

Mr. Ernest McIntosh Sr.
Blue Crab Fisher and Oysterman
Harris Neck, Georgia
Interview Date: March 10, 2015

JM: Let's start off by giving me your name and what it is you do in regard to fishing.

EM: Um...Ernest L...Ernest L. McIntosh Sr. I'm a commercial crabber.

JM: And what got you into crabbing?

EM: Well, I started...I went out on a boat with my father, he was doing it and during the time I was laid off from my work in doing construction work and working with the plants and stuff and I liked it. You know, I went out there and so I asked him, I say, "You think I can get me a boat?" And he said, "Yeah" so, I've been doing it since 1978.

JM: Wow, okay, okay. And have you always just done crabs or have you done other um..?

EM: Crabs, oysters, shrimp.

JM: Fishing?

EM: Mhmm.

JM: Okay, and so a little bit about the crabbing then, I mean I'm sure the environment, the water, the environmental conditions have changed. Have you noticed any of those changes?

EM: Yeah.

JM: What have you noticed?

EM: When I got started, they used to drag the sound at a certain time of year and they, you know, open the closed water up and umm that would help filter out the...the sound by taking alot of this old grass and stuff out you know. Now, they hadn't had it open up now probably since the 80s.

JM: Okay.

EM: The early 80s.

JM: And what effect has that had on the...?

EM: It's starting to build up alot of bac... uh I guess...diseases or whatever. There's stuff that build up in the bottom and nothing want to stay there you know.

JM: Mhmm. Mhmm. So you've had to change the way you crab because of it?

EM: Well, the crabs don't be plentiful there and they, I guess because it's too much junk on the bottom and the big fish could get 'em, you know? You know, 'cause...

JM: Have you had to change the type of gear you use?

EM: No, same gear.

JM: Same gear?

EM: Yes.

JM: Okay. What about the cost of operating, as far as um you know gas and maintaining your boat and like all the equipment it takes to actually work with the crabs? Has that gone up, stayed the same since you started or...?

EM: Oh yeah, it's terrible.

JM: Is it?

EM: Mmhmm. Traps used to be, when I got started seven-dollars. Now...a trap will cost you about fifty-, about fifty-something dollars.

JM: Really?

EM: Yeah. The rate going up.

JM: Okay. Okay. How about the number of people? Are there more people going into crabbing?

EM: There's lesser people.

JM: Really?

EM: And then when I got started, Harris Neck used to have about fifteen to sixteen boats.

JM: Really? Within just this community?

EM: Yeah.

JM: What changed?

EM: Well...everybody, I mean the prices of crab you know, they...it gets cheap, the cost of living go up. Now the price of crab, the cost of the crab, the seafood now is coming back up.

JM: Okay.

EM: But they had a big dip in there for years.

JM: Oh yeah?

EM: Yeah.

JM: And a lot of people got out of the industry then or...?

EM: Mmhmm.

JM: Okay.

EM: Yeah. They were taking the seafood for nothing.

JM: Okay. Okay. So, do you have have sons?

EM: Yeah, I have one son.

JM: Does he do crabbing?

EM: He work with me, yeah.

JM: Oh okay, well that's good. So you've taught him everything there is to know and you learned from your dad, you said everything?

EM: Mmhmm. He's in the oyster business and the crab business with me.

JM: Okay. Alrighty. So in terms of what you did teach him about the environment, was it just you know learning the ins and outs of the boats or did you teach him like the different seasons; where to go...?

EM: Where...we pretty much learned it all.

JM: Okay. Okay. What age did that start you think?

EM: He's been on the boat with me since he was small; probably about...I started carrying him maybe about nine or ten.

JM: Okay.

EM: And he's thrity; he'll be thrity-one next month.

JM: Okay. Okay. So, I mean, have you only ever fished out of Harris Neck or have you traveled some?

EM: I tried in Darien, but it didn't work. They don't want you up there.

JM: Okay. Okay.

EM: Them guys don't want you in them areas, you know I pretty much stay where I'm at.

JM: Okay, but I mean it's been successful. Um, you know in a lot of the work I'm doing, I know Harris Neck is like okay it's notable seafood from Harris Neck, like a lot of people want it. Is that what you would say?

EM: What you saying now?

JM: As far as the market, being able to sell Harris Neck seafood, like it's desireable or have you noticed that?

EM: You mean more people wants it?

