Michael Proch: All right. It should be good.

Georgen Charnes: This is Georgen Charnes. I'm here with Michael –

MP: Proch, P-R-O-C-H.

GC: Ty –

Ty Fleishut: Fleishut.

GC: Fleishut of the Nantucket Lighthouse Middle School. It is April 6th?

MP: Seventh.

Henry Wasierski: 7th.

GC: Seventh, Wednesday 2011.

HW: [laughter]

GC: We'll be speaking with Henry Wasierski at his home here in Nantucket. You are an experienced fisherman.

HW: I was.

GC: Retired.

HW: Happily retired [laughter].

GC: We are here to hear about your experiences. Do you understand this interview is going to be available to the general public as part of NOAA's Voices from the Fisheries Project?

HW: That's fine. Yes, ma'am.

GC: Great. Go ahead, kids.

MP: Now, before we really start getting down to the meat of this, what's your full name?

HW: My full name?

MP: Yes.

HW: Henry Wasierski, Jr.

MP: Now, where and when were you born?

HW: Where? Nantucket Island, August 27th, 1935.

MP: Where did you grow up?

HW: Here until the sixth grade on Nantucket. Then seventh grade to twelfth grade in Falmouth. Then graduated from high school out in Wahiawa, Hawaii in 1953.

MP: You were all over the place. What would you like to say is your occupation?

HW: My previous occupation?

MP: Yes.

HW: Fishing. When I fished, there wasn't much money in it [laughter]. It was a lot of fun, but it kept subsistence. It was wasn't too bad. But compared to what happens today, it was totally different in those days. Totally different.

MP: I would imagine.

GC: So, you were a commercial fisherman?

HW: I started commercial quahogging and bay scalloping over in Falmouth in 1961. I was learning plumbing at the same time. So, I did this in the summertime evenings and Saturdays when I wasn't plumbing or what have you. Then I got into other aspects of commercial fishing when I came back here after 1965. So, once I had my plumbing license, I came back here. I used bay scalloping and quahogging as other season. Scalloping during the fall, winter. Then quahogging and what have you during the summertime. So, it was kind of different.

GC: There's a lot of people who do that, I guess. They do both.

HW: It helped. It really helped. I hate to tell you that when I came back and started plumbing, it was only a $1.50 an hour. So, anything that you could make other than that helped the house. So, that's basically what it was all about. The wives were all –

MP: If you don't mind me asking, your name Wasierski, that sounds like a Polish name. Is that true?

HW: My dad. My mom Nantucketer, 1917. She just turned ninety-four.

GC: Oh, what's your mom's name?

HW: Her last name, Appleton.

GC: Appleton.

HW: All this land in here was the Appleton farm. She was born down the end of Mizzenmast here where (Mrs. Broncho?) lives. That was the Appleton farmhouse. That's where she was born.

MP: The Appleton Road isn't too far from here.

HW: No, it's right up next street up from here.

MP: That's very interesting. So, where and when did you first work on a fishing boat?

HW: First commercial fishing boat was probably 1969, 1970 with the Captain Les Eldridge. Went commercial bass fishing with him out of here one spring and stayed with him for, I don't know, three or four years, I guess. Just doing bass, bluefish, scup all by hand. Then it went into tub trawling, which was a long line with hooks set on it. That was for codfish and haddock. Did that out of Chatham. We spent a couple of summers up there fishing out of Chatham. The rest of the time we fished out of here.

MP: What were the different boats you worked on? You've kind of just answered that. Who was the captain, yes, you've kind of said that. What was Charlie Sayle like?

HW: What was Charlie Sayle like?

MP: Yes.

HW: Just like he is today [laughter], young Charlie. I worked for Young Charlie.

GC: Oh, you worked for Junior?

HW: Yes. Because the other one Charlie is the third now. But I knew Mr. Sayle quite a bit from his scrimshawing and his basket work and things like that. I used to stop down at his shop quite a bit and talk with him and just wrap and what have you. But it was his son that I worked with. They owned the fishing company that had the *Sankaty* and the *Nobadeer*. I ended up in the end of the seventies, probably around 1978, ran the *Sankaty* first. Then I took over the *Nobadeer* after that. Fished with them until eighty-two.

