

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project, "Bridgeport Working, Voices from the Twentieth Century"
Hillard Bloom (**HB**) interviewed by Jaime Mills (**I**), April 22, 1998.

I Mr. Hillard what's your position with Tallmadge Brothers?

HB I'm President of Tallmadge Brothers.

I Can you just describe what your business is?

HB We're in the oyster business and we've been in it since 1947 or so.

I And have you been involved in it since 1947?

HB Yes.

I How many boats are you operating now?

HB We have about twenty three boats right now.

I And about how many employees?

HB Seventy five here in Connecticut.

I And you have operations in other states?

HB Yeah, Delaware Bay, New Jersey. We have two oyster companies down there, plus Brown's.

I Can you describe a little bit about what it was like to oyster out of Bridgeport Harbor back in 1947?

HB Well, we started on the sailboats working on the public beds under sail catching oysters. And there was twenty five, thirty boats here at that time.

I And were they all Tallmadge Brothers at that point or different?

HB No, no. They were all individually owned. We had two boats; we worked with them up until 1950.

I So 1947 it was mostly small operators, operating one or two boats?

HB Right that's right. No, there was companies here too. You had the Lewis Oyster Company, Radel Oyster Company and the Sailship Oyster Company here in Bridgeport

I About how many other people would you estimate were oystering out of Bridgeport Harbor back in '47?

HB Oh God! There must have been hundred and fifty, two hundred, something like that.

I And those would all be operating just out of this little harbor?

HB Yep.

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I And at that point, how were the beds out in the sound regulated?

HB Well, we come under the, at that time we were under the Connecticut State Shell Fish Commission and of course they tipped the ground, natural beds for you and then the oyster companies kept their beds full, but all the patrolling and things like that was done by the State Shell Fish Commission.

I And at that point were all the boats under sail?

HB All the public fishery boats were, yes.

I And were there some motor boats permitted?

HB The motor boats were on the, they were a lot of steam boats. They were out of the private oyster grounds.

I Back in '47 what was your company using?

HB We were just under sail with the public beds.

I Was there some reason why they wanted sailboats rather than motor boats?

HB It was a conservation measure, idea where you wouldn't be able to clean off the natural bed too fast. You had to tow the dredgers under sail.

I So were they trying to limit the amount of oysters that were taken out of the harbor at that point or out of the sound?

HB Just on the public beds they were. On the private commercial beds, of course, they could take them off as fast as they wanted to.

I Can you describe a little bit about how you farm oysters?

HB Well, what we have is a setting bed, which we usually clean the setting bed. To make it clean before we put the shell on it and between the fifteenth and the twenty fifth of July, we'd make sure we had the shells planted. The larvae would float in the water and it would settle down on that clean shell and with all luck and everything it'll start another bed of oysters. And then we had to, after we'd get that then we usually try to winter where it is and then the following spring we shift it to the offshore beds where it's got more water. It's more safer and then we'll have the setting bed prepared again to put the shell back on.

I And are these beds that Tallmadge Brothers owns or are these public beds that you...?

HB No, they're grounds that we owned.

I Are there still public beds in the sound today?

HB Yep. The sailboats are gone and they changed the law and the follows can work it now with a small scowl or an outboard.

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I So the public beds, who takes care of the public beds?

HB Today it's Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture Division in Milford.

I What kind, what's your relationship with the Department of Agriculture in terms of keeping the oyster beds in the sound healthy.

HB Well, we work very closely with them. They monitor the water quality to make sure that the beds are open for marketing, we put out a safe product. They patrol the state shellfish beds, they issue licenses and permits and things like that.

I Do you also plant some of the shells for the Department of Agriculture in the public beds?

HB Yeah, we've been putting up about a hundred thousand bushels a year for the state. And we plant that back on the seed beds for the public fisheries.

I You mention that back in '47 there were probably a hundred and fifty different people oystering out of this harbor. How did that change over the years?

