

**Narrator:** John F. "Tucker" Brown

**Interviewer:** Carrie Kline

**Location:** Avenue, Maryland

**Project Name:** Calvert County Marine Museum Oral History Project

**Project Description:** These are audio recorded interviews with residents of Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's Counties, Maryland who were connected to the seafood houses of Southern Maryland. Michel and Carrie Kline did this work in 2005 as part of the "Seafood Houses of Southern Maryland Documentation Project" of the Calvert County Marine Museum.

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**Abstract:** This oral history with John "Tucker" Brown provides an in-depth look at the life and experiences of a waterman from St. Patrick's Creek, Maryland. Brown, born in 1938, narrates his lifelong involvement in the fishing industry, detailing the significant changes in the environmental and economic conditions affecting watermen. He discusses the decline in the number of watermen, changes in licensing structures, and the impact of population growth and pollution on the waterways and marine life. Brown emphasizes the importance of conservation efforts and the role of watermen in sustaining the industry. He also touches on community life, recounting personal anecdotes about his upbringing, family traditions, and the communal nature of rural life. The interview highlights the evolving challenges faced by watermen and the need for adaptive strategies to preserve the Chesapeake Bay's ecosystem and the livelihoods dependent on it.

Carrie Kline: Okay. We're here with Tucker Brown in his home in [inaudible]. Oh, we'll wait until Kim's done here. All right. Would you introduce yourself, say, "My name is."

John "Tucker" Brown: Yeah. I'm John F. Tucker Brown. I live in Avenue, Maryland. A little fishing village is what it started out, say, sixty-eight years ago. Now, of course, the numbers have really dwindled since that time.

CK: What's your date of birth?

JB: 7/25/38. Back then, I guess, best I can recollect, at about eight years old, is when I started earning my own money. I used to crab here in the creek a little bit, soft crab at eight years. I worked with my father straight on up until the time that he was taken sick. The six months just before he had had a stroke, things had gotten so bad into the river back then that I went and worked for American Airlines. I worked up there six months. It was a different kind of work, but it was enjoyable work, very good relationship with them that we had together. They wanted me to take leave to come home as long as it took because they would like for me to be part of the company, to stay on, but I chose to – after a couple months, I chose to come home. I had one younger brother and a sister home. Well, at that time, I had two sisters and a brother, so I just chose to come home. Of course, I've been here ever since. We were fishing at the time, so I took the crew over, and I guess you could say, from there, been all up and down the bay oystering and clamming from one end to the other. You meet a lot of people, a lot of good people. Well, I mean, they're all good, but you have some that'll get real active and participate into some of the problems that you see coming. I've been very active in Annapolis and then, too, our county association. Right now, I'm not as active as I was. I was in the MWA [Maryland Watermen's Association], second VP [vice president] for about eighteen years.

CK: MWA?

JB: Yeah, Maryland State Watermen's Association. I asked them to give my position to another fellow, Kenny Keen, from Calvert County. He's under [the] Department of Fisheries now and DNR [Department of Natural Resources]. But I think that if it hadn't been for your county association and especially the Maryland state association, which joins up a large group and other associations, I don't know if we would really be where we're at today. So many things have happened over the years. Being a harvester of any sort, I think you get the fingers always pointed at you. You have other groups that just want to, shall we say, just see the watermen deleted from the bay itself. But we are not going anywhere. There's going to be watermen. Our ways are going to change. They already have changed.

CK: What do you mean?

JB: Well, I think that's just part of any history, part of life. None of it stays the same. We've seen our waterways as pristine as probably they will ever be. We've seen them right now down to – we hope it doesn't get any worse because, if it does, we will most likely lose it all, lose the bay. We're down now, just about to the point where our food chain is getting ready to be jeopardized. Once the food chain goes, then it's a lost industry for all the user groups. Right on this creek here, back years ago, we had probably no more than probably twelve, fourteen homes

on the whole creek. It was a large fishing village back here. Back then, this is what it was all about. Some of the younger ones went into the service. Some would maybe go somewhere and get a job. But this whole county, the whole state, was just farmers and watermen. Our numbers are very low now. But it makes you wonder. We say low numbers. Is that because nobody wants to participate into it? No, that's not so. Our numbers are low. We're down to what we call the dedicated watermen, been into it so long they're not going to be able to get a job nowhere, no how, so you don't have too much of a choice but to fight it out. You can still make a living at it, but you have got to hustle. It's not like it was back when. Even though we saw some hard years back then, too – I mean hard years – so much has done happened. We've changed our license structure. The watermen have really done their part in trying to be conservative on the part of harvesting. But with the population growth and between the sewage plants, power plants, [inaudible] the land, everything over a period of years has just taken its toll. We don't feel like it's being fair to us at all to put us down and point at us. We know why some of these groups are doing it because they want it for their self. They want the whole pie. Well, that's not going to happen. We're getting pushed to the point now where we're getting ready to start calling a spade a spade. If these other groups think that they can do so much, then why isn't the problem not corrected? Why are we still looking at the same thing? The state – every group that I've ever been familiar with has tried and done everything that they can do to try to turn this around. But it is hard to turn an animal around when it is diseased. It's not harmful to human consumption. It's just that our shellfish, the virginica oyster, the native product of this state, cannot live under the environmental conditions that it's in. It's also getting into our clams. This is a bivalve that is very important to the shellfish industry and the Chesapeake Bay. It's a filter feeder. Now, we're not just losing our oysters, but we're losing our softshell clam and our razor clam. But it's not all due to pollution. A lot of things play a big role into this, our grasses, for one – our grasses, which, back here, I guess forty years ago, we had – or, yeah, about forty, forty-five years ago, the grasses were so heavy that we had the state look into it and other groups and they decided that they could – it was getting to be such a menace that they could thin this grass out. I mean, studies and samples were done with seafood so that it wouldn't get into that part of it. But when the grass was sprayed with some type of a chemical, we were told then that we wouldn't have to worry about this grass for quite some time. So, I think everybody needs to stand accountable for really letting that go. I don't think nobody can point the finger at any one person or any one group as far as that goes.

CK: Was the grass a problem?

JB: Yeah. Well, it would get so thick that you couldn't even get a boat in and out of the creek. You just couldn't move into it. You couldn't do anything into it. It was a different grass than what we have now. But on the other hand, we've done came a long way. We're trying to get some of the grasses planted back, and some of them are living. Some of the grasses, like widgeon grass, for one. There's like three different kinds. We're trying to get it back.

