seen numerous of them. I mean, you're talking 8, 10, 12, 15 boats at a time on big channel and little channel both. It was a way of life in those days.

Marguerite Holloway: Were there certain areas that except for the sturgeon fishing where you would stagger it? Did you also do that with shad fishing? Or were there certain areas that your family's and people sort of knew?

Lester Ostoyic: No, it was open to everybody. Like I said, there was no disputes over, there was only so much areas you could fish. And like I said, you had to take your turn. You had to make sure to get out otherwise someone would be ahead of you. You'd have to wait a half an hour for them to get by.

[TIME STAMP 25:00]

Lester Ostoyic: It was just a way of life and everybody enjoyed, everybody knew everybody.

Marguerite Holloway: Were there any very famous characters on the river?

Lester Ostoyic: When you say characters now what do you mean?

Marguerite Holloway: People who were known for doing sort of remarkable things or who were known for doing strange things?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know, on the river, I can remember Poultney Bigelow if that name rings a bell with you. The Bigelow family.

Marguerite Holloway: Bigelow, yes.

Lester Ostoyic: Poultney Bigelow was my neighbor, he lived right behind me. And he'd come down in the morning and he'd yodel and he had these old wooden Dutch Holland shoes. But that's what he wore, coming down the road in those. You wouldn't believe what a gentleman he was. I remember when Kaiser Wilhelm and them used to come over and visit him and everything.

Marguerite Holloway: Really?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yes. I don't remember his father before him but I know Poultney passed away I think at 96 and his father was somewhere in the same vicinity. They're buried in Malden.

Marguerite Holloway: Are there any of the Bigelows still around?

Lester Ostoyic: The last I knew, I'm going back 7, 8 years ago. The sister was still alive in New York City somewhere. Because I remember reading an article on her. She was still active.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you remember where the article was?

Lester Ostoyic: It seems to me I clipped it out but I'd have to look and dig, you know. Because this really, the history is really my, I don't know what you'd say, I love history anyway. The Hudson Valley, all the way to New York City. Because everytime I'd see anything on shad fishing or sturgeon I always clip it out. I've got news clippings from all over.

Marguerite Holloway: That's great.

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, because I don't know anybody you could really talk to outside of Albert. I know that's alive anymore down here. All the ones across the river that I used to know have all passed away. My father, and all the older guys have gone.

Marguerite Holloway: Did younger people come in and want to learn?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, there's guys like myself, we're all crowding 60 ourselves now. But we went to school at that time with the Huttons and that. They were always good at it. But they worked at the cement plant today and they're ready to retire. But I'm sure they all miss it.

Marguerite Holloway: It's not something that you can learn from a book or from ready, you have to be out there.

Lester Ostoyic: No, you'd have to actually get out and do it. If you did it. If you like fishing. I mean like I said, you have to like the sport to begin with. If you like fishing you would enjoy it, you'd pick it up quick. There isn't that much too it, you know. The hardest end is your mending and you're simming and stuff like that there when you tear holes. That's your hardest part. And then of course you have to watch the tide and the weather and all that. Because that means a lot. My wife, when we first got married she used to laugh at me when I lived in town. And we'd watch the clouds and it would get real black over here. And she said you going out? I said No because we're only two miles from Saugerties now. I'm going to watch that. My father used to break us in and show us. We'd sit there we wouldn't through the net in because we knew it was going to get rough. It would be solid black in the north. I of course when we were kids we were always asking. And he said, don't look good. So I kept watching, I'd more or less look up at him and see what he's watching, you know. And you'd ask him. He said always look for a light lining behind it, which would be further north, would be like toward Albany. If you don't get that light underneath that dark cloud, you should be careful. You're going to get some strong winds, you could get a tornado, anything. So we'd wait and we'd wait and sometimes it would be an hour. And he said, no, we're going to be all right. He said you're going to get some strong winds in the beginning, it'll be like a blowover storm maybe a half an hour, an hour had gone. So we'd go on in, because he could see the light below, it was more or less just a storm passing through.

Marguerite Holloway: So then you could go in and take up the net.