HB Well, in the fifties it kind of slowed up. There wasn't too many sets, a lot of pollution and there wasn't, a lot of oyster companies kind of went out of business at that time.

I And then was there some consolidation of?

HB At that time we bought quite a few of them up as they went out of business. We bought the grounds and the boats and the properties. This property we're on Radel was the company.

I What was the cause of the pollution that affected the beds in the fifties?

HB Well, I think it was from World War II there was so much factories here in Bridgeport. A lot of chemical pollution was in the water. But when that 1972 Clean Water Act came through that stopped a lot of these factories and plants from dumping their chemicals into the water.

I So what affect did the pollution have on the beds?

HB It stopped the oysters from setting and you gotta have pretty clean water for that larvae to live. And also, it gave the oysters like they got older colored green and blue which wasn't acceptable for the market.

I So how did you survive the '50's and '60's oystering?

HB We went clamming. We started clamming on the West End of the sound. We survived it through that until it started coming back again.

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I So was there any oyster beds at all, off of Bridgeport Harbor close to Bridgeport Harbor in the '50's and '60's?

HB Yeah, the same oyster beds were there and different companies owned them. But most of them didn't do too much with it.

I So they basically were not producing oysters for about twenty years would you guess?

HB That's right, yeah I'd say close to that.

I And how long after the Clean Water Act did you notice a difference in your oystering?

HB Well, we noticed when you reach work where turning them white and the oyster sets started coming back.

I And did you work with the Department of Agriculture, with the state or federal government to try and get the Clean Water Act passed?

HB Well, yes, we backed it as far as we were concerned. It's just that it was a good thing to put in to stop that chemical pollutions.

I So back in the '50's and '60's when you were mostly clamming, how many boats did you have out of Bridgeport Harbor?

HB We didn't have any in Bridgeport. We took them all down and all of them were clamming with them.

I And when did you come back to Bridgeport Harbor?

HB Oh, I'd say it was in the, 1970 on '72, '73.

I And how has it changed from 1970, '72, '73 to the present for you?

HB Well, the water's cleaned up a lot. Even on the sewer plants and stuff the waters a lot better now, a lot better quality than it was back then. It's getting better all the time.

I So have your, the amount, how do you measure the oyster intake in bushels?

HB Yes.

I So how has the production on your beds changed in the last twenty five years?

HB It's increasing, been increasing every year.

I And is that mostly due to the cleanup of the water?

HB I'd say yes.

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I How would you describe the public beds that you now use for seeding, in terms of the water quality?

HB Well there's probably a hundred and twenty five licenses that the state issues for people to work out there in that bed. It's according to the line of oysters that's at the time you want to go to work. There's been oysters coming off that ever since they started this program...

I And how long has the program been in affect?

HB Oh, I'd say about six years. Six or seven years.

I So there is about a hundred and twenty five oyster men working out of this area?

HB Licenses to work in the State of Connecticut. Most of it's on this bed out here.

I Is it one license granted to each operator or each boat?

HB There's one to the boat and then one to each person on the boat.

I So when you say there's a hundred and twenty five what do you mean? Is that a hundred and twenty five individual boats or?

HB Boats and licenses.

I So for example, you have twenty boats, about working out of Bridgeport Harbor?

HB Yeah, but our boats don't have to be licensed, because we work on private beds.

I So you don't work at all in the public beds?

HB No, we're not allowed to. You have to do that by hand. So they use a small boat with an outboard and a hand dredge.

I So are most of those individuals with the licenses, just individuals who have a boat and work on their own?

HB Yeah, it's a chance for a fellow with a small investment can get in the oyster business. And start making money right off the bat by selling the oysters.

I How many big operators like Tallmadge Brothers are there now working out of Bridgeport Harbor?

HB We're the only ones out of Bridgeport. But through the state I'd say there's about fifteen or twenty.

I And then probably a hundred and twenty five of the independent guys with just their own boat?