CK: Why is that now?

JB: Well, it helps to hold back. It's a filter. It helps hold a lot of runoff back. It helps to purify the water. It also gives a habitat for the small crabs, small fish, and stuff to get into. It's something that is needed. We got a couple grasses. One'll live in the spring right now and will

fade out as the summer goes on. But it's a help. It gives everything something to get into. We got high spots into our oyster industry, where they live a little bit better than some places than maybe they do others. There's been [an extreme] amount of revenue spent into the restoration into the seafood industry. I believe in research. I always did, and I always support it. But there is a time when I think you have to say, let's all get on the same page here, and let's take a good look at this. Let's not go spending good money for bad. As hard as everybody's trying, it's just gotten to the point that the time is coming now that we seriously have to look into maybe getting another animal, a shellfish animal, in here. There's going to be probably some things that maybe we won't see into it. I know they've been studying it now for three or four years. I'm sure there's probably some unknowns. But when you look at the bottom line to it all, the problem that we have with our native oyster now has been studied for about forty years, and we haven't got no closer to that problem than what we were forty years ago, outside of it just spreading and spreading more. Our seed areas have dwindled. When you lose your seed areas, you don't have anything to put back, and you have to solely be dependent upon Mother Nature, and then you are really getting yourself back in a corner. Now, the hatcheries, the one here in St. Mary's County, Stanley Tomaszewski, I think, and his crew have done an outstanding job down here in producing seed. That was closed last year. That did put a hurting on the tri-county area then because that – what may not have been the answer, but it was a big key into the tri-county area keeping a little bit more other stuff going and keeping it overboard. The watermen participated into it. They would help put the shell in the tank. They had boats there to take it out and would hold it and put it overboard, so I feel that, along with the state and the watermen, they certainly did their part in trying to keep that program going. It boils down to amount of funding. How much are you going to spend? But I don't think that one hatchery can do it. Matter of fact, I don't believe that the hatcheries can be an answer to the problem we have. But it is a help. It's a help to try to keep it going until something is decided, what avenue we're going to take and go down. Are we going to bring this other one in? I think we need to. I think that our bottoms – and which, I guess, are silting over, they're getting just like concrete – we asked for power dredging. We got groups that are fighting this power dredging. The only thing power means is just so that you don't have to use your back to pull that up off the bottom. That's all it's doing. Yes, it will allow you to make a few more licks. But what difference does it make? You're on a time limit. You got a bushel limit. It does not matter how you take that animal off of that bottom because, once it's taken off, it's gone. But what does matter is the way that we keep our oyster bars up and keep them cultivated so that we can produce a habitat for something if we should get a set. Now, if we do get a set, that does not mean that it will all survive. With the type of parasite that we have, what is happening – when they get just about two and three-quarters to three inches, they die. It's not one thing. It has a lot to do with the salinity. We haven't really heard much yet about the acid rain. Look at the acid rain. Now, that's another thing that needs to be looked at, all of that. If anybody has a boat somewhere, and they got it tied up, they go down, look at their boat, they left it washed good and clean. Well, they went home for a week, and they come back – where did all this black soot and stuff come from? Well, where it's coming from, it's coming out of the air when it rains. We got a serious combination of problems, not just one, and not – to just keep pointing the finger at us, we say, “No.” Now we are tired of you pointing the fingers. If you all got all the answers, don't point your finger at us. Come on out and give us their answer because you evidently know exactly what it is and how to correct it. Don't try to take the whole pie. That will not happen. We are not going to let it happen. Some of the groups want to get us out of it and turn it over to leasing. Well, what does

anyone think that a leaseholder's going to do? A leaseholder's going to go find an animal that's going to live. Legally, I don't believe that they can legally stop you. Now, there is a group of environmental lawyers in a state – I'm not going to call the state – but they claim that they can win this case in court and that this oyster can be put over. The fine line into it is not to get involved with the state to start – I mean the feds to start with. Now, we are hoping that all of this is going to be taken another look at and that, after the research is just about done, and then maybe they too will take a look at it and say, "It is getting time that where – it's got to the point where we're all going to have to put this other animal overboard." For anybody to think something otherwise – nobody would love to see us keep the animal that we have, the virginica oyster. The ariakensis oyster will not come from across any ocean or any sea. It will come right out of this state – this country of ours, not state – but it'll come right out of this country of ours, in which we all live, and it will be coming out of a documented hatchery into that state. As far as anybody wanting to know if they can get an ariakensis oyster here, of course, you can get it. They're not hard to get. And all you need is a credit card.

CK: Is that the Asian oyster?

JB: That's the Asian oyster. But everybody's sitting tight, just waiting that everything go through its course. And then we'll all take a look at it. We hope we're all together with a say in it and see what's going to happen. Sometimes things change, and our ways may change too. A while ago, I talked a little bit about leasing. Well, if someone takes the time – and I know some have – to look at the amount of leased ground that the state of Maryland already has in it, well, why isn't that being utilized now? Because the animal won't live on it. That's why it's not being used. So where are we going to – why get more? Let's use what we got first, and let's see what that will do. I'm sure that if this Asian oyster comes about, that it will be a lot of people that [are] going to say, "Hey, now we want them here, we want them here, we want them here." Pick out two, three places. There are some places they'll live better than what they do others. As far as aquaculture goes, I'm a hundred percent for it. I'll do anything I can to help anybody with. But I think, when you look into that, you got to look at your climate, you got to look at the animal. You got to look at your summer months when your algae bloom is hitting hard because it's so labor-intensive trying to keep everything clean.

CK: Are you talking about floats when you say –?

