

Long Island Traditions

NEWSLETTER

www.longislandtraditions.org

Vol. 11 No. 2 Summer 2004

Bluepoints

Situated on the Great South Bay in West Sayville stands the historic Bluepoints operations founded in 1912 by Jacob Ockers. Hundreds of local baymen worked for the company, harvesting oysters, clams and scallops, destined for fish markets, restaurants, and other food purveyors across the country. Founded as the Ockers Oyster Company originally, the company employed baymen and local residents on contract to work on their boats, shuck their harvest, and collect a meager paycheck at the end of the season. Many of these workers settled in West Sayville, near the operations, some of whom remain and whose descendants clearly recall their experiences. As part of our South Shore estuary reserve survey we interviewed several former workers and perused local libraries for more information about this historic operation. Currently the site is up for sale and its future is uncertain.

Beginning in the mid-1800s Dutch immigrants settled in West Sayville, attracted by the abundant shellfish and finfish, which they were able to ship easily to Fulton Fish Market by the new extension of the Long Island Rail Road. Like those who came after them, they were limited in their resources and hungry for work. Many found work in the local oyster houses owned by the Rudolphs, Vandenberg, Vanryans, Boebes, Fred Ockers and the Brewers. Other worked at local boat yards owned by the Jim Lamden, Walter Lightner, Sam Jurgensen and other boatbuilders who had learned traditional methods common in Dutch communities. Still others, like Lowell Ockers, worked independently harvesting fish in pound traps or at local fish markets. However the majority of residents labored at Bluepoints.

Their jobs ranged from working as oyster harvesters on the company-owned skiffs, as shuckers and cullers in the processing section and in the office as part of the company's operations. As Mike Van Essendelt, a former Bluepoints manager, age 95 recalls, "they had to have permission to go out and catch the oysters. And of course we had an oyster farm

see **Bluepoints** on page 3

Fishing Shacks

by Mark C. Nuccio

Editor's note: on Sexton Island in the Town of Islip stand abandoned fishing shacks originally built by the Doxsee family in the early 1900s for harvesting operations near their pound traps. After World War II the company moved its clam harvesting activities to its current location in Point Lookout. Poet Mark Nuccio writes about the site in this poem.

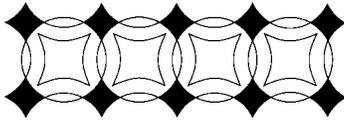
Falling shacks painted barn red
Tar rolled roofs and piled nets
Barrels lined like sentinels
Guarding now abandoned bulkheads.

Vestiges of long gone enterprise
Plying of trade among the bays
Housing harvests of shell and mussel
Decayed remnants upon the marsh

Once the soiled baymen's boots,
Left their prints upon the mud
Now like his footsteps, the shacks are silent
Only weathered wood is left to speak



Bluepoints



Long Island Traditions Inc.

Dedicated to the documentation and preservation of Long Island's living cultural heritage.

Executive Director: Nancy Solomon

Staff Folklorist: Cristina Muia

Board of Directors: Dorothy Jacobs, Mirna Cortez-Obers, Ken Maltz, Robert Pachas, Addie Quinn, Linda Scholl, Michael Scully & Wayne Wink

Advisory Board: Paul Bentel, John Eilertsen, Dave Opatow & Jean Ritchie

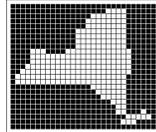
Newsletter Designer: Barbara Koelbel Bange

LI Traditions is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization registered with the NY State Board of Charities.

For more information call: (516) 767-8803, fax: (516) 767-8805, write to us at: 382 Main St., Port Washington, NY 11050, E-mail: litrad@i-2000.com or visit us on the web at: www.longislandtraditions.org

Copyright 2004 by LI Traditions. Permission to reproduce any article or portions thereof must be requested in writing.

State of the Arts



NYSCA

Become a Member Subscribe to the Newsletter!