HB Yes, along with their own boat go out here and they dredge here and in the rivers they dredge oysters.

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I And how do they sell them?

HB They sell them by the bushel. Well, we buy a good percentage of them.

I So you buy them from the he independent?

HB From the independent fishermen.

I And about how many bushels can an independent person with their own small boat bring in, in a day?

HB Oh, they can get anywheres from twenty five to a hundred bushels.

I And what's the market price for a bushel, wholesale to you?

HB Right now \$7.00.

I So they can make, maybe \$700 in a day, if they have a good day?

HB If they had a real good day, yes.

I And what's the season for dredging?

HB July 20th it closes and it opens up again September 20th and runs right out through the winter until the following July.

I So the season is all but July 20th through September 20th?

HB Through September 20th, and that's a setting period for the oysters that's why they have to close it.

I And that's again just the public beds?

HB Just the public beds, right.

I But the beds that you have, that you own?

HB We can work longer, but we, on the setting beds we don't touch them because they have them shelled by that time and we want to make sure that anything that gets on them lives.

I How long do you leave the oysters in these setting beds before you move them to deeper water?

HB We try to winter them. If the grounds safe we'll winter them where they are and the following Spring we'll, if the ground isn't safe a storm could hurt it or star fish or something like that, by then we would move it in the fall after about three or four months.

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I And how far out are the deeper beds?

HB They're about a couple miles off shore. And usually they're between, around thirty-five, forty feet of water.

I So then you would move them from the setting beds out to the deeper water?

HB Right.

I And how long do they stay out in the deeper water?

HB Well, might be a year or two and then we'd move them down to Norfolk or Milord or somewhere where we have market beds. Where we can hold them and raise them for market.

I So they actually get moved twice.

HB Right.

I Did this process differ back when you were using sailboats?

HB No, it's pretty much the same, but the only thing the equipment's all mechanized now. Back then it was mostly hand labor. Where today it's, most of its done with equipment. Machinery to make it easier.

I So, Hillard what year did you come to Bridgeport?

HB I'd say it was somewhere around 1970, maybe a year or two before that.

I 1970?

HB Yeah.

I But you had also worked here in the '40's, correct?

HB Yeah.

I So when did you first come to work out of Bridgeport Harbor?

HB I'd say, it was around, well part time prior, but full time about 1946, '47.

I And what year were you born?

HB 1928.

I So did you work on it before you came full time?

HB Oh, yeah. When we were in school we'd work there an awful lot.

I So your uncle was a oysterman also?

HB He was an oysterman too, yeah, working under sail.

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I So how old were you when you first started oystering?

HB Oh, maybe 12, 14 years old.

I So you started back in what, 1940?

HB Yep, during the War.

I Were you drafted or did you join the War, you were too young?

HB No, we were too young for it. And when we did get of age, why of course the War was over. By that time we got married and we were exempt from it.

I So what did you do during the War years?

HB Mostly sailboats and stuff like that.

I So you were working part time during the War?

HB Part time, yeah, and partly in school.

I So you were in High School during that period?

HB Correct.

I And was that in Bridgeport?

HB Norwalk.

I In Norwalk. Was your uncle operating out of Bridgeport Harbor at that time?

HB Yeah, out of Bridgeport.

I And those were two sailboats?

HB Yeah, he had a sailboat.

I And how long had your uncle been oystering out of Bridgeport?

HB Oh, he went way back. I'd say in the '20s.

I He started in the '20s?

HB Yeah.

I His family also did oystering?

HB Yeah, my uncle was in the oyster business. His father was in the oyster business, working on public beds with companies and then we lived next door. Our neighbor was Lovejoy, he had an oyster business, so we were brought up around the oyster business.

I So your grandfather, what was his name?

HB Willis Bell.

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I Willis Bell. B E L L?

HB Yep.

I And he operated out of Bridgeport Harbor also?

HB Yeah, he worked for the Radel Company.

I So did you continue operating your uncle's boats, when he retired?