JB: Yeah, floats or putting them in trays overboard. Look, if someone wants to try it, fine. I'm not saying that you can't pick up a few extra dollars out of it. If they want to know why the watermen, some of the watermen, don't do it, because the waters, like this creek right here for a good example, it's closing an account of pollution. You want your stuff where you don't have to worry about the weather affecting what you're doing. You want stuff where you can keep an eye on it. I'm not saying that somebody would just [inaudible] deliberately taking it. But when you get into some open water, sometimes, even boats [inaudible] get off course, and it doesn't take much to jeopardize the program that you are trying to get started. I think it's got a place. As far as it going real big and strong, you better be getting a faster-growing oyster into it, but you really need to get some product back on the bottom. The bottom will tell you what your food chain's doing. Once you see your stuff's dying on top of the bottom, you can best believe it's not going to be long before the other underneath there happens. We have stingrays. That's another –

getting to be a big problem. They just like to go in an oyster bar and clam beds and just clean them out. So, it's not just one person. It's a combination thing – people, population, developments. Look at the homes that we have right around here now compared to what we had years ago. People are going to live somewhere. They're going to have to go somewhere. But I also believe that we can get things a whole lot better than what they are right now. They are supposed to upgrade the sewage treatment plants. Boy, that sounds good. Makes you feel good. But you know what? They're going to upgrade them, but yet, on the other side of the coin, they don't tell you that there's probably going to be, in the state, another million homes built. We're working forth to do something, but are we going far enough at one time? And look at your plants. Some of these are nothing but secondary plants.

CK: Plants?

JB: Yeah, your sewage treatment plants, some of them are just nothing but secondary plant. Take a look at it. I think that's a key thing for everybody. Take a good look at it. If you could find somebody to really tell you what's in the water, you probably wouldn't want to know. Maryland has the best seafood of anywhere I know. I guess I am being a little partial to that. But it's good, healthy seafood. I think that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, I think they have done a tremendous job. If you look at a chart now, you would see restricted areas way ahead. Then you run into conditional use in the harvest areas. When you have rain, they back it up. They have corrected so many problems over the last ten or fifteen years. And we have got some of the lines moved back up. But they are probably about as far as they are going to go. We just hope we can hold it where we're at.

CK: Let's talk some about you, just your story.

TB: Oh, me?

CK: Let's go back. Let's look at your own – tell me about your people and more about where you were raised and your upbringing.

JB: Well, I was born and raised right here on St. Patrick's Creek in a little fishing village. My grandfather was a waterman. My father was a waterman.

CK: And their names?

JB: Sam Brown was my grandfather. Frank Brown was my father. I have a brother that's into the water. I have a son-in-law. The rest of the family, we've tried to get them out of it, tried to get them to go do different things, just keep their license – hold onto your license – and there's other better ways to try to raise a family than to go through some of the things – you know what I mean – like what we had to go through. I have been very active and tried to be very active over the years into what was going on.

CK: Tell me about being eight years old.

JB: Oh, eight years old. When you're eight years old, you only remember little highlights, so to speak. Then, next thing you know, you're ten, twelve, fourteen. And then you're out there and figure you're just as big as any guy out there. It was a good way. You didn't have any phones. No electricity, no phones. And now, you see somebody get in the car, [and] before they're out of the driveway, they're talking back on the phone. Weekends, Sundays, you always went to your neighbors or had your neighbors come see you and family. It was a family thing on Sundays, which was good. It was really good. Didn't have no – well, if you went to a store once or twice a year, I mean you had gone somewhere. You got your Sunday best out, and you put it on. Man, you were going to the store. When you went to the store, you better not touch nothing, and you better not ask for nothing.

CK: A store down here, you mean?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, we had – one was up here on Joe Bailey (turn?), and there's one around here, which was [inaudible] Mattingly's, then Murphy's. Gas used to be – we paid eighteen cents a gallon for gas. A soda was five cents.

CK: So you didn't even go to those stores more than once a year?

JB: No, once a year. Now, down here, Captain (Golden?) Thompsons, when you carried your soft crabs into him, or up here to [inaudible] Mattingly's, you could go in and get yourself a soda or something like that. But no, you didn't. When you went to school, we had anywhere from twenty-five cents to fifty cents allowance a week is what you had. If you got fifty cents, you were rocking. You had some money in your pocket then. But I don't know that it was – you didn't have the conveniences and all that you got now. You raised a garden. You'd have a spring garden, early spring garden. You had a summer garden. You'd raise yourself a couple of hogs for your hog meat.

CK: Tell me about the spring garden and the summer.

JB: Yeah, well, the spring garden; you would plant like onions, peas, and stuff early, lettuce.

CK: Early?

JB: Early. And potatoes.

CK: Early [inaudible]?

JB: Early potatoes and stuff, so you'd have them on time. And later on, you would plant just about everything. And then, in the fall, you would plant a kale and turnip patch, and you would make a (keel?) for them to go in. During the winter months, you just went out and got some straw and stuff and gather that up, make a big circle, lay your turnips and all into it, and then you put more on top of them, then you covered it all up with dirt, and you'd make a pretty good mound if you had any amount of stuff. When you wanted something, you just went out and dug a little hole during the winter inside of it and got yourself some out. And your hog meat, you salted that down, or you cured it, hung it up, and let it cure. When it blew hard back then, and

you couldn't work in the river, you'd either be out in the marsh trying to catch a snapping turtle, or you would squirrel hunt. You always did try to do something to keep some kind of meat or something on the table. If you didn't want it for yourself, you didn't have any problems; your neighbors would be glad to take it. People shared a lot back then. I'm not saying that they don't do it now because I think now families do help one another. It's probably done a little bit more on the quiet level than what it was back then. Back then, if somebody had a hard time getting food in winter or something, everyone around them would pitch in and help out. It made you feel good. It was a very good thing. Well, I can remember when the first movie theater started down in Leonardtown. There used to be a little hamburger joint right beside. We'd come out of that, go in there. That used to be the best hamburger because you wouldn't go but once or twice a year. It cost you twenty cents. Then you had to find somebody that could drive you there. There used to be two movie theaters in Leonardtown one time, but of course, then when things started to change, you started getting – stores started getting bigger. More people started getting [inaudible]. Families were growing up. If anybody had a piece of land, they tried to keep it, just like they do now. They try to hold on to it for the family.

CK: What months would people put in those gardens [inaudible]?

JB: Well, you would start like – depending upon the spring. But most of the time, you would figure anywhere from mid-February, first of March, they'd get the early one in. And then you would go from there. It depended upon – you'd have to look at the weather itself, but there was a lot of trading off. During the summer, you would give some of the farmers – you would give them fish and stuff. During the – when he got his corn crops and all done and tomatoes, they would give you tomatoes and corn, and so it was a lot of trading off done back then.

CK: What kind of fish are we talking about?