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

TOWN: _____

ST: _____ ZIP: _____

PHONE: _____

\$20 Individuals \$30 Organizations

Please make your check payable to:
Long Island Traditions

Mail to:
Long Island Traditions
382 Main Street
Port Washington, NY 11050

Maritime Folklife Festival

“Working the Waters: Maritime Culture of Long Island” at the Bridge Hampton Historical Society

On Saturday, July 24, 2004 Long Island Traditions will present its annual Maritime Folklife Festival in collaboration with the Bridge Hampton Historical Society on the Historical Society's grounds in Bridgehampton, New York. “Working the Waters: Maritime Culture of Long Island” will present to the public first-hand accounts about the contemporary and historic traditions of commercial and recreational fishermen, the factors affecting these traditions and their future on Long Island. Special guests include journalist Russell Drumm of the East Hampton Star and Carl Tarnow, pound trap fisherman from Belford, New Jersey.

The program is the culminating event of a multi-year partnership between Long Island Traditions, the Bridge Hampton Historical Society and the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Folklife Programs in Washington, D.C. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is a 2-week event that this year will focus on Mid-Atlantic Maritime Culture including fishermen from Long Island, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and North Carolina. Many of the participants in the Bridgehampton festival will be going to Washington during June 23- July 4th.

Participants will include baymen, dragger fishermen, duck hunters and decoy carvers, model makers, and other traditional maritime artists from Long Island. Participating baymen include John Remsen Jr. of Freeport, who will show how he catches killies and other bait fish, using handmade killey traps he learned to make from his grandfather. Joining Remsen will be his father, a traditional boat builder. Cory Weyant, a Freeport bayman, who will demonstrate fish smoking in his homemade smoker. Baywoman Flo Sharkey of Patchogue will demonstrate clam shucking and harvesting, skills she learned from her father. Bob Kaler of Patchogue will demonstrate crabbing and eeling. Lowell Ockers of West Sayville will show how pound traps and nets are designed and constructed using traditional methods he learned from his father and grandfather.

Baymen from eastern Suffolk County, often called Bonackers, will share their experience in finfishing and shell fishing the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Peconic Estuary system. Among them will be Brad Loewen, who will demonstrate net mending while displaying and discussing a model of a modern fish pound trap, Dan King who will describe ocean haul seining, and Stewart Lester who will give a presentation on scalloping and clamming while sharing stories about a lifetime following the bays. Traditional decoy carvers Jack Combs, Ed Feeley, Pete Palumbo, Tom Stewart, Larry Udell and Joe Begy will be among presenters demonstrating and discussing the creation of gunning stools as well as decorative decoys.

Recreational artists will include legendary Jones Beach lifeguard Reggie Jones, the longest working lifeguard at the beach. He will tell stories of rescues, training exercises, entrance exams, and pay scales during his 50-year career. Peter Ames of Little Neck, along with his son Pete Ames Jr. will show how to make fishing rods.

Festival admission is \$5 and will take place at the Bridgehampton Historical Society on Montauk Highway in Bridgehampton. Hours are 10am - 5pm. For more information, please call Long Island Traditions at (516) 767-8803 or the Bridge Hampton Historical Society at (631) 537-1088.

too. We had maybe 20 people that shucked oysters. They were all men. It's a rough job. Other men culled oyster, put them in barrels, batten down the barrels and ship them out. And the shells went out on a heap. We had two heaps - one larger and taller than the buildings! You would put some shells back in the bay to catch spat - that's young seed oysters." Shells were also used to pave the road - cars would run over them and crush them into small pieces. "When it rained the road would harden, making for a nice strong road."

Oysters were sold nationwide with markets in the south, mid-west, northeast and of course the mid-Atlantic region. Their customers included Bird's Eye Company. "They put shucked oysters in packages and froze them for Birdseye."

The company dominated the foot of West and Atlantic Avenue in West Sayville, consisting of 5 attached gable roofed buildings 2-stories high, with a channel behind the buildings for unloading the day's catch and for docking their boats. The buildings included a shucking section, a float room, an ice room and a culling room for separating attached oysters. When pay day arrived most workers had to buy their groceries at Greene's General Store because of an arrangement that was made between the company and the store, which also owned most of the houses where workers lived. As Van Essendelft recalls: "Sam Greene extended credit to Dutch folks because "he always knew their credit was good." Greene owned most of West Sayville, through a grant given by the Queen of England in the 1600s that had been passed down through his family. His store was on Cherry Street & Montauk Highway, across from the firehouse, but is no longer standing. Greene also rented small houses along West and Atlantic Avenues, where descendants of baymen still live.