HB No, he had his own boats and we bought our boats in 1940...? 1947 we bought our first boat.

I When you say we, who are you referring to?

HB My brother and I.

I So you and your brother went into business. At that point what was the name?

HB Bloom Brothers.

I Bloom Brothers?

HB Yes.

I And how did your business develop into Tallmadge Brothers?

HB Well, it went along and then we worked out of the Tallmadge shop with the Tallmadge's and we helped them with their products and stuff. And eventually when they wanted to get out of the business, why of course we bought the Tallmadge Corporation.

I What year was that?

HB That was around 1965.

I That was primarily clamming at that point?

HB Yes, we were clamming also. And we bought the Tallmadge, which was a small company. It only had about 1500 acres of oysters. They had their oyster boat in the dock and we bought that out and of course we added other oyster companies to it. To bring it up to the size it is today.

I What's your relationship with Tallmadge brothers?

HB My wife's grandmother is a Tallmadge. Was one of the Tallmadge sisters. But that had nothing to do with us getting into it. It's just that we worked until the, we worked with them until the business started to got and of course we was able to buy it.

I So did you meet your wife through the oyster work?

HB No, I met her in High School.

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I You went to the same High School?

HB Yep.

I And what year did you get married?

HB 1949.

I So you were right out of High School?

HB Yeah.

I And did your wife, has she been involved in the business?

HB She was an officer of the corporation. That's as far as it went. Of course, all my children, I have two daughters in the office and a son there.

I And they're working today?

HB Yep.

I For Tallmadge Brothers?

HB And my brother had two boys that's working in it.

I And is your brother still involved?

HB No, he died in 1989. He died.

I So you have your three kids and your brothers two kids all working for you now?

HB Brothers. Right.

I So when you bought out Tallmadge Brothers, their dock was that Bridgeport Harbor dock?

HB No, that was strictly Norwalk dock. And with the Radel Companies went out of business, well of course we bought the dock here in Bridgeport, plus two boats.

I And when was that?

HB That had to be close to 1970. It might have been a little after that. It was around that time somewhere.

I When was sort of the busiest time for this Harbor in terms of activity?

HB Well, I'd say at the turn of the century, it was really big and there was two or three hundred sailboats in here. But then it kind of died out in the '30s and stalled up until '50s. It was almost really extinct until the '50s but then it started coming back.

Hillard Bloom

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I And in the '50s was there a lot of traffic out of this harbor?

HB Oh, yeah, a lot of coal barges and tankers coming here and things like that. Ferry boats.

I Ferry boats from where?

HB Mostly the ones that run to Port Jefferson.

I And what other businesses were active in the harbor in the '50s and '60s?

HB Oh you had a few fish boats. They operated by the Stratford Avenue bridge up the road and that was about it.

I Besides the oyster sailboats, so there wasn't a lot of like tankers or boats that were taking products out of Bridgeport?

HB No, I think most of it was bringing into Bridgeport. Until they dredged this channel...see this wasn't a thirty five foot channel back then. I'd say, it had to be somewhere's around there in the '60s they dredged this channel to thirty five feet. When they done that, then they started bringing in these big tankers and stuff.

I And who were they delivering products to?

HB Most of it went over to the Cilco and this UI plant. When they could get a ship that comes in the doors, you know twenty five, thirty feet of water.

I Where did all the products that were being produced in Bridgeport, out of GE and Bryant Electric and the big....?

HB I think that went by railroad, I think.

I So most of that didn't come out of the harbor?

HB A lot of scrap went out of here. There were a lot of scrap boats years ago.

I So you've employed a lot of workers who lived in Bridgeport, over the years?

HB Yes.

I When you first started operating your own boats back in '47 did you have people working for you?

HB Yeah. We had two or three with a boat.

I And were they mostly Bridgeport folks?

HB They were Bridgeport and Norwalk.

I And did you have people who stayed with you for a long time?