JM: Mhmm... because it...because it's from Harris Neck.

EM: Yeah, well because of the taste, I guess.

JM: Okay. What...what...what is distinct about the taste?

EM: It's got the salty taste, 'cause we are near the ocean...and it's clean.

JM: Okay. Good, good, good. So, did...did your mom, was she involved in fishing at all when you were coming up or...?

EM: Mmm my father did it. He was raised up on the water. He was originally from Harris Neck.

JM: Okay. Okay.

EM: From "old" Harris Neck

JM: Okay, okay. So it was more of a...men involved in the fishery, not so much the women?

EM: Mens.

JM: Okay, alrighty. And a little bit about the crabbing...what season do you mostly go out umm. like when is crab season?

EM: Now, well usually the older people, when they was crabbing, come September they quit...then they go pick oysters.

JM: Okay.

EM: September to April.

JM:...was oyster season?

EM: Yeah, they do oysters and then they'll start back with crabs in April; but now...the generation that...we doing it year round, crabbing.

JM: Okay. Is that...why is that?

EM: Well...nobody been really... into the oysters the younger generation, you know? The older ones was really into oysters.

JM: And I see you have the set up out there...is that for oysters or is that for crabs?

EM: Oyster and crabs.

JM: Oyster and crab. What do you do out there?

EM: I got a cooler out there.

JM: Okay. And you clean and just...?

EM: I'm...I'm certified with the state of Georgia.

JM: Oh okay.

EM: You know um. I'm licensed um...wholesale retail dealer. Yeah, so I can um retail it; I can wholesale it; and I can buy it from somebody and turn around and re-sell it and ship it out; and I'm a harvester, you know I harvest it too.

JM: Okay, so who are you customers for the most part? Locally or are you shipping all over?

EM: Pretty much in the Southeast area...and I ship out some to Florida as far as St. Augustine and Jacksonville, Savannah, Atlanta, some of them might get into the Carolina you know...'cause the guys that I sells...I sells them to the wholesale, they turn around and ship 'em out. So, I don't know how far they shipping them out.

JM: Right, so what made you want to go into business for yourself?

EM: Well uh, been doing crab for...since 1978. My father used to have that picking house...we used to have that picking house down there. You know it's a picking house down there?

JM: Yeah, I know I've been out there...not..not Tiger Bluff...not that one right?

EM: No.

JM: Oh.

EM: No, right down here.

JM: Oh, I didn't know that.

EM: You know where Wilson live at?

JM: Mmhmm.

EM: ...that's our old home spot.

JM: Oh yeah.

EM: Yeah.

JM: Oh okay and was that...?

EM: That's, that's originally our home. My father, my...my... you know we were raised up there. Yeah what happened is that...all that land that's there originally was ours. That whole block behind Wilson and it's twenty acres back there and we had the crab house on it. You didn't know that story?

JM: I didn't know that story. Tell me that story, please!

EM: That Blue Crab Lane, it say "Blue Crab Lane," that was our creation. We built that place, it's a building back there 125 feet long.

JM: Wow.

EM: Yeah, and back in...we build in...1980. And at that time we had five crab boats in our family, my father and four of us brothers. Sons, was crabbing, so my father mentioned to us

about, "why don't we build a crab plant?" Because we was selling to other picking houses at the time so we went on and we started building and what money that he had, it ran out so he went and got a SBA loan.

JM: Okay what's an SBA loan?

EM: A loan from our... government loan and he got it out of Macon, Georgia, but local banks had to agree on it, so he borrowed a hundred-thousand dollars to help finish up what we'd done and we went on from there, ya know? We had as high as fifty womens cuttin' crab meat in there.

JM: Wow, okay.

EM: We was shipping all over the United States.

JM: Wow. How long did that business las..?

EM: On 1980 into 90's.

JM: Okay.

EM: Twelve years or something like that, until you got a turn-around on the seafood; I mean the picking houses went out of business umm along with that before then you know, I mean my father was working a lot...people that was getting checks and...I know you might hear people talk this, you know a lot of them getting checks, some of them want to work under the table and don't want no tax taken out; so that ran down on him, the government came in, the IRS came in and attach a big bill to him, you know so he said, "Well..." They got got on him about not taking tax out on them right? So he said, "Well..." he said, "Well, you should've took it and hold the tax." And at that time the IRS was terrible; I don't know if you have heard them talk of the IRS in the past used to be pretty rough at one time. They didn't even want to work with you, they just do what they want to do. So they went and attach a big bill on him and wherever he was shipping out his crab meat, they garnish his paycheck and he had like eight, ten-thousand, fifteen-thousand dollar payroll to make. And you know when they garnish you to take out some of this tax money, well it hurted him for when he had to pay his people. So it..it pushed him out of business and so what he did, he just walked away from it all. He went on and build him another house out in Eulonia.