JB: Croaker, spot, perch. I can remember back when you couldn't even so much as catch a croaker. And they've been here now for the last seven or eight years. They're going to leave again. They're not caught up. It's a cycle. These fish run into that. I believe in looking at El Niño and La Niña. One brings hot weather. The other brings cooler weather. I think it plays a large role into all of it. A lot of people might not believe it, but our rivers control, I believe, just about the whole earth. The moon and tides work together and just like your oceans. I think if we ever let it get to a point where we can't bring it back, I think we are in for some real serious problems.

CK: The rivers control the –?

JB: Yeah, I think your oceans and rivers control it all. I'm not a scientist, don't claim to be one. But I know, when you work out there into it regularly, you see things that the average person will never see. You can tell a difference in things. Probably, some of the mistakes that maybe some of the watermen that we have made, when we see young fingerlings coming all about, we don't say anything about it.

CK: Fingerlings?



JB: Right, young little fish. We don't say anything about it because seems like when you say something – there was a time when you said something, it just brought you problems, so you just learned to keep quiet about it and let them show up on their own. We got a better relationship now than what we had. The scientists and the watermen now try to work together. You have some scientists that are not going to change. They just want to keep that revenue coming so that they can keep their programs going. Well, that's all fine and good. But you haven't solved anything for us yet in the last forty years, not as far as our oyster goes. All we are asking of you, those of you that don't want to look down this road – just stop and look. That's all. Nobody's trying to take anything away from you because you're going to always have plenty to study out here in this water. Don't try to claim to know it all. We know we don't know it all. And it takes a two part – you need watermen and scientists. Back then, when you were coming along – and you see some of that coming back – well, we used to have a lot of boat races and stuff that you would go to.

CK: What kind of boats?

JB: It'd be work boats. And the MWA has got that program going. They have boat docking and stuff now at these shows.

CK: Are these sailboats or?

JB: No, most of them are workboats with wooden-type hulls. Now you're getting into the fiberglass hulls. So things are changing. I guess when it's all said and done, our ways will change the way we harvest some things too.

CK: So they would raise a skipjack or a diesel boat?

JB: Well, the skipjacks still have their races in [inaudible]. I don't know how much longer that's going to go on.

CK: But in your day, coming up?

JB: Yeah. To give you a good example, if you've ever been to Chesapeake Beach when we were patent tonging off the bay years ago, there would be like twenty-some or thirty skipjacks; we would block that whole place off every night from one end straight to the other. You could walk from one boat straight to the other side of a work boat. That's all gone now. As the older ones fade away, you don't have many young ones left into it, so what kind of game we playing, fellows? Are we playing just to let the old guys get out of the way, so we can do what we want? That's not going to happen, either. Oh, the old guys will go, all right. But just remember one thing, our license – our young ones still got our license, and they'll come back. Matter of fact, I know another one now – matter of fact, a schoolteacher, and he's kept his license all these years. He told me the other day he's going to soon retire. He has missed that water so much. He says he knows it's hard, but he's coming back, and he's coming back to it full-time. And it's good. It doesn't matter what it is. If it's nuts under a tree – if you got a whole lot of nuts and everybody can go in there and get a license and grab some and sell them, you're going to have a lot of people doing it. But when it's not many left underneath the tree, people will find something else

to do. We only had back then – Lord almighty – back then the amount of boats that were working, you would not believe. Now, our manpower is diminished, so we need to change our methods. We need power dredging, for example. Power dredging needs to be done, and it needs to be opened up statewide. Just open the state up and make it part of this industry.

CK: Let's go back to your history with the industry. So your dad died, and you were how old then?

JB: Let's see. He died in '64.

CK: [inaudible]

JB: My father, in '64, so that's about thirty-something years ago.

CK: So, you were a grown man?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, I was in my twenties when he passed away. It's been about forty years ago because he was in – well, he got sick in '57 when he had a stroke. And he passed away in '64 from a heart –

CK: So you were always in seafood or [inaudible]?

JB: Well, that year, it got so bad into the water, we couldn't even catch – because you didn't have trot – I mean, crab potting was just getting ready to start, but people used to trot line back then years ago everywhere. Back when I first come on, you didn't have any crab pots. It was all trot-lining. But I can remember when you couldn't catch a bushel and a half, two bushels a day trot lining. So the cycle changes, your numbers are going to change, and you're not going to stop it.

CK: Were people in shucking houses back then?

JB: Oh, yes. Man, I tell you, some of them had large shucking houses. Back then, there was probably twenty-some on Kent Island. It's only one or two left there. Here in this county, on this creek, [inaudible], he had probably the largest one here on this creek. Then there was – (Davis?) had a large shuck house. (Noyes?) up there had one. There was, I don't know how many, all told and never really looked into it. But I know there was – you didn't have any problem getting rid of that. You had running boats, barges coming over, buying oysters, carrying them back to Virginia. Or we could run, of course, to Virginia if market got tight on this side. Now they use trucks to do it. But now, far as shuck houses go, in the state of Maryland, there are none.

CK: Except you. How did you [inaudible]?

JB: Well, no, there's one more down the creek from here. That's Junior Thompson. I think he's got about two shuckers. Then there's one, Bunky, over on Solomon. I think he has about two

shuckers. Greg was over here. He's gone now. When he leaves, Joe Scribner down the county – he's probably got five or six shuckers.

CK: Down in the county?

JB: Maryland Seafood. Real nice fellow.

CK: Like Ridge (sp?)?

JB: Yeah, well, [inaudible]. But he's like everybody else. He doesn't know that he's going to stick with it much longer. I used to fish years ago and bought my brothers' fish, my uncles' fish. Then when fishing started slowing up – to fish, you need a good crew. To do it right, you got to have a top-notch crew. That's what we had. I tell you what, I'm proud of those guys. It had its ups and downs, but they were top-notch, dedicated people. When that started dwindling down, they could do other things, didn't have to put in the hours that you were putting in because then you fish by tide. You just can't go out whenever you want [and] put the net overboard. You had to fish by the tide. Certain times of year, nighttime was your best time of fishing, so you were out all night long. But when I started working off the bay, I don't know how many years I done work up the bay, driving four hours a day in a truck to get home; it just got to the point, especially in the hot summer months – I just taken my back window out of my boat, went up to the local hardware store, bought myself a little air conditioner, put an air conditioner right in it, and I stayed aboard the boat. My wife would come up most time on weekends, on Fridays, and she'd go clamming with me on Saturdays. I'd come home on Saturday evening. I never will forget it. I bought a new truck. I drove for that whole year. I put 103,626 miles on that truck that year. Now, that was counting a few times of meetings in Annapolis and stuff. But that's a lot of driving for one person to be doing.