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, we knew what to do then. And he passed that down. I used to tell my wife when we used to go out on the back porch when we lived in town. She'd say, come here, she said, don't look good. So I taught her. At first she laughed but she knew what I was talking about. And it would happen. I'd tell her when the wind was going to change, it was going to change to a north wind.

Marguerite Holloway: How could you tell that?

Lester Ostoyic: All by the cloud formation. They passed that down. When you get, like I said you've got a clear sky and everything's coming north and building up. While you'd have a light breeze in the south. We knew it was going to change by the storm. And sure enough you'd get either a northeast or a northwest. Most time northwest. But it would breakup and blow over and after the storm it would come out the calm, the river would be like a mirror. But you could do that, you'd learn that. Like I say, from the older guys.

[TIME STAMP 30:00]

Marguerite Holloway: What else can you tell from the sky?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, like I said, the wind mainly, you knew whether it was going to blow hard, or just a normal day. But you picked this up. This was one of your big interests when you're fishing. Because we weren't fair when we were fishing either. Because many times we'd have two guys rowing, just to stay with the net.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you ever get caught totally by surprise out there?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yes, oh yes.

Marguerite Holloway: Sometimes when you can't read.

Lester Ostoyic: Well we seen the storm coming and we always try to hang on, you've only got another 20 minutes we can be through our drift, through the shoals, mainly over on the Little Channel side. But I can remember one year, I don't remember the exact year. Coming out of the south we seen the whitecaps on the water. And my father being older and being more experienced. He said, son, we oughta get out of here. It don't look good down there. So I hung on with him. I said Dad, we've only got a little ways to go. And it was brand new net, first drift that day. We lost it, we couldn't even hang on to the net. We wound up going up on the Germantown side and getting the boat up on off on the rocks and get it out of water. The waves were I would say, 6 or 7 foot high. Which is high for a 16 foot rowboat. We were lucky to get ourselves out. But the net went out, got caught on the bottom. It was a couple of hours, 2 to 3 hours before the storm got over. We were over there until evening. We salvaged some of the net. We found it, caught up with it but it was all tore up. We had half a boat load of fish in it of what we salvaged. But it was a brand new net and like I said they were running 2 – 2 and a half then, which a lot of money.

Marguerite Holloway: They were how much then?

Lester Ostoyic: \$250 then. They used to run \$8 - \$10 a pound for nylon. And that's without the lines on it. You have the top line which is heavy, the bottom line which was fine. Then you have the tie lines in what you would call seminal. You had to put them on after you bought it.

Marguerite Holloway: Those are the lines that run from the main part of the net to the

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, they were the outside of the whole perimeter. You used the heavy line on top with the floats and small line in case you got caught on the bottom it would break rather than pull the whole net down. So that was really your fine line. And the rings were tied to the fine line. And the net was simmed there would be like a V on each one every 4 inches, connecting the net to that line. And then you'd tie it like a hitch.

Marguerite Holloway: Did you experiment with where to place the sims and where to place?

Lester Ostoyic: No, this was all established before. Even before I was born. These shad fishermen had been at it for years.

Marguerite Holloway: So was your mother able to mend that net that got torn?

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yes. She was one of the best.

Marguerite Holloway: What about when you went out at night? How would you be able to read the weather then?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, you just did everything like I said on experience, and you'd listen to the radio as well. You watch the moon if it was out. And the stars. There were different conditions to go by. And you had your flood lights. You took lights with you. You had to have a red lantern with a float that would go on the outside of your net. Especially when you ran the big channels where the commercial traffic is. And we used to go out and wave barges around us and tugs around us. The only thing, if we saw a freighter coming, an ocean going liner, we had to get out immediately. Because they can't move. The channel ain't big enough for everybody. Where tugs and the barges we could get around 90% of the time they'd go around us. Either that, or if they'd go over the top, they would break their engines. They knew us and we knew them. We every tug by the name and numbers and everything. We used to tell them to cut their engines, they'd cut the engines knowing they'd more or less try to float over the top without damage. Sometimes you'd get maybe a couple of feet of damage but 90% of the time they were good. Maybe once in a while you'd get a captain that was stubborn, might have had a drink or two, we don't know. We've had our feuds on the river. I took on the Army Corps of Engineers and everything. I've got it all in the file here.