MP: So, it sounds like you've been doing this for a long time. Have you ever had any close calls while you were at sea? Like any dangerous situations?

HW: We were caught one fall with the *Nobadeer* out east of the island. The winds were hurricane force winds. We stayed out there just jogging, just keeping the boat in the waves, the big swells. It was mostly big swells. But what was strange about it, when you go up on one or one lifted you up, you could see boats all around you. Then when you went down and you got in the trough, you couldn't see anything but water. Just blue-green water. That was probably one of the heaviest storm ones we were in. We had one night that we were scalloping out east of the island down in the channel. We took a bad wave right over the top of the *Nobadeer* and had a

man washed overboard. It seemed like it took forever to get him out of the water. We got the spotlight on him. One of the young fellows from Nantucket here kept the spotlight on him all the time that this was going on. We maneuvered the boat. We got it back around on him. Got a line to him and headed back on board. I don't think it took ten minutes to do it all. But it seemed like it was hours. All we had to do was get him out of his wet clothes, get him down the foxhole down where the stove is nice and warm, get him dry, and everything was fine.

MP: Must have been scary though when it happened.

HW: It was. It was different because the wave that broke on us had to be like a blind sea. From the water line up to above the pilot house, it had to be 15, close to 20 feet above the pilot house. We had a doorway up on top. It came right up on top of the boat.

TF: Is that what they call rogue wave?

HW: Yes. It came right up on top out of nowhere. It was just unbelievable. The seas were maybe five feet, six feet at the time. All of a sudden, this one monstrous thing just slammed the boat.

TF: At night it sounds like.

HW: At night, yes.

MP: It must have been shocking. What is roughly the biggest fish you ever caught?

HW: The biggest fish I ever caught, 106-pound halibut [laughter].

TF: What was that like to bring that in?

GC: That is big? Was that line or net?

HW: No, line by hand.

GC: Line. You have to catch fish by line.

HW: By handlining.

TF: Tell us what that was like to catch something that big.

HW: It was kind of amazing. We were codfishing. It was my boat, my first wife, and a friend of ours who was older than myself. We were out there jigging handlining for codfish jig fishing. All of a sudden, he said, "Captain," he said, "I'm hung up. I'm going to break this thing off." I walked over to him, and I said, "Well, just hold on to it and see what happens." I put my hand on the line with him, and I could feel motion. So, I said, "Well pull." He said, "I can't. I don't have enough strength." So, being a young fellow, I started pulling on the line. In doing that as it was coming up through the water, I said, "You don't have the bottom. Unless the bottom's coming up

to us." Because I said, "Whatever is here is like a pendulum. It's going back and forth. There's only one fish that I ever read about that does that." He said, "What?" I said, "A halibut." We got it up. The boat was only a little 28 feet boat. Took the three of us to lift the board because it was so green, fresh, trying to beat all over the place. We got it in the cockpit of the boat. It beat its tail and its body so hard on the deck I thought it was going to break the boat. It was just unbelievable.

GC: How long was it?

HW: It was longer than I was. Well, I'm 5'10. It was probably better than 6 feet.

GC: A halibut, wow.

MP: A halibut, wow.

HW: Yes. Someplace has a picture of it here. I think Larry Cronin has a picture of it.

GC: Did you sell it or what did you do with it?

HW: Yes. We sold it to Kevin Shaw. He had the lobster pound down on Straight Wharf years ago. That's where it went. It went through him.

TF: Where was it you were fishing when you found that?

HW: Just east of Round Shoal.

MP: How much did you sell it for 160-pound halibut?

HW: I couldn't tell you. I would guess it didn't go for more than 25 cents a pound. Because fish back in those days wasn't worth anything. Codfish was the same way. If you got 20, 25 cents a pound for them, and 30 cents a pound, you were doing good.

TF: Now, why wasn't it worth anything? People didn't eat it that much?

MP: Because they were so many?

HW: I don't know. There's always been a thing prior to nowadays of quantity that used to come in. The draggers would load up on fish. It's nothing for them to come in with 20, 30 pounds of codfish on a trip. You put 20,000 pounds on the market. You go someplace with a hundred pounds to try to sell them, and you take what they give you, even though it's dayboat. It's called dayboat fish. When I was with Captain Eldridge, 90 percent of our takeout was done in Chatham. He belonged to the Chatham Co-op. We did most of our takeout over in Chatham. Other than that, we sold here in the boat basin on weekends, nights, whatever. Whenever we had some fish we could sell here, we'd sell them right off the boat here. Like I said before, it was a different way to go. You don't see it today.