CK: From where to where?

JB: From here to Eastern Shore, and then going to Annapolis. I went to Massachusetts that year once to see my daughter when she lived up there. Her and her husband – he's back down here now. He's in the water business. He does welding [inaudible] top-notch welder. I asked him, "What do you want to keep staying out here?" He said, "I don't know, I guess I like it." Then we upgraded. We upgraded the fish house to a shuck house.

CK: When was that? How did that get started?

JB: That was, let's see, probably about seven, eight years ago.

CK: So it'd been a fish house?

JB: Yeah.

CK: What do you mean by that?

JB: Yeah. Well, we used to ice and box our own fish and ship to market and [inaudible] product. We used to sell to other people. But it got so that they weren't getting enough, really, and they were getting at the age where they just said they had had enough. They had gotten out of it, so we just started handing our own product.

CK: So you were working a boat and packing?

JB: Yeah. And you could get – you didn't get a whole lot of sleep, but back then, you could get some real good workers. They would come in and work hard for you. You'd get your fish packed up. The men would go home and try to get a few hours, a couple hours' rest. Sometimes I think the most we ever did go one time – we went about thirty-some hours until you would literally fall down. You just get back up. You'd have to fight that feeling for just about an hour, and then you'd get your second wind, and you go and go again. But when the fish were there, you had to go. There was no stopping. If you could get fifty, twenty minutes' rest or shut your eyes for fifty, twenty minutes, or an hour, you did it. You learned how to sleep is what you did. You didn't have the time to do this and do that because you knew that if you went out tonight, you got home, and the tide was right, you would have an hour or maybe two hours, or sometimes you just went home, and they'd just go home and eat, take a shower, and they'd be back, and you were going again. Everybody looked out for one another. Everybody knew what that feeling was when you just couldn't hold your eyes open anymore, that you had to fight it. We used to tease one another about it. You knew that he had to fight it for about an hour, and then he'd get his second wind come back to him, and he was going again, freerolling. Back then, a part of it, when we first started – when I first started fishing with my father, you didn't have any such thing as waist boots. You just had a choice. Do you want to put [on] a pair of pants and pair of tennis shoes on and go overboard? Or you went with your short pants. Didn't matter. The sea nettles were going to get you anyhow. But it was just part of it. You'd see these boats come in, look like a bunch of laundry hanging up. That was the men having their wet clothes dry out. Of course, in a little while, they'd have to put them back on. But then, when the waist boots come about, everybody bought waist boots. That really made it nice unless you went over top of them or fell down and got them wet. During the wintertime, it made it good for other things too.

CK: Because you're actually in the water, getting in with the sea nettles?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, when you're fishing, when you were haul seining, it comes a point when you can't keep pulling it that way. You got to get overboard, and you – what you call – bunch your fish up. If [you] caught a good haul of fish, then you'd what you call staking it out. You'd have to get some poles, and you stuck out a big circle. Then you took another little net and went inside of it and would just gather a few of them at a time to load your boat and come in. You left somebody there to watch the net while you were gone and see that everything was right and no holes come into it, or a pole come up, or lead line get up off the bottom some kind of way. You come in, put them out, and then you go back. You get some more until you got them all out.

CK: So you're fishing in the shallow?

JB: Right. Right, well, you brought your net back in the shallows. You would swing it out off the edge and stuff and bring it back in the shallows. And then you'd have to separate your fish,

grade them, cull them over in the river. We used to cull them over a culling board. We tried everything. We put goggles on. I don't care what you do. We kept wearing the goggles. We had people making all different kind of gadgets for us to try to keep them – when you put the fish on a board, we had a piece of wire about three, four [inaudible], something like eel pot wire or chicken wire, so that the slime and sea nettles would fall down into it, and you'd rake that kind of stuff overboard. You'd just pick what fish you knew. You didn't guess at it. You just picked what you knew was big enough, threw it in the boat, and the rest of it was just bycatch that went back overboard. But you could not stop those sea nettles. They'd start hitting you in the face. Then they're going down your collar and your neck. You just gritted your teeth and went on with it. It hurt all right. But long as it didn't get in your eye. It's a funny thing, but a Pepsi cola or a Coca-Cola would help to knock some of the burningness down. They even tried putting Vaseline on their face. You would try anything to try to keep that – now and then, one of them would have a piece of one get in their eye, and that was getting bad then. That hurt big time. You would have some menhaden or maybe one or two perch with gills – you'd have some type of a fish sometime that would gill in your net. When you were trying to get them out, sometimes some of them would flip over and stick right down into your knuckles. Every one of us had – we could bend our knuckles, you'd see the bones. You'd have to take a pair of pliers or something or your teeth and just pull that bone out and just keep on going. It hurt, but after you worked it for a while, it kind of will go away.

CK: And then Pepsi cola you put right on your skin?

JB: Yeah, you just poured it. If you got it in your eye or something, you just poured on there to stop some of that burning. You'd get them on your hands. They'd get in your gloves. And it didn't make no difference. You could be two days later and touch your face or something, and I don't care how much soap and water you used, a sea nettle – some people don't know this, but you can take a sea nettle. You see, a lot of people do it. You go down on the pier and dump it up on shore or throw it on the pail. I'm going to let this dry out and get rid of this. Let me tell you something. When that sea nettle dries, that will burn you just as bad or worse then than what he is when you hit him overboard. And don't ever let nobody tell you no different because it will. But when you had a good crew, you could cook a lot on the boat at times.

CK: You cook?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, we used to cook during the – when it was real cold weather, you would cook a pot of soup or stew or kale, potatoes, and stuff of that nature, something that would keep you warm a little bit. You had your breakfast and all. A lot of times, we would have breakfast on boat. And everybody would take – well, no, I take that back. We wouldn't let everybody cook because we knew some of them couldn't cook. But some of those fellows could really, really cook. I mean, you could sit down – it wasn't home, but it was the closest you were going to get. Some of them could even make some of the best biscuits, homemade biscuits you ever tasted.