HB Oh, yeah.

Hillard Bloom

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I You remember some of them?

HB Oh, yeah. Some of them right from the beginning. In fact we got one that can, he's semi retired now. He started in 1951.

I What's his name?

HB Henry Smolinski.

I He's worked for you since 1951?

HB Yep.

I Did he lives in Bridgeport?

HB Yeah, he lives in Bridgeport. He was on the sailboats.

I Now he's converted to working on the big boats?

HB Yep, now he's mostly retired, but he does come in a couple days a week.

I There are other workers that worked for you, that you remember?

HB Yeah, my brother-in-law works for us, he runs one of the boats. Our cousins run the boats. My son, and my brother's sons run boats.

I Over the years have the workers that you've hired, for the busy periods, most of them been Bridgeport residents?

HB Yeah, a lot of them were.

I Has the work force changed over the years?

HB Yeah, it started out, it was mostly Hungarians, Polish deck hands. Then during the War, it was mostly the colored and then after the War we were using mostly college and high school kids like that. And then the Spanish people started getting in. We've been hiring a lot of them now. That's what we're using today.

I Mostly Puerto Ricans?

HB No, mostly from the El Salvador, Costa Rica, in that area Honduras.

I Do they tend to have experience on boats?

HB No, but some of them are pretty good workers, they're good learners. We use them doing some of the welding work, some of them got a little talent as far as mechanicals go. Most are captains, they've been with us for years, of course they run the boats. We use these people mostly for deck hands and in the shops.

I Right now, how many captains do you have?

HB About ten or twelve here in Connecticut.

Hillard Bloom

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I Did a lot of the people you hire live right around the neighborhood here?

HB Yeah, not too far.

I Has that neighborhood changed over the years?

HB Oh, yeah, it's gone down hill.

I What did it use to be like?

HB There were all middle class people that lived here. Most of them worked in the factories. The houses were kept up, factories were all working. It's the same thing in every town, just that the commercial element seemed to dropped out.

I So when did the neighborhood start changing down by the water here?

HB I'd say it was in the '70s.

I How has that affected your business?

HB Well, it hasn't bothered us too much. Right here we haven't been bothered that much. Of course you keep your area fenced in to keep the kids out and stuff like that.

I Well, you have a beautiful dock here, when was this put in?

HB We put that in, in the middle of '80s.

I Did you get some help from the city or the state?

HB No, we put it in ourselves. The dock's four hundred and fifty feet long. That cost close to a million dollars to put that dock in.

I Do you get some state or federal assistance in terms of maintaining these boats?

HB No, well we do have our construction fund set up. It's a 1934 Bridge Marine Act. Where you can put money in the bank, as long as you put it in an American shipyard and you can maintain the boats with it or build boats. We've been using that to maintain our equipment.

I What's the advantage to you under the Act?

HB Well, the money that you put into it, you put in profits from the company and it's not taxable. Only thing you have to do, you have to spend it on just on the boats. You can't use it for anything else.

I Your boats are spotless, are some of these older boats?

HB Some of these boats go back to..., the oldest one is 1891. Most of them were built around 1930, 1940.

Hillard Bloom

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I What were they originally built as?

HB They built as oyster boats. We've got one ferry boat, then we've got two coast guard boats that we use for oyster boats to bring them over. On of them was in the Solomon Islands in World War II.

I Was in the service?

HB In the service yeah.

I The oyster boats that you have, the older ones, were they under sail at one point?

HB Some of them were, we got about six Delaware Bay schooners and they were all sailboats.

I And you've converted them?

HB Yeah, we put them into power boats. Matter fact we're putting one back under sail. Down in Jersey now, we're gonna be getting it.

I You just mentioned that you were gonna put one of your boats that's down in New Jersey under sail again, what....?

HB Yeah, we're gonna rig the Aida Laura, and use her so we can demonstrate her when we're working under sail and stuff.

I So is that sort a public service to retain some of the history of oystering?