GC: So, you sold right off the boat?

HW: Oh, yes. That was half the fun. Some people would come down, they wanted the heads of the codfish. They wanted them split, and they'd take them home and cook them up. Some people wanted the tongues and cheeks cut out of the heads. They wanted that.

MP: Chop them up right there on the boat.

HW: Yes.

MP: Sounds like –

HW: No, go ahead.

MP: It sounds like you had a lot of fun. But were there any things you really didn't like about being at sea?

HW: No, not really. I can't say there was really anything I didn't like. The hours maybe. When I was sea scalloping, it was six hours on, six hours off, and keep doing it in shifts. When you get off, it was either time for breakfast, time for dinner. So, you'd lose an hour there. By the time you cleaned up and did what you had to do, you'd be lucky if you got three or four hours sleep each six-hour shift. That was probably the worst of anything.

MP: At least you had fun. That's good. Which one?

GC: It sounds like you've just done so many things. You've done sea scalloping, bay scalloping, commercial fishing.

HW: Lobstering.

GC: Lobstering, quahogging.

HW: Dragging, fishing. Only thing I didn't really do was commercial swordfish basically and tuna fish like they do now. We saw plenty of tuna fishing when I was fishing back in the early days. But there was no market for them. We fish out the same place they're catching them nowadays. We'd be out there cod fishing, and they'd be swimming right by the boat.

GC: Didn't get them.

HW: Just nothing to catch, no reason to catch them. They weren't worth anything. So, that was all part of it too.

MP: It's amazing how the market for things can just change so fast.

HW: Exactly. Yes. Because you look today, you go to the store, you want to buy a piece of codfish, you're going to pay 8, 9, close to $10 a pound for it. Sea scallops, they retail in the

stores for 13, $14 a pound.

GC: I think the bay are seventeen this year.

HW: Yes, exactly. I think bay scalloping was probably lucky to get 25, 30 cents a pound when I first started. When it got up to $1.50 a pound, you thought you were rich, $9 a gallon. Oh, boy. Strange. I wish I had all my old books. I had them somewhere, but I think they all got thrown out through the years.

TF: What do you mean? What books?

HW: Well, I used to keep a daybook.

TF: Like a diary?

HW: Yes, just like a diary. Keep track of where we fished, what we caught, the whole nine yards, what we sold it for, how much we made.

GC: I wish you'd kept them too.

HW: What the expenses were.

GC: [laughter]

HW: Everything that got taken out and what have you.

GC: That's great.

MP: I remember you were saying that you had fished for a long time from the mid-sixties all the way to the late eighties. What are some things that changed drastically about fishing while you were working?

HW: The only thing drastically that changed for me was going from a 14-foot skiff to a 72-foot dragger. I never had anything to do with a big boat until Charlie Sayle called me and said, "I want you to take the *Sankaty*." I said, "I don't know anything about it." "Don't worry about it." I said, "Well, how do I get it away from the dock, and how do I get it back?" "Don't worry about that either. Just get on here. We'll throw the lines off. All you're going to do is back out. When you're ready to come back, call, we'll be there to meet you. We'll catch the lines and tie you up. That's all there is to it. It's that simple." I'd never run a boat that size up until then. That was seventy-eight, seventy-nine, whenever. But totally different going from bay scalloping in the harbor here on a 16-, 18-, 20-foot boat. Most of these guys now scallop with 21- and 22-footers. It's quite a jump when you get into other aspects of the fisheries. That was quite a change.

TF: Do you have any interesting stories about your fishing, anything specific?

HW: Other than half the ones I've already said? No [laughter].

TF: I know you already said a lot. Any we haven't asked you about that would be interesting to hear?

MP: It's okay. We have dozens of other questions [laughter].

TF: Yes, it's okay [laughter].

HW: You what?

MP: We have dozens of other questions.

HW: Oh, you do [laughter].

MP: Oh, I know.

TF: Do you want to?

MP: Yes, please. What were some of the rules and regulations when you started?