CK: You could bake biscuits?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, you had a little – back then, early part of it, you had a wooden stove. It was small, and it just took little, teeny, small pieces of wood about six or eight inches long, maybe

ten, some of them. You had a little metal – looked like a metal box. It had the bottom, but it had a couple little trays in it, and it had a little gauge on top that said cold and hot. That's all you had. So you would put that on there, and you would put your biscuits in there or, you were going to have cornbread or something, you would put that in there. It had a little glass window that you could look into it to see how it was doing. When it was about right – after you did it for a while, you knew it was about right. Some of them could just take it right out and take a straw out of a broom and stick right in it and knew exactly when it was right. I'm telling you right now. Of course, we ate a lot of fish and molasses too, don't you think we didn't, when we were fishing.

CK: Fish and molasses?

JB: Yeah. Yeah, especially if you had run like – say, you were fishing somewhere, and you knew you were going to be like an hour, hour and a half before you could get in here. Well, while the others were finished getting the net and stuff on the boat, the others would be cleaning some fish. They'd start frying fish. We'd have fish and molasses coming down the river.

CK: Molasses?

JB: Yeah. That's a good combination. Don't you think it's not. It's very tasty.

CK: How do you fix that?

JB: Well, you just fry your fish. You'd have this (King?) syrup and just cans of molasses. You just pour it on your plate and eat it together. I'm telling you now, it was good. It was very, very tasty. Of course, I guess, when you're hungry, you can kind of go along with anything. A lot of times, in the morning, like we were going somewhere [during] breakfast, we would either have saltfish and eggs for breakfast or oyster cakes. Now, let me tell you, some fried oyster cakes and eggs for breakfast, now that is what you call a waterman's meal there. Now, that is some kind of nice. The average people probably never even thought about eating an oyster fritter or oyster cake in the morning for breakfast. But you take that and a couple of eggs, and if you got some home fries or something or a couple slices of bacon, something with it, you're talking about something that is tasty. You're talking about now like six hungry or seven hungry men on a boat. They could eat up something. Of course, you're tired; you're hungry. But when they ate, that was – of course, they'd eat so much, just like all of us, when you ate – oh, man, you mean we got to get out here and do this all over again? You know what I mean. Kind of got a little lazy there for a while. That was probably because everybody was relaxing, and Mother Nature was just saying now your body's getting tired. Now it's time to go to sleep. But after you got moving and all, it was all right. But it was very enjoyable. We would catch soft crabs. We would have soft crabs every Friday. Of course, we always kept stuff clean on the boat. That was clean. Every Friday evening, the crew would come down about an hour early. We would go out, take everything on that boat, start right at the bow, inside and out, and scrub it all down with soap and water and clean it all up, clean all the clothes up, have everything – because you knew Monday was coming. You had to go back through it again. And then, when you fished Friday night, if you caught some fish, it might be Saturday before you got home. But then, if you didn't have – then sometimes you'd have to pull the net off and fix that.

CK: How did you do that?

JB: Well, you just back the net boat up to the shore. You'd have to pull the net off. You check it for holes and, if you had some lacing that was torn out, fix it. Sometimes it would take you half a day. Sometimes it would take you just two, three hours, and everybody working together. When you're done, everybody knew that they had the rest of the time off, until Monday evening most time.

CK: So everybody could knit a net or fix one?

JB: Yeah. Well, most of them – just about everybody could lace it up. But not everybody could mend a net. Not everybody could fix the hole. They could tie it up so nothing could get out of it. But everybody didn't know exactly how to cut it. Most of them did, but not all of them, which worked out good because you needed both to be done. So you took your best net menders and put them fixing the holes and put the others catching the lacing up.

CK: Lacing?

JB: Lacing is where the net is tied to your cork line and lead line. It's looped over. And that's just a matter of putting so many [inaudible] into a loop and tying a double half hitch and then making another one. I'll tell you the truth. I don't regret none of it. It got a little hard there at times. But I think anything that you really like to do – I don't care what it is – it's going to have its hard times. None of it's a hundred percent – nothing. You're going to have ups and downs. I don't care what you do in life; it's going to be ups and downs. If you like doing it, you hang in there, and you just got to hang in there and just fight it out; just go with it. You'll see that it will turn around. Sometimes you think it'll never happen. Sometimes it takes a long time. But most of the time, what goes around comes around, so you have to go with a theory that you can make it. When things get hard in any business, I think it makes you take a little bit better look at it. I think you learn something from it. I think that's in any type of business. I don't think the water business is really any different than any other thing. There's a way that this needs to be done, and you need to try to keep looking at what can we do to make it better. It's so easy for someone else to point a finger. It is very surprising. When you go out to some of these meetings, you can't help but laugh to yourself. Here, some of these jokers will get up. Some of them might be engineers. Some of them might be truck drivers. Some might be coming from anywhere. Who knows where they come from? But they can't take care of their own business – some of them can't – but yet they know what you're supposed to be doing with yours. That kind of hangs there a little bit on you, so we done just got to the conclusion now that, let's just go start calling a spade a spade. We try to be polite with it. But I don't think I could go out here and get into, say, a tractor-trailer, and I'm supposed to tell that man everything he knows? I can't go out here and tell a farmer everything he knows, no more than I could tell an engineer probably what he should do. So we're the people – and like the environmentalists, I like to think that I'd like to save the environment too and do what I can. But I don't go – I'm not going to go out here and preach to everybody and say, "Now, look, you can't do this, you can't do that." No, they don't know the whole picture. I'm going to tell you exactly why. Here's what they do. They go around and talk to as many people as they can, talk to as many scientists as they can. Then they come up with

their version of it. No knowledge of being out there and doing it and knowing exactly what it is. I think that anybody would be glad to take them out and show them.

CK: Say that again?

JB: I think anybody, any of the watermen, would be glad to take these people out that don't really understand it and how it works and show them some of what goes on out here, and this is why we ask for this, this is some of the things that need to be done, this is what's happening. You are not the judge. Don't you be the judge because you're not knowledgeable enough. I think the scientists are very knowledgeable. But we know that we don't have their other side of the coin to put together. And we also know that they don't have our side of the coin to put together.

CK: So, talk more about your side of the coin. Talk about running a fish house and then running a [inaudible].