HB Yeah, especially in Delaware Bay. Then we can bring her up here to display it and stuff.

I That's great.

HB We have two oyster boats that, and this boat, we got the last one that was built for the Bridgeport Bay, we got that down in Norwalk. That's all been rebuilt.

I What's the name of that boat?

HB The Hope. Then we got, we built a replica of the Sandbagger, it was in natural bed here. The Tiger, we got her down in Norwalk too.

I So you do some work with the public to teach people?

HB Yeah, we display them for, down in the Maritime Center and things like that.

I Are you involved at all in the Norwalk Oyster Festival?

HB Yeah, we help them with that, we put oysters in it to, in the oystering stands and then we also have an oyster exhibit there, we put into the thing.

I How long has that festival been going on?

HB I'd say, I think it's been since 1978 was the first festival.

I There's some plans to really change this harbor in Bridgeport?

HB Yeah, they got a plan to spend a billion dollars here. This area we're in to put in office buildings, hotels and shopping center. Different things like that, they want this property that we're on and then all these waters become users along here. So we're hoping that we can move somewhere in the Bridgeport Harbor so we can operate, because it's very important that we do have an operation in Bridgeport. Because this is a half way point between our Norwalk grounds and our New Haven grounds. So this dock is very important to the company. We service eight or ten thousand acres of our ground right from this dock. We also store shell here, we store the state shells here for the state of Connecticut. It's short ride out to the beds from here, very important to keep an operation in Bridgeport.

I So if this development project goes through, what will happen to this million dock that you put in?

HB Well, that'll be gone. They'll change the way the harbor looks here. The only thing we're hoping that, they're suppose to be finding a place for us to move to.

I Somewhere in the harbor?

HB In the harbor, you gotta be in the harbor, because this harbor is very close to our beds. The closest bed is probably on the right out of the harbor you're right to the first bed.

I So has the developer or the city been in touch with you to talk about where you might be moved?

HB Yeah, we've been working with the city and the United Illuminating Company and the Port Authority to try to get a place to move to.

I And if they develop this area where would you be moved, what's the proposal?

HB Well, one area we're really interested in going to is this former Carpenter Steel property. That'll be an ideal location, next to this. Of course we'd rather stay here, but we know we can't stay for this developer. We'd rather be off a little bit by our self like that.

I So is the developer and the city and Port Authority made efforts to make sure that you stay here?

HB Well, let's put it this way, we're all working toWards it. We haven't got no final say in it yet, but we're hoping that's gonna still happen.

I Do you own the property that you're on now?

HB Yeah, we own it. This has been an oyster company here for over a hundred years. We haven't been here that long, but the Radel Company owned it before we bought it.

Hillard Bloom

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I Who else operates on land that this development would be on?

HB You got the Hitchcock Marina. That's next door to us. They got the Dupont Yacht Club and then you got the Riverside Marina which is another boat yard and then the Move Yacht Club.

I So all of them would be moved?

HB All...everybody would be moved.

I Is the City and the developer trying to keep the boat yards and the marinas in the harbor?

HB That's what we're trying to do. We formed an organization amongst all of us. Water dependent users are trying to get that to happen.

I Is there space for all of you to stay?

HB I think they can work something out. We were always here, that's what we're hoping.

I How has the city been in dealing with all of the users that are here now?

HB They've been very cooperative, I think that we're all working towards the same goal. It's just that everything is so slow to get things done.

I So United Illuminating is right across the harbor from you?

HB Yeah, and it's the former Steel Point plant, it's just up above us which we do rent now from the UI company, we store shells on it. We have state shells stored out there, we got out shells stored out there. They've been very cooperative with us too.

I When was that plant built, do you remember?

HB That plant was built back in the '50s. Now that plant, I guess the way they thought, they're gonna do away with that transmission plant. The power plant they're gonna get them to just using the transmission lines eventually. So that plant will probably go, it'll be gone.

I Is that property...?