GC: How they changed.

MP: How they changed.

TF: How they changed, yes.

HW: I don't know. Bay scalloping when I started it was over in Falmouth. That was all basically town regulated just like it is here today. It was no different. It was always the same thing here. When we were commercial bass fishing, there were no rules like today as to how many you can take. I can't think what it is this year. Maybe thirty fish, 34 inches or larger or something like that. In those days there was no limit at all. There was nothing. That's 90 percent of what happened to the fisheries. I think it was the same thing with the draggers on the groundfish, flounder, codfish, haddock, all the groundfish. There was really no cap on it. It was what you could catch is what you brought in. That was it. Nowadays, I'm not overly familiar with it, but just in what I've read, most of the fishing is limited. Areas are limited. They close numerous areas to different ground fishing. The quotas are limited as to how much you can take, how often you can be at sea. The whole nine yards of that is totally different than it was a long time ago.

TF: The reason is?

HW: To try to cut down on what's there, sustainability, try to bring things back. Years ago, when they put the moratorium on striped bass, you couldn't catch bass for quite a few years. They bounced right back, came right back. Maybe it took ten years or so in that area, but they came back to a point where they made them fishable again. They still have small commercial fisheries. It's a large recreational fishery. It's kind of different.

MP: Were you allowed to take any of what you caught home?

HW: Yes, absolutely. When I was sea scalloping, the size that you couldn't keep, guys would cut a few to take home, smaller stuff. Different fish, like monkfish was a trash fish. Nobody wanted it. Now, it's worth a lot of money. Guys would cut that up and bring that in, take it home with them. We used to get to keep any fish that came up in the dredges. That was part of the crew. Guys would take it home or else would sell it for crew money and split it up, whichever, depending on how much it was. But always let people take stuff home.

MP: That's good. When did you stop fishing at least as a job?

HW: I think 1981 I went back plumbing. It was a little more lucrative.

TF: [laughter]

HW: To say the least.

TF: Shorter hours.

HW: Yes.

TF: Can I ask a question too? You just said that you could take fish home. So, did you deliver the rest of your fish then to a fish market on the island? Or were there regulations on where to bring it because now I think –

HW: Well, when I fished for Mr. Sayle, everything went through him. He shipped, and he kept what he wanted here. Every time we came in here the truck to go to Boston with the sea scallops if there was fish to go enough, he'd send it that way. Other than that, he could use it here himself.

TF: In the shop.

HW: He can sell it through his shop, through his fish market.

TF: Now, is that true today? Are you allowed to do that?

HW: Oh, yes. The boats still do the same type of thing. They call it shack money. It's money for the crew. No fuel comes out of it. No grub comes out of it or anything else. Whatever you have and you can get rid of the fish like that, it always was up to the crew.

MP: What was your typical day on the water, or your schedule?

HW: Long [laughter].

TF: [laughter]

HW: Long, some days rough, wet. You'd be out in thunderstorms, blinding rain. Same thing in the wintertime. We'd try to fish out of here and do what we could do and get a day here and a day there. You could end up getting caught in a snowstorm and being cold as can be out there trying to keep yourself warm.

MP: Now, if the weather was too rough, obviously you didn't have to go fishing.

HW: Oh, no. It was a matter of watching the weather reports. If you could sneak out for a couple of days, you'd go when the wind was starting to lay down. You had to keep track on the radio on the weather channels as to what the weather was forecast for. When they forecasted it was going to increase again, you headed home. In the wintertime, we didn't really go far from here, 40 miles maybe to the east a little bit, and that was about it.

GC: I'm curious more about the selling the fish off the boats. You worked for Charlie Sayle, and he took the catch because it was his boat. They stopped doing that. You can't walk down there and buy fish.

HW: No. When I had my tub trawl boat, which was the one that I got the halibut on, it was 28 feet long. I had that and my bay scalloping boat and number one and number two slip at Straight Wharf, which meant people walking by could see the fish. You stand right there on the fish box, filet fish for them, wrap it up, plastic bag it, wrap it up, put it in a shopping bag for them, and off they'd go.

MP: You're making me hungry [laughter].

GC: I am, yes.