JB: Well, when you ran a fish house years ago, you had – well, the crew helped do a lot of the work.

CK: How are you processing it?

JB: Well, you take them out of the boat. You bring them in the house. You grade them. You separate the species. You separate one fish from the other. Back then, we were weighing them up in hundred-pound boxes. You put your ice into it. And then you had to load the truck. If you didn't have the truck going straight up the road, then you had a walk-in box that you kept them in. A shuck house – that's just another ballgame in itself. It's just about a non-ending job. You're on the road so much. Give you a good example; my wife left here this morning about eleven o'clock. She's making deliveries. Yesterday, she left here at eleven o'clock, went to Glenburnie, dropped some oysters off here in the county, then went to Glenburnie, dropped the oysters off, then went to eastern shore at Kent Island, picked the oysters up, and she got back home here last night about eight o'clock. Then I had to go down to unload the truck, see that the oysters were in the house, see that tags are put in every single basket. That's the date they're caught [and] what area they came from. Then you get up around 1:30 in the morning. And you got to go down and get stuff ready for the shuckers because they're coming in anywhere from one to two o'clock – most of the time, they're in. You know, by three o'clock, they're all going to be in there going hard; most of them are going to be – just about every one of them. They'll stay until about eleven. Sometimes they want to keep right on working, but you shuck according to your market. If your market's pushing and heavy at the time, then you let them shuck longer. Then you have to put your oysters on. You clean the oysters out to get the dirt and stuff that might be up in the gills and stuff. You run them through a process there to get that out. Then you have to pack them up.

CK: What kind of a process?

JB: Well, you do it with water. Some use air. Some use water. The main thing into it is you don't take everything out of the oyster. You can push it to a point where you're really taking a



lot of the flavor out. We don't do that, not here. We just take them just enough where you got a time limit on it anyhow, from the time you take that oyster out of the box and get it back in under certain temperatures. There's a whole lot that is involved when you're handling, well, any kind of raw meat, so to speak. You're allowed to use so much water. You don't want to use so much water. You don't want to take everything out of this. You want that flavor. To sell your product, you need to keep that flavor in. That's what it's all about. You try to buy a product that has a good flavor to it. There are other states that do have a great flavor into the shell oyster. We tend to shuck nothing but Maryland oysters. That's all we've been shucking this year is nothing but Maryland oysters. Maybe later on or something, if the weather freezes up, we may have to go to a Texas oyster or something. But we try to stay solely Maryland oyster. I think that we will see a time that we could shuck oysters in Maryland year-round. I'm talking about the Maryland oyster. We already know that we can take out-of-state oyster, whether it be Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, or wherever, and shuck it all during your summer months and – which is a good oyster. I don't think the average person really understands what the MDE [Maryland Department of Environment] and all or how –

CK: MDE?

JB: Yeah, Maryland Department of Environment – and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene out of Baltimore – how closely they watch the shucking plants, where this oyster is harvested, what state it comes out of, what's the date on these oysters, what status is the oyster in when it gets to you, how are you handling this oyster, when it gets to market. You would not believe the paper trail that goes behind a jar of oysters. You have to keep records of what was the temperature when you shuck it, how long did it take it to get shucked, when was it in the box, what was the temperature before you process it, what was the temperature after you process it, how long did it take the shuckers to shuck it? What was the temperature of your boxes? That's got to be taken every morning and night. What's the temperature when the oyster leaves the plant? How is it when it gets to where it's going? After it gets there, that's theirs, then. The paper trail is kept so that Maryland can show that, if anything happens, they know exactly what to look at and backtrack the problem.

CK: So, every day?

JB: Every day.

CK: You'll sit here this afternoon and write it all up, or you already [inaudible]?

JB: Oh, that's done as you go. No, in the morning, you write your temperatures down. When you first go in that building, you get the temperatures down of every box. When the first shucker comes in, the temperature of the oyster is checked before he starts to shuck. When he gets finished, it's checked. And then you go to clean the building up. You have to sanitize the building. You never know when the department's going to come in. They don't pick the phone up and say, "Hey, I'm coming down tomorrow. Have everything clean." No. They just drop in at random checks, which is good because things are supposed to be like they're supposed to be. And you do it. You don't have any – so far, Maryland hasn't had any problems. So it's a whole lot that's involved. When you go to the store, and you are going to get a jar of oysters, you look

at the top of that jar; it'll tell you a safe date. That date is not – when that date comes due, that's not saying, “Now, tomorrow, these oysters are bad.” No. That's a safe date. When that date goes, they can't be sold after that date. So there's always a little lapse period there. That's something that the Health Department, they make us go according to that time, that date.

CK: How long is it?

JB: Well, they like for you to sell them in a week. Most of the time, most people put about a two-week date on them. By the time you pack the oyster, get there, get it there, and they keep it – say, the oyster goes in the store, say they'll call and get some oysters Sunday, well, you can just about figure, by the middle of next week, the oysters are gone. So they got a close date on them. Your shelled oyster, every bushel of shelled oysters that go out of your plants, supposed to have a ticket in it. It will tell you on that ticket the date that that oyster was harvested and where that oyster came from. It doesn't matter. If it comes from Texas, then it'll have Texas on it. If it's come from state of Maryland, then the number will be on it. And most people ask you, “Where did it come from?” Some people love out-of-state oyster. I mean, really love it, and it is a good product. The people shouldn't think that it's not because it is. There is no different – now, I know this spring was a little different than others due to Katrina. But let me tell you; it is no different than a hurricane hitting here in Maryland and one hitting down there. They are not going to let nothing come out of that water that's not right if they know it. When you have a – well, even when you don't have a storm – when you have a storm, you have what they call conditional use lines. Everything is pushed back, conditional use. If the storm –

CK: What's that?

JB: – has a lot of runoff where, when you have over an inch of rain, you can't harvest this water. You have to back down the river. If it gets too heavy, then it's either backed up farther, or it's closed until they just, they take – I mean, they're out there every day taking samples. Then they can see when it clears up. Just as soon as it's cleared up, bam, it's opened back up again. It's nothing but a precaution is what it is. But it's a good one. Everybody understands it. The watermen understand it. They live with it with no problem. They all know that we got to have – keep our product – number one is keep it safe for the public and – but a lot of people don't – I don't think really realize what role the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene really takes into the seafood industry. It's just not shellfish, oysters. It's crab meat. They're on crabmeat – they're on that just as heavy as anything. Crabmeat, fish, it doesn't matter what it is. They are involved into every single bit of it.