The company continued to grow until the 1938 hurricane, when the oyster beds were covered with mud churned up by the storm, ending one of the most productive oyster harvesting regions in the country. At that point the company turned to clams for its livelihood, an enterprise that would sustain a fraction of its former 1000-person workforce. Unlike the oysters, clams were able to crawl out from under the mud. Through the years many generations of baymen worked for Bluepoints as clammers; however their numbers declined drastically when in 1985 a



Greene's General Store

mysterious algae decimated the clam population. While many efforts have been made to restore the once world-renowned clam beds, these efforts have failed. In 2002 the Bluepoints Company permanently ceased its operations, reflecting the decline of this tradition that continues to affect generations of baymen throughout the south shore. ■

Steel Sensation School Programs

Through the efforts of Ian Japsi, founder of Steel Sensation, and fellow band mate, Marc Brook, a committed group of 7- and 8th -grade students at John W. Dodd Middle School and 5th and 6th grade students at Carolyn G. Atkinson School in Freeport now have a deeper understanding of Trinidadian culture and steel band music. On the evening of Tuesday, May 25th and Friday, June 1, Ian and his students will participate with other classes in an after school program performance/demonstration. All of these activities were made possible in part by Freeport School District's 21st Century program.

Since October, Ian and Marc have been teaching the students the basics of steel pan drumming along with the skill of working together as a team. They have learned both traditional calypso melodies as well as contemporary songs. On a recent visit, it was easy to see the supportive and positive learning atmosphere they created with the students.

Steel Sensation has also been busy with school performances, putting on two successful and energetic programs at E.W. Bower Elementary School in Lindenhurst and Lindell Elementary School in Long Beach. In sharing their music and culture, the band is an inspiration to these school communities. ■

West Meadow Beach Update

On March 26, 2004 the New York State Board for Historic Preservation reviewed Long Island Traditions' national register nomination for the proposed West Meadow Beach historic district. The vote was tied which means that no action is taken on the proposal. As a result the cottages will be torn down in fall 2004 unless a legislative compromise is reached by the Town of Brookhaven, the cottage owners association and Assemblyman Steven Englebright. State Senator John Flannagan has introduced a resolution to extend the leases for 4 additional years. However Assemblyman Englebright has not introduced a companion bill in the state assembly. To support Senator Flannagan's efforts we hope you will write Assemblyman Englebright at 149 Main Street, East Setauket, NY 11733, indicating your support for preserving the cottages. ■

EVENTS OF INTEREST

PLEASE NOTE: If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we'll put it in our "Events of Interest" column. The deadline is the 1st of October, January and April.

- May 23** Concert by klezmer masters Kapelye. Midway Jewish Center, 330 South Oyster Bay Road, Syosset. 7:30 pm. \$30. For more information call 516-938-8390.
- May 29- Oct 31** "Beach Bound" exhibit at the LI Museum in Stony Brook. Features profiles of historic beach communities including West Meadow Beach. 1208 Route 25A, Stony Brook. For more information call (631) 751-0066.
- June 11-12** Wildfowl Heritage Festival at the LI Museum in Stony Brook. 1208 Route 25A, Stony Brook. For more information call (631) 751-0066.
- June 23-27** Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Washington D.C. Features Mid-Atlantic Maritime culture. Free admission. For more information see accompanying article or call
June 30 - July 4 (202) 275-1150 or visit <http://www.folklife.si.edu>.
- July 24** Maritime Folklife Festival, Bridgehampton. 10am - 5pm at the Bridge Hampton Historical Society, Montauk Highway. Admission \$5. Rain or shine. For more information call (516) 767-8803 or (631) 537-1088. See accompanying article.

 Printed on recycled paper.

Long Island Traditions
382 Main Street
Port Washington, NY 11050