HW: We'd always make a point of putting a little poster up on the sign board at Federal Maine at the hub. It was just a nice thing to do for the local people. I sold most of my fish on the Vineyard. If I didn't have enough to warrant going there, it wasn't worth the ride. So, just sell them here. Catch them one day, sell them the next. It worked pretty nice. It wasn't bad at all.

GC: You had to stop or you just change jobs?

HW: No, just changed. I kind of got out of that type of fishing and just stuck with the bay scalloping. I ended up lobstering with a man out of here, Joe Mayo. I lobstered with him. Ran a lobster boat that came out of Plymouth. I ran it out here for the whole summer offshore lobstering.

TF: How is the lobstering here?

HW: One thing kept going into another. I had a small dragger that I ran for about eight months in the springtime. After one winter, I picked it up at the end of the winter and ran it all through the summers. Did dragging up around Great Point in the sound here. It belonged to a man over in Woods Hole. Took out the fish in Woods Hole all the time. Then came home from there and

started again from here. After that is when it evolved into Charlie Sayle's Fisheries. Then that was the end of it.

GC: So, how'd you catch your lobsters? Was that in the lobster cages?

HW: Yes, traps.

GC: Do you guys know how to scallop?

MP: Oh, yes, I've gone scalloping.

GC: Do you know, Ty?

TF: No, I don't know.

GC: How do you scallop?

HW: How do you scallop?

GC: Yes.

HW: The most fun way is with a glass-bottom box and a dip net and walking around. People didn't believe that. When I came back here, I got my license in sixty-four I think it was, my plumbing license, after an apprenticeship in Falmouth and going to plumbing school. I came back here in sixty-five, and I had learned this glass-bottom box thing over in Falmouth. They had a rule, you couldn't use dredges on any of the flats. It had to be water, 9, 10 foot deep before you could use a dredge. Shallow water, you couldn't tow a scallop dredge in there. You didn't want the eel grass all tore up or anything else. So, the guys used dip nets. Over the side of the boat, you just let the boat drift, glass-bottom box down in front of you, dip net, and you went along and pick, pick, pick. It worked great. So, I brought it back here. I tried it here when I came back here in sixty-five. People didn't believe what I was doing. It just evolved into walking around recreational and doing it in October. Nowadays, I can't tell you, I wouldn't know how to count the amount of people that have glass-bottom boxes. I still have three downstairs. I've got probably half dozen dip nets. Six-foot was the normal length. The ones out of the boat were up to 11 feet so that you could reach. As long as the water was clear, you could see everything that was on the bottom. No problem. Actually, it was fun. It still is. I still love doing it recreational. Get to see a few things other than scallops on the bottom once in a while. So, it helps.

GC: So, you get a glass-bottom box. You put it. Then you can look down. So, it's floating. So, it helps you look in.

HW: I got a picture of one. Just a minute. Excuse me.

TF: So, the box floats on the water?

GC: Yes, and I guess you look in.

MP: Oh, yes. It's a glass-bottom box so you don't have to dip your head into the water to see. It's a glass-bottom box.

GC: I need that.

MP: You use the little rake thing to just pick it up and put it in a bucket.

GC: I've only done the family push rake with the –

MP: Well, it's those two.

GC: I am really bad at it [laughter].

TF: Do all scallops have those blue eyes, those bright, blue?

MP: I think those are oysters.

TF: You have some variety of them, but I saw the two scallops.

GC: I don't think so.

HW: This was in The Independent quite a few years ago.

GC: Oh, excellent. "What the scallop might see." Rob Benchley. Glass-bottom view boxes.

MP: Very cool.

GC: See that?

MP: Yes, cool.

GC: I got to get one.

MP: You can just wash those off. As soon as you pick them up you just shuck it and just eat it.

HW: Oh, yes. That's the way to eat them. You're right.

MP: That's the way I eat them unless I couldn't.

TF: Awesome.

GC: Thank you. Gail, have you been scalloping yet?

Gail Clark: No.

MP: You have to go.

GC: Now, we got to take her.

HW: [laughter]

MP: Right down by coat too, I think.

GC: So, this is your invention. Was this your invention, the glass?

HW: No.

GC: No?

HW: No. It was a common thing in Falmouth. I don't know how much more the Cape did it. But when I was in Falmouth, that was – like I said, you couldn't use a dredge where the water was shallow. So, this is what they came up with. There was no problem with it because you're not harming nothing. You're not touching nothing. You're not busting up the eelgrass. You're not tearing up the bottom. You're not doing anything wrong.