HB That belongs to the United Illuminating.

Hillard Bloom

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I What's your hope for the future of this harbor?

HB We hope that we're able to keep some commercial business in this harbor—the boat yards are an important asset to it. Of course the oyster business is very important to us! And some of the some of the best setting beds in the state of Connecticut are right off this Bridgeport. So it's very important that we have a dock here in Bridgeport. We buy a lot of seed off these recreational shell fisherman. We buy close to, up to a million dollars worth of seed off these follows in here.

I These are the independent guys?

HB Independents and the all got small boats. They couldn't travel any distance, they gotta be close to the way they can get to the buy boats. This is an ideal location for it. they only got maybe a drive a half mile to a mile to get here to the dock in here. They're right here.

I Do you have any idea of how many bushels of oysters are farmed out of this harbor every year?

HB No. Most of it is being shifted around, I'd say maybe a couple hundred thousand bushels here.

I That's about one and half million dollars worth?

HB Yeah, according to what we got raised up here.

I With all the independents, you know individuals operating out as well as your fleet how many people do you think are employed in oystering out of this harbor now?

HB Probably seventy five. When the shell fisherman, when the oysters set, there's a lot of shell fish around it increases dramatically. And then of course as the shell fish get depleted they drop back out, some of them drop back out to there shore jobs.

I So the busiest time is what season?

HB Well, they'll look at in the fall, September when it sets, because a lot of money to be made you'll see them all come down here. They come from all over to come here and work.

I What's the biggest threat to the oyster business? To your business today?

HB I'd say pollution. We have to have clean water to operate. And if you haven't got clean water, of course, the state would shut all the beds down. So we have to have clean water in certain localities. Some of them, it's not so bad, like here. You might have alot of the grounds shut down as far as fecal pollutions, but that doesn't hurt the oyster setting. But you have to be able to move 'em to a beds that are in the open area so they can free themselves.

Hillard Bloom

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I So they actually clean themselves out?

HB Oh yes, they pump so much water, they clean out two or three days, if there's anything in them.

I So what's the biggest threat in terms of pollution at this point?

HB I think that so far they're really cleaning the Sound up, they're upgrading the plants. Especially in Norwalk where we do most of our marketing. They're really upgrading that plant.

I That's a sewage treatment plant?

HB Yeah.

I So at this point it's the sewage treatment that is really the most threatening to the water quality?

HB Well, I'd say this, when they have heavy rains they have some run offs that causes—like we get shut down for seven days and then they come get tests and when everything clears up they open it back up again. That's been our biggest problem. Birds use to cause us alot of problems too.

I What is that?

HB Birds.

I Birds?

HB Yup, they'll do their waste on the rocks and stuff and then go of course you get the high tides and wash it off into the Sound, you get some from that. But all in all, it's been getting better all the time. I say the birds are causing us more of a problem than the sewer plants.

I You said that starfish are also a threat to your beds?

HB Yeah, if you get starfish you get big invasions of them, of course we haven't had that in quite a few years now. Drills that convert the oysters, we haven't had many problems with them either.

I What causes the starfish to be more plentiful?

HB Well, all the conditions, they gotta be right because they'll set in the summer too. And then we get big sets of starfish; of course they grow pretty fast if they've got something to feed on.

I So how do you try to control them?

HB We have mop boats that check the beds and also we have two things, we take them up to one of our section boats and line the stars on deck.

Hillard Bloom

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I So you kill them?

HB Kill them that way.

I How much regulation is there of your business today?

HB Well, we have to follow that federal government regulations, the FDA as far as water quality goes; and the state's gotta keep all the records so they come in and inspect, the state, to make sure it's being done. The state monitors the water, they come into the plant to check the oysters, take samples, check around the boats, check the beds where we're operating from, and then when we ship out of the state, the different states, the oysters are picked up there and checked. So it's pretty much regulated.

I So do you actually pack the oysters and ice them?