Marguerite Holloway: What did you take the Army Corps of Engineers?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, I had at different times Russell Brothers Towing was the name of the tugboat company. I took them on one year. They ruined a brand new net. So I had to file a claim against them. Like I said, back in them days it was big money \$60 some. But they thought it was a crime that I had no right there.

[TIME STAMP 35:00]

Marguerite Holloway: So what happened?

Lester Ostoyic: I won. And I also had Moran Towing Company, which is probably the world's largest. They paid.

Marguerite Holloway: Now is this because they knew? They should have stopped?

Lester Ostoyic: They knew it. More or less the captain went through anyway, didn't care. You did get that, but like I said, it was very rare. 90% always tried to work with the fishermen.

Marguerite Holloway: Were some of them fishermen themselves?

Lester Ostoyic: Not to my knowledge. But they knew the river, they were the best in them days. They knew the channel like we did. Like I say, back in them days you took pride. Anybody that did anything like that on the river, you took pride in your job.

Marguerite Holloway: It was a real art, being able to know.

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, yeah. Like I said I've never been on a tug and done it myself but it's really an art to do it. Like I said, it's quite a strain. You've got to steer that channel and you've got to pass other traffic plus the nets. It's quite a thing. And they knew, we used to know at that time, I couldn't tell you today, like short blast on the whistle to the other tug coming south. One would slow up and let the other come on through further so he could get around without us moving our net. Very cooperative, I've got to say that.

Marguerite Holloway: What happened with the Russell Brothers Towing and Moran, when you won the cases. Did they have something out for you in the future or did they?

Lester Ostoyic: No, no, we had other incidents. But we never had cutting nets after that. In fact that's only happened to me twice in my lifetime. Like I said it was rare cases. Other fishermen's had it once or twice. Not even knowing to this day it might have been the same pilot all the time, we don't know. It was rare.

Marguerite Holloway: What would happen with the ocean liners? There was nothing to do?

Lester Ostoyic: There's nowhere he could go, he can't get around. They were so huge they used to even drag bottom up here by the Malden Brickyard. There was only 22 feet of water and when they were loaded coming up, you had to get out because the water sucks when they draw it off the shore and that would go up 10, 12 feet. They'd draw all the water they could get. And they would actually, when you'd watch them go through the shoals they would slow down by the Malden Brickyard because it was so shallow. And you could see the mud picking up from the prop. They were actually scraping bottom. A lot of times we'd read in the paper a year or two sometimes in a row. Maybe one a year you would read in the paper where they'd poked a hole in the bottom. But it wasn't a severe hole where anything leaked out. But you would read that. Since then they've dredged it since I've stopped fishing. In fact they have buoys marked out there and everything.

Marguerite Holloway: How often did ocean liners come up here.

Lester Ostoyic: Oh, everyday, day and night.

Marguerite Holloway: And did you know the schedule?

Lester Ostoyic: No, there was no schedule on them.

Marguerite Holloway: And so you just had to sacrifice the net if it was out there.

Lester Ostoyic: We'd just get right back out of the water. A lot of times you would just throw in. Because you could see all the way to the Saugerties Lighthouse and all the way to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge from where we were fishing. You could see if there were any boats in sight. In fact I could say when you're out in the water you could see almost to Turkey Point there below Glasco across the river. And if there was no ocean liner in sight you'd throw in. But a lot of times you'd throw in one would be hidden beyond the

Saugerties Lighthouse as it's coming up. You wouldn't see it, be in line with it. You'd throw in and you'd see them after you got in, oh, wasted my time. So we'd kill as much time as we could, figuring you know how long it takes to get the net back out of the water. We'd let them get a little bit closer so we'd get at least a half an hour fishing. And then you'd go like the dickens. One guy would row and you'd be picking as fast as you could pick. So we'd get out of there before he reached us.

Marguerite Holloway: How long would it take to get the net out?

Lester Ostoyic: On a thing like that there you could pick it up in 15 minutes. But when it was loaded after drifting all the way it would take you a lot longer than that.

Marguerite Holloway: Once you saw the ocean liner coming around the Saugerties Lighthouse now long

Lester Ostoyic: It would take 20 minutes, you had about 20 minutes to get out of the way.

Marguerite Holloway: And how many feet of net is this?