MP: Now, do you still go out in the water today?

HW: Yes. Not as often. Try to go softshell clamming once in a while. Try to go dig some little necks once in a while. I quit boating. The boat's sitting in the back of the yard right now.

MP: Now, how old is that boat?

HW: That one out here? Oh three.

GC: Why did you quit boating?

HW: Pardon me?

GC: Why did you quit boating?

HW: This was mostly illness. But we got through that bad knee. I had vertigo this year. I thought my head was going to fall off. Ended up doing therapy at the hospital with it. But it was cool. They got rid of most of it.

GC: Good.

HW: But just seems like it was fun when you were young. Even seven years ago, that was still young. How quick age can creep up on you.

GC: Yes, it's true.

HW: Your legs slow down, your reflexes slow down a little bit. Everything just changes a little bit. You decide, I don't know if I really want to do this. Even today when I go quahogging or clamming, I take my wife with me with a cell phone. "Keep an eye on me if I fall down, stumble, or end up in the water. Even though you don't have no waders on or anything on, you're going to come try to help me get up." Then I get nervous sometimes in the water.

TF: The whole time you were fishing, did you see a change in communication from the boat to whoever you needed to?

HW: I don't know.

TF: Like now people take their cell phones, I'm sure, right?

HW: Right. We didn't have cell phones.

TF: So, I didn't know if there was any kind of communication at all.

HW: In the end of the seventies, I didn't know what a cell phone was. I don't even know when cell phones actually started.

GC: Not long ago.

HW: The only communication we had was the radio. They had operators that were called Boston Marine Operator that was on a certain channel. You could go to them, tell them the phone number you wanted, and they'd patch it through. They'd receive from the radio to a landline. Then they'd patch the line response back through the radio. That's what we had to use.

TF: So, at least if you had an emergency, you could use that.

HW: Oh, yes. Channel 16 was always emergency coast guard. Still is today. They have ears. They don't miss much. The only thing that bothers them are false calls, people just fooling around. I don't know what they did before they had good radio systems.

MP: Prayed.

HW: Pray is right [laughter].

TF: I have to go back quickly to one of your stories.

HW: Sure.

TF: Why were you out fishing in a hurricane?

HW: Why what?

TF: You said you were out fishing in hurricane winds.

HW: Oh, we got caught in it.

TF: You just got caught. It just came up.

HW: Oh, yes. It was during November. It was right after hurricane season. We got nailed 70, 75 mile an hour winds.

TF: That can happen on the sea, right?

HW: Yes.

TF: They just whip up out of nowhere.

HW: Yes, right. It happened really quick. It just was almost like snapping your finger, all of a sudden it was right there. Never heard nothing on the radio about it, about winds increasing, 15 to 20, 10 to 20, so on and so forth. Then all of a sudden, it's winds may exceed 50 miles an hour. That's how fast it came.

GC: Did it stay long?

HW: No. Eighteen hours maybe and it blew right through. One thing we had on the boat was a good radar. I think it was a 72-mile radar. You could see a cold front come through that had rain and thunder and lightning on it. You could see 72 miles of it and pick it all right up. You could watch the speed of it coming towards you. Get the dredges up, get everything secured on deck, and everybody down below and just ride them out. Wait for it to go by.

TF: Like a cork.

HW: Yes. Just hang on, we'll go through this. Then we'll start over again. But it was good. Between the radios and the radar and the Loran set to tell you your location, same thing the GPS does today. The people have their automobiles. Well, nobody drove around with all a Loran set in their automobile to get from point A to point B. But GPS takes you everywhere [laughter]. Got anymore?

GC: Anything else?

MP: I don't know. We've kind of been relying on our list.

GC: Well, I think that's about it. Thank you for the interview.

HW: Thanks, Georgen.

MP: Thank you very much.

TF: Thank you so much.

HW: Thank you very much to want to do this. Thank you, guys.

MP: Thanks for letting us interview you.

HW: Did you make up your own questions?

MP: Some of them we did.

TF: Some of them, yes.

HW: Good.

MP: If we ever got stuck.

[end of transcript]