HB Yeah, we have to maintain under the rules a 40, 45 degree temperature, all shellfish. Trucks have to be maintained at that temperature.

I What kind of involvement do you have in local government where you have an operation? Whether it Norwalk, or Bridgeport or New Jersey?

HB We don't get too much involved in, as far as the government, and politics or anything like that, we try to stay by ourselves. We help any, like local shellfish commissions; we help them with their programs and things like that. Because we got the equipment to do it. But as far as anything else, we usually don't get involved in it.

I Did you ever get involved in Bridgeport politics at all?

HB No.

I And did Bridgeport politics ever have any impact on your business out of the harbor here?

HB No, they never did, because I don't think they ever knew there was that much of an oyster business here. I don't think they ever knew the oyster business was as big as it was here.

I Was there ever any effort to, for Unions to organize the workers who worked out of the harbor?

HB No, I never heard of it.

I There was never a campaign to organize people down here?

HB No.

I How about the steel company that was here?

HB Yeah, that's covered by Union.

Hillard Bloom

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I Is it still operating?

HB This so called terminal?

I Um hmm.

HB Yeah, mostly now it's mostly bananas and fruit that's coming in. I think most of the steel and lumber have gone out of here.

I Were there ever any strikes that closed down the harbor?

HB Just at that terminal over there was some trouble a couple of times. But there was nothing major.

I Never affected your business at all?

HB Never affected us.

I Hillard, you've worked in oysters for the past fifty years or over fifty years, do you still enjoy eating oysters?

HB Yeah, I like fried oysters. I like all fried seafood, whether it's cod fish or clams, and but the real oyster eater eats them raw. Let's put it that way.

I With anything on them?

HB Yeah, they have sauce they put on them.

I Hot sauce?

HB Yeah, hot sauce.

I And what do you use with your fried oysters?

HB I usually have a salad with them, and stuff like that. That's all. I like hot sauce on them too.

I Do you think the public is eating, or enjoying oysters more and more?

HB We seem to be increasing with the business, and we're trying now to go into more of a frozen product and get it for the consumer. They can make a consumer package and get more in the supermarkets and things like that.

I And is there anything that is unusual or special about the oysters that you farm here in Long Island Sound?

HB They seem to be a fatter oyster and they seem to have a better taste because, with every, we go into competition with other oysterers and we always come out on top.

I In terms of flavor?

HB In terms of flavor and plumpness and meat. And ya know, color.

Hillard Bloom

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I Is there any particular name of the oysters that you farm here?

HB Well we call them the "Bluepoints." And that's usually the half shell sized oyster.

I That refers to the size mostly?

HB Yeah, it refers to the size mostly. That's what we sell mostly now. We used to sell, years ago it was mostly mediums and mostly for fried oysters. But the market seems to be shifting towards the half shelled oysters.

I So what percent would you guess are used as raw oysters? Or eaten as raw oysters?

HB I would say right now, 80, 90 percent.

I You sell mostly to restaurants?

HB Mostly wholesalers who sell to restaurants.

I And you think that there's an increasing market to sell directly to consumers?

HB That's what we're trying to get into now.

I And have you figured out a way of freezing them that...

HB Yeah, in our plant in Jersey we set up a flash freezer and a freezer and we're getting into processing and handling down there, that's where we do most of the freezing.

I So is it your hope that your kids and nieces and nephews are going to continue the tradition of oystering out of Bridgeport?

HB Well I think they will. This is a center of the operation and it's very important that this stays here and we operate under control.

I Do you also have grandchildren?

HB Yup.

I Are any of the grandchildren working in the business yet?

HB Not yet, but they're close.

I Yeah! They're too young?

HB Yeah, one of them is in college yet. That's the oldest. And the rest of them are younger.

I Great. I thank you very much.

HB Okay.

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I I just wanna get for the record your name is H-I-L-L-A-R-D?
HB Right.

I Bloom?
HB Right.

I Okay, thank you very much.