Lester Ostoyic: They all ran between 600 and 800 foot long. You had some shorter ones, some longer ones. Sometimes when we'd need a lot of fish, we'd put two nets together, tie them together so you'd have two 600 footers, which would give you 1200 feet.

Marguerite Holloway: And still two people

Lester Ostoyic: Two people.

[TIME STAMP 40:00]

Marguerite Holloway: So when you had an ocean liner coming up would you not pick the fish

Lester Ostoyic: You didn't do that, no, very rarely did that. Only on an uptide when it was slow and you knew you had a boatload. The guy picking it up. We would take our time and right along be no rough water. It would be calm days. You'd slide the fish out one by one throw them in the bottom of the boat until you got back tired or sometimes you'd go through the whole net. And you could do the whole net. So when you got ashore all you had to do was wrap the net out itself because the fish was already out. Which was rare, you didn't do that too many times.

Marguerite Holloway: Otherwise you would get back to shore and you would have to pick each fish out.

Lester Ostoyic: What they call rack them up on poles

Marguerite Holloway: Rack them up on poles?

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, you'd have four poles, 20 foot long and about 20 foot wide, there'd be four poles separated. You'd drop the tray more or less, like here's the four poles, you'd drop the tray in the bottom here and then one would be on each corner and one guy on this side and you'd wrap the net. Straighten it out as it's coming through untying knots taking the fish out and throwing them in the boxes. And as each guy was racking it up across the poles to dry.

Marguerite Holloway: Oh, I see, so the poles were in parallel lines.

Lester Ostoyic: This won't interfere with that will it?

Marguerite Holloway: No we just have to describe things so that people who are listening can visualize it.

Lester Ostoyic: There's a guy standing in the tray picking it up. These were all brothers. The tray in the back of the boat. This is at a little channel beside Clermont.

Marguerite Holloway: So the tray is about how many feet long?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, the boat was 4 and a half foot wide so that was probably a 6 foot tray and we had handles cut thru it. Everything was homemade.

Marguerite Holloway: So one man would stand in the tray and would throw the top line

Lester Ostoyic: That's when you threw out. This is when you're picking up. See both lines are together. Actually you're looking at 24 feet of net in that man's hand but it comes in like that you're picking up until you get around a shad. You see a shad coming up and you're picking it up out of the water. And this guy's rowing alongside the net. One guy is rowing alongside so he can keep going right around the back of the boat, keep pulling it in.

Marguerite Holloway: So the guy who's standing in the back of the tray has both lines

Lester Ostoyic: Both coming together. You can see in the picture now, this is up across from Malden there's the Saugerties Lighthouse. What we call the Long Dock all the way the lighthouse is very faint back there. But you could see a long distance. That was a beautiful day there.

Marguerite Holloway: And did it work the same way for sturgeon fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: Yep, same thing. It was pretty much the same operation. The only difference was sturgeon you fished the bottom, shad you could fish anything. Sturgeon was the bottom fish, they was always on the bottom.

Marguerite Holloway: Did the numbers of sturgeon decline over the years?

Lester Ostoyic: In the last few years it has, but I think it's coming back. They say that they're extinct which the DEC claims this, but I dispute that. I could go back out tomorrow and get a bunch.

Marguerite Holloway: So the DEC doesn't know where they're looking? Or?

Lester Ostoyic: I won't say exactly that. Let me see how I can put this now. I know a lot of the biologists that are still with the DEC that are really good, they love their job. And there's the ones that are there just for the check. But the ones I do know are really interested. They've got pride in their job. They agree with me, some of the conservation officers agree with me. Like I said, you've got a percentage that doesn't. You always will have that. But I know they're there. They're not extinct.

Marguerite Holloway: Have you ever helped the DEC find

Lester Ostoyic: Yeah, we used to tag shad for them. If I can recall a Thursday 3:00 was the deadline you had to get out of the water and you couldn't go back in until Saturday night at 6:00. I don't know what the reason for it was but like a Friday you couldn't fish. It was the day of the week that you couldn't fish at all. Well, they used to come down, we used to work with DEC. Of course, it wasn't DEC in them days, they called it Conservation Department. And they used to come down and biologists would work with

us. We'd use our equipment and we'd tag them. They'd put like a stainless steel pin through the back fin underneath the back fin with two little red tabs on each side and they'd have all the information on them. And that's what we did. We used to take, I'd say 4 or 5 times a year.