CK: Do you get into crab?

JB: I used to. We handled crabs there for a while. But we stopped handling it. We got into razor clams. The razor clam is something else that we did. We were de-sanding them, getting the sand out of the razor clams, and carrying them up to Chinatown. You had a few Orientals there that really love them in Chinatown. I really enjoyed myself up there. But I tell you what, it was a lot of sign language going on when I went in that town. I can tell you that. But I enjoyed every minute, made some of the best friends that – I'll tell you what. They love to barter. Every time. You can go there every week, but he's got to barter. You know you got to let him get you

because he'll get talking his language, and they're all standing around. Some of them can speak some English. But they got to talk in their language and don't know more – well, you soon get so that you understand one another because you both understand what the dollar means. But it was very enjoyable.

CK: Barter, like he wants to trade you something?

JB: Well, first thing, he's going to give you something. And you're supposed to give them something, just as a gift, showing generosity, friendship. It didn't make no difference what it was. Could be a toothpick or anything. But he always had to take you to breakfast. I tell you – every day I'd leave. He said, "Mr. Tucker, where'll you go now?" I said, "I'm going to get my...". I says, "No harm intended. I'm going to get myself a good old American hamburger." I don't have anything against Chinese food. It's just not much of it that I can – it's just not my thing. But now, the Vietnamese food, some of that I could eat. I can eat some Chinese food. There's some that I can eat. But there's some of it I just couldn't quite handle. They'll sit down and eat snails, chicken feet, and all that stuff for breakfast. And they tried everything with me, giving me all different kinds until they finally found out different kinds that I could eat. Then I had a problem trying to – giving me chopsticks, so they finally felt so sorry for me that they went and got me a fork. [laughter] But I got a lot of respect for them and their culture. I think that there is – that's a world – Chinatown has a place of its own. I got the greatest respect for it. They are extraordinary people. I got a lot of respect for them standing for what they have there. If you want to see some beautiful china – I went in a china shop up there one time. I didn't see no signs saying – I couldn't read their writing no-how. And nobody said you couldn't touch it. I touched one piece, and it just went down like dominos, straight on down. I tell you what, it was something going on in that store. They come back and put this glass up. A friend of mine come in there and said, "Oh, Mr. Tucker, you'll have to buy all this." They looked for every little – I mean, this was some expensive china and – but it didn't hurt anything. And he told me, next time when I come back, come get him, he'd walk me around. [laughter]

CK: How do you find these customers?

JB: A friend of mine, an Oriental guy, very, very knowledgeable person, carried me up there. Matter of fact, he came here. And I was telling him about the razor clams, so he wanted me to get some, and we carried them up there. And he could speak seven different languages. He was very – he's still a very intelligent man. I got to get with him, deal with him. You learn how to pick the boss out. You learn how to pick the henchmen out so that they don't hit on you. Once you can kind of – you get around there, and then you get a feel for one another, they're either going to like you or they're not going to like you. If they like you, you're in town. If they choose not to do business with you, nobody in Chinatown does business with you. Nobody. That I guarantee you and but – and you learn, see how they do things. You could go there in Chinatown every day, buy the freshest vegetables and fruits you ever wanted to see. It's just pulling right in. They'd have certain items shipped from their country in.

CK: And you sold to Vietnamese, too, then?

JB: No. No, but I did go in – it’s right in Washington. It was a place up there I went in to have breakfast. A fellow from Hong Kong flew over. It was some stuff here he wanted to look at. He sent two people over to kind of get things just lined up. They called him the big boss. When he flew over, you knew that he was the big boss. They waited on him hand and foot. They even took cigarettes out of his pocket and would light it for him, just did everything for him and – but he had things that he wanted to look at. The American food – he ate it three days here. It was kind of upsetting his stomach. It was a little too rich or something for him. So, when we were going out that day to look at some stuff up north there, he wanted to know if we could stop in Washington somewhere; it was a Vietnamese place in Washington. I tell you what – I’m going to tell you, the desserts and stuff they had was unreal. You would not believe. The flavor – I still got that taste in my mouth. Some of their foods were good. Chinese food, now, is okay. But some of it, it’s just not my taste, and I have a little problem with some of it. But now my wife loves it.

CK: What’s her name?

JB: Agnes.

CK: Agnes? So Agnes is up today delivering?

JB: Right. Yeah.

CK: Talk about that. How did you find those customers? You said there’s other shucking houses here.

JB: Right. Well, it’s one of these things that, when you start up, you start wherever you can. Most of the people that already have a buyer stays with them. You have to try to offer them something a little bit better. You have to try to get them started out with maybe handling a few; just try to take a little to let us show you what we can – what kind of pack you got, what kind of flavor you got, and the other little things that kind of go with it, the service that you give.

CK: Service?

JB: Right. If sometimes they’ll want a certain kind of oyster, you try to provide that. You try to keep them provided with the time that they need. You have to try to get on a schedule. You try to make a round trip. You try to make a circle so that you don’t have to double back the second day because then that’s eating your profits then. You got to try to keep your trucks in good shape. That’s a deadly expense. I’m telling you, trucking is a nightmare to any company. I don’t care how big or how small you are. And you really need – sometimes you say, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t want to put that ...”. Let me tell you something, always try to buy the best. Always try to buy the best. I don’t care if it’s a frying pan. If it’s a frying pan, if you can’t afford the best and you can make out without it for another two, three months, hold off, but get the best because the best will pay for itself. Very seldom you ever have any problem with the best. One thing about a truck, you go out here and buy a used truck – and I know, I’ve been there – still there, but I got my stuff in good shape – you’re going to pay one way or the other. If you buy a new truck, you probably won’t have any problems or shouldn’t have no problems for

two, three years, maybe four. You buy a used truck, you might just as well go ahead and go over the whole thing to start with because it's going to start eating away at you. There's no getting around that, but the people – the product. You got to look at the product. Somewhere along the line, you're going to cross over with somebody. You can start out in open markets, like Jessup Market. You can start in those markets. They'll pretty well buy from anyone. It's your price that's going to get you started. The only thing is if you start low –

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