JM: How about your brothers?

EM: They all got out of the business. Yeah, they all turned sour against it at the time and got out; and I'm the only one that's stuck into it. And now I got my son and I got a brother, one of my brothers helping me now so...

JM: Okay, good. Good. But when, you know, the women who were working in the factory...

EM: We used to get the crab meat, we used to...we used to catch the crab and bring them in; in fact we were buying crab from Lauderdale, the crab was still...and we used to cook as high as ten-, fifteen-thousand, twelve-thousand pound of crab a day, but it was a plenty of crab; each boat could've catch maybe a thousand, twelve-hundred, fifteen-hundred pounds; now it's hard to catch that kind of crab. And we would get back there, we had the big ol' boilers where we could cook twelve hundred pounds every fifteen minutes.

JM: Right.

EM: We would cook em' and we had ladies in there bagging them and cleaning them and then um that evening, the next morning, well that evening after the clean 'em, we'll put 'em in the coolers to cool it down, chill it down; the next morning the pickers would come and they would cut the meat out of them. Yeah.

JM: But it was bringing money into the community basically?

EM: Yeah.

JM: And everybody who worked there was local?

EM: Yeah, pretty much in the county. Some were Liberty County and McIntosh County. But I was going for...crabbing since then you know and I just started with the oysters...I think the oysters about twenty-five years ago, but I was picking for somebody else.

JM: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about what goes into that?

EM: Oysters?

JM: Oyster picking.

EM: Yeah, and I had just got started with the oysters now two years...yeah back. And I got my own lease area; I lease Jullington Plantation. I heard them say last night about the uh property, buying a piece of property and swap...I mean yeah the swap over. And they mentioned Julington Plantation, but Julington Plantation is my lease; that's where I lease my oysters.

JM: Okay, so you have to lease space to go pick?

EM: Yeah, lease the area.

JM: Are there... About how many people lease?

EM: Nobody got that space but me.

JM: No, I mean like there's that area and are there other areas that are leased.

EM: Yeah.

JM: Okay.

EM: And you have to be certified. I had to send my son to school.

JM: For what?

EM: For um hazard.

JM: Hazard. Oh okay.

EM: You've heard of that?

JM: Mhmm.

EM: Seafood hazard like. Yeah so he had to go there for three days and he's got his certified certificate and...

JM: Okay, great, great. What do you do to maintain the lease? Do you plant the oysters?

EM: We've got single oysters planted now. We had 'em planted since October; the State, University of Georgia gave us some.

JM: Oh okay.

EM: The gave me about ten-, fifteen-thousand seeds in the first part of October.

JM: Is that how you usually maintain it?

EM: We got 'em out in cages and I have to go out and shake 'em around, but it take eighteen months for them to grow but they growin'. They was like this when we got 'em, some of 'em in there about that big now. Yeah, so they 'gon be single oysters.

JM: Okay, do you usually partner with schools on doing that?

EM: Huh?

JM: Do you usually partner with the schools on doing that or did they...

EM: Partner with the schools?

JM: Yeah, did they come to you to give them to you or do you go and ask?

EM: Yeah, I had to go and pick them up at Skidaway...University of Georgia, and um it's a few other ones here who got the seeds too.

JM: Okay, but they're just giving them away?

EM: Yeah, but they wanted to um...they got a grant. So I mean, it's a paycheck for 'em you know. They got a grant and they working on wanting to get single oysters; you know like Florida got single oysters, Maryland got single oysters, our oysters is good but we got single oysters but you have to...you can't get that many of them. You know and it's really is what been helping me with the oysters, I get in there and try to pretty muck pick as close to single as I can; and if they aint a single, I break 'em down. I don't try to sell too much bunch oysters and you know, I've been getting pretty good business with it.

JM: Okay, what's um...why do you only focus on the single oysters? I mean, what's wrong with the bunches?

