

Narrator: Ola Mae Carter

Interviewer: Carrie Kline

Location: St. Inigoes, 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.

To browse this collection and others, please visit the Berea College Special Collections & Archives: <https://bereearchives.libraryhost.com/>

Principal Investigator: Carrie and Michael Kline

Affiliation: Talking Across the Lines; Berea College Special Collections & Archives

Transcript Team: Fantastic Transcripts; Molly Graham (reviewer)

Date of Interview: March 4, 2024

Abstract: This oral history captures the life story of Ola Mae Carter, as recounted in an interview on March 4, 2005. Born in Waynesburg, Mississippi, Ola Mae grew up in extreme poverty on a farm with a leaky house and dirt floors. At a young age, she moved with a family friend to St. Inigoes, Maryland, after facing racial discrimination in various places. She described her childhood experiences of working for minimal wages, striving to send money back home to improve her family's living conditions. Ola Mae shared her journey of overcoming hardships, from making makeshift shoes out of cardboard to taking on multiple jobs, including shucking oysters and picking crabs in seafood factories. Her narrative includes vivid recollections of the physical toll of her work, the camaraderie among her fellow laborers, and her resilience in the face of adversity. Despite facing numerous challenges, including minimal education and financial difficulties, Ola Mae found solace in her faith and community. She became a skilled and renowned oyster shucker, even winning local competitions. Throughout her story, she emphasizes the importance of perseverance, community support, and the impact of systemic inequalities on her life and work.

Carrie Kline: Can you say, "My name is," and introduce yourself? I'll hold this. You can just relax.

Ola Mae Carter: My name is Ola Carter, Ola Mae Carter. I live at 48925 Chisleytown Road, St. Inigoes, Maryland, 20684.

CK: Oh, you sound really good. And your date of birth?

OMC: [inaudible] really – can I go off?

CK: Sure. [Recording paused.] There's more important things than birthdates. [laughter] I just want to hear more about your people and where you were raised.

OMC: Well, I was born in Waynesburg, Mississippi, back down on a little farm, where we had a house with no roof and hardly a bottom. We threw sand and gravel up on top of the house, trying to stop it from leaking. I was a little small girl, about eight years old. It was about six or seven of us as being children.

CK: This is too good. So we're in a little place in Mississippi with barely a floor, I guess.

OMC: Well, dirt floor. We didn't hardly have a roof. Then this lady that I used to go out and help in the garden thing – she said she was going to give me a job to help her, so I would clean the yards and pick up cans and trash out of the yard and things. I wouldn't know – didn't know what to do. But anyway, I came here with her daughter. She was on our way to go to California. She had a business there. She stopped here. I don't know too much about her life. But I was only a kid; only did was I was told. And later on, she got ready to leave, she said to me – well, back in those days, it was a thing like – she went to this hotel to get a room for she and I. When we got there, the name of the hotel, I think, was Sunset Manor, but the manager came too, and he said. "We don't allow Black people to come in here." Said, "You can stay, but maybe you can go to the neighborhood and find some Black people who have a place that you might could leave her. You can stay, but she can't stay." So the lady said, "Now, she's with me. She have to stay. I don't know nobody around here." And the hotel manager said, "Well, I'm sorry, she can't – unless you just put her on the back out there. We find something for her to sleep out on the back." And she said, "It's too cold. She can't stay like that." So I'm a child; I can hear. But I didn't know what was going on. But anyway, she said, "Well, come on. We're going to take you – I'm going to find somewhere else." So she stopped at this little soda – let's see, the name of it was Soda – outside, where the people were cooking barbecue, and it was soda house or something. I didn't know. Well, I'll just sit there in the car. There were some Black peoples out there, so she came over. And she said, "I have a young lady that's here with me. And she's going – we's on our way. I can't find a room for her. Is it possible that I can get a room for her?" So it was a little short lady that turned around and said, "She's not a bad girl, is she?" And she said, "No, she's not. If she was a bad girl, she wouldn't be with me." She said, "Well, I do have a extra bedroom. You can follow me there, and we'll put her in there until you get ready until you find a place." So anyway, she left me there. And the first time I had ever seen a crab, I was so scared, a little soft crab. She told me to touch it, and I just screamed. I said, "It's a bug' it'll bite." [laughter] I was afraid of it. So anyway, she said, "We're going to have these for

dinner.” I say, “I’ll have peanut butter and jelly.” [laughter] So she gave me a peanut butter and jelly and a glass of Kool-Aid, and so that was satisfaction with me. I went on the bed. So they fired up these things, and that’s what I [tell] myself, “Ooh, they’re eating bugs. I don’t know they’re eating those things.” [laughter] I didn’t tell them that – this is what my little mind was telling me. So the next day, she said to me – she said, “We’re going to go down to the river and go crabbing.” I said, “I don’t like them things you showed me.” She said, “No, these are hard crabs.” I said, “Ph, well, maybe they’re bigger. They might ...” And I just kept looking at them because they had this little, beady eye. I was so scared. So anyway, that went by. And the next two days, the lady came by that I came here with. Her name was [inaudible]. And she said to me – she always called me (Lou?). She said, “(Lou?), are you ready?” I said, “Yes, I’m ready.” I think I had one pair of shoes and two little dresses and a pair of pants and a sweatshirt. That was my suitcase. So I got them together, washed them by hand, and hang them out. I don’t want to tell you about how many other garments I had. Oh, God. So anyway, she and I left. And so every night, when I went to bed, I had to wash all of my undies and hang them up on the foot of my bed because I didn’t have very many, about one, maybe two. So anyway, she said, “You’re very neat and clean, and I just love the way you do things.” I would wash the dishes, and I would wash them by hand and rinse them. But at my home – we didn’t have running water where I came from. I was planning on working and making the money and send it so Daddy could get a roof on his house. So they weren’t paying over – I think it was fifty cent.

CK: Fifty cents?

OMC: About fifty cent a day is what we was making. So to me, that fifty cent was like a piece of gold. Back in those days, I mean, it was really good money. And I could save that fifty cent. I spent a nickel. Maybe two pennies, you could get a cookie for. About two big cookies or three for a penny, and that was my sweets, and a little can of juice for another penny, so that was good money, that fifty cent was. Then, the lady got ready to leave to go to California. She and I moved to a little residence here in Ridge. We stayed there for about a week or two. So I had never seen anybody drink. So she came in; she was very, very upset at me. I didn’t know what I had done. She was telling me, said, “You didn’t wash the” – used a real bad word – “the frying pan I left in there this morning.” But really, it had some food into it. But she never taught me what to do with the food. And I didn’t know what to do. So anyway, I had covered it over. And she just said I was hiding, whatever, but she used some bad words at me. Then the guy that came in with her – she had a guy. I thought it was her husband. I did not know – come to find out later, it was a boyfriend [who] said he was going to slap me out the window. I said, “Oh, God, he’s going to kill me.” My mind was telling me – I don’t tell him this, but my mind told me he was going to kill me. And I