[TIME STAMP 45:00]

Lester Ostoyic: In fact they used to pay us 10 cents a tag again, that was big money in them days especially on your day off. But we enjoyed it, it was quite a challenge.

Marguerite Holloway: Did they approach you?

Lester Ostoyic: I don't recall at this time. More or less my father set it up. But we all did it. It was handed down.

Marguerite Holloway: Was there any antagonism between the DEC and some of the fishermen?

Lester Ostoyic: Not at that time. Not like it is today. I think they worked a lot closer with the people in the field than they do today. Too much political today.

Marguerite Holloway: When did that start happening?

Lester Ostoyic: You could see it coming in the early 1970s, late 1960s – early 1970s.

Marguerite Holloway: What changed?

Lester Ostoyic: Like I said, politics really. I don't know what you would call it. I call it greed but that's not really the answer, but that is part of it, greed. We knew everybody, we knew the Commission in them days. Everybody knew everybody on a name basis. In fact we used to call for our shad license. A lot of times you'd go to Albany and pick them up direct. They were \$10 a license. And there was a lady up there, we used to call her Mr. Fisherman. She knew the river as good as {blank space on tape}

Marguerite Holloway: She's not still around?

Lester Ostoyic: No, she passed away quite some time ago. Because we used to send her up roses every year. My father started that and I continued the tradition. But she knew everything about the river and we would call her up on the phone. Normally, like today you've got to send your money in with a license application and all that. We'd call her up on the phone and say Julia, you'd tell her who you were, you'd chat a little bit. And say we need three licenses, we'd have the license in the mail the following day without the money or anything. Then you'd send the money in on the following day to her. The honesty was there and like I said, she knew everybody. She knew all the fishermen along the river. But try that today it just doesn't work.

Marguerite Holloway: Why did it change? I mean there are not more fishermen than there were.

Lester Ostoyic: I don't know really, I really couldn't explain that. Like I said, regulations changed. I assume they want it for the better.

Marguerite Holloway: How did the regulations change?

Lester Ostoyic: You couldn't do that today. You'd have to go up direct and there's a lot of bureaucracy today. There's too much paperwork for one thing. The whole world has changed itself. I can show you

AUD_2014_0065A Lester Ostoyic – Malden-on-Hudson, New York. Interviewed by Marguerite Holloway, December 24, 1991. Transcribed by Carla Lesh, Hudson River Maritime Museum, 2024

today, I keep updates on them. I've got Conservation 1 and 2. Well, years ago the whole book for the State of New York was green and about a half inch thick. I can show you today I've got two volumes like that. One is the Fish and Game Law, one is the Environmental Law.

Marguerite Holloway: Each one is 4 inches thick?

Lester Ostoyic: Well, pretty good. And I get the updates every year of all the law changes. I live by them. There's what you're up against right there.

Marguerite Holloway: Wow, they are thick.

Lester Ostoyic: And if it's not there, it's not law. But they used to be a little bit bigger than this for the whole state.

Marguerite Holloway: About a half and inch and now they're each about three inches, wow.

Lester Ostoyic: And like I said, you have to live with it. We've never been arrested in our life or anything. In fact a lot of times I could recite the law to the Conservation Officer because my nose is always in it.

Marguerite Holloway: Were there any fishermen that didn't go according to the rules?

Lester Ostoyic: I think we all did, not just other fishermen, myself included. Sometimes you couldn't take any sturgeon less than 30 inches. Well, if you've got one 26, 28 inches, we all took them. I wouldn't say no everybody, we call that bending the law. Everybody did, it was a way of life. A good one at that, I'll say that.

Marguerite Holloway: When were you last out on the river fishing?

Lester Ostoyic: It's got to be 1971, 1972 somewhere around there. It was in the early 1970s.

Marguerite Holloway: Do you miss it?

Lester Ostoyic: I miss it entirely. My wife knows it too. She knows I want to go back at it.

Marguerite Holloway: What do you miss most about it?

[TIME STAMP 50:00]