EM: Most people, most people they haven't...some of them just don't want to be having no bunch of oysters; say like we're sitting down on a table, you know. I've got...you ever been to the Grey's restaurant?

JM: No, but I am going to that, I've seen it.

EM: Yeah, my oysters in there.

JM: Yeah, they have them on the menu! It says, "Harris Neck oysters."

EM: Yeah, that's my oysters.

JM: Oh okay, good.

EM: See the Timmons oysters and my oysters, they're all Harris Neck oysters.

JM: Right. And they have been...

EM: They just named they lil' company "Harris Neck Oysters," but really both oysters are coming from the same area.

JM: Okay, wow. So did...How about Grey's, did they come to you and ask you to put your name on the menu?

EM: Uh Billy...Billy um...Billy told them about me and he brought her up here to visit me one evening and she talked to me about what they wanted to do. And it took them a while to get where they at, it's a beautiful restaurant.

JM: Yeah, I've been past it and I've been meaning to go over there

EM: It got three sections, upstairs, midsection, and floor...they say they have like 125 to 140 people a night.

JM: Really, really? I know it was booked up, I wanted to go for Valentine's day but it was booked up, like you couldn't even get in there.

EM: They didn't ask me to put the oysters on the menu, they did that you know. It's okay.

JM: So for you is that kinda branding? Or how do you advertise about your oysters? Or people just know you?

EM: Yeah...My tags. On my...my state tags identify my name. Says my numbers, "Georgia 120SS," so that mean you can pull it up on the uh...on the uh...what do you call it? The Georgia seafood um...

JM: Right and it'll be on there?

EM: Yeah, it'll be on there.

JM: Oh okay.

EM: Also, the Timmons are on too. I put a lot of effort in it. And uh I try not to sell a muddy oyster, you know Ima be frank with you, I um I'm trying to set...I want a business that will grow and everybod will know where it come from you know?

JM: Quality.

EM: Yeah, so I mean you know, I've seen people you know come up here in they nice new car and why would I wanna put a bag of muddy oysters in they new car? You know what I'm saying? So what I do, with the school that my son went to, she said,"they'd rather you clean the

oysters." 'Cause if you clean it and put it in your cooler and you walk in that cooler, you got a fresh smell, not a seafood smell, not a muddy smell you know. 'Cause really the mud stinks off of that oyster. It's got um, I guess uh...the feeding uh just the mud that's off of the oysters or whatever you know, that it feeds on and it just stays on there, it's 'gon carry a deep seafood smell you know and you can detect it quick! You know what I'm saying, but if you clean it, you'll smell that fresh seafood smell. It's a difference.

JM: Okay. And you see that your customers can tell the difference?

EM: Yeah, yeah. People that comes and buy 'em always say, " Oh man, you got your oysters clean, I'll be back!"

JM: Good.

EM: First year I started, I hurt myself with the price. I say..."I'ma charge the price." I sell a lot of oysters to Russo in Savannah and they the same oysters. He selling oysters for seventy-five dollars a bag. So now, I sell mine on retail for sixty dollars. You can't get that kind of money out of wholesale now. Wholesale now...wholesale is all together different. It's... Along the line everybody making about ten, fifteen dollars a bag and that's business. You can't argue with them about that. They ain't 'gon buy that seafood if they can't make something off of you. See, I'd pretty much rather load it up and sell it to wholesale, than sitting here waiting for one or two people to come. You call and you say, "I want to get a bag and I'll be here at so and so." Now it's the time and I'm sitting up here waiting on you. Yeah, my time is important too. You might find a bag of oysters before you get here, and you say, "Oh well, I'll get their's." Now you done disappoint me, because see... what I does, I go over there and I write it down, so and so. I say, "Look ma'am or sir, if you want the bushel, I'ma write it down. I'll look for you to come and get it." If you don't and they call again, I won't answer. You know.

JM: So is there a lot of competition?

EM: Uh, well you got a lot of boot leggers.

JM: Yeah?

EM: With oysters and you know they got a lot of them running around here selling oysters and not licensed and they get out there and sell the oysters cheap. But you really hurtin' yourself, you don't know where that oyster coming from. It could be coming out the back of somebody cesspool. Somebody who don't even have a boat, they go down to the creek, right behind where somebody living at or whatever and they propably cepitc tank or whatever might be dumping in the water...and you drinkin', I mean you eatin' that stuff; so...you gotta know where your seafood comin' from.

JM: That's true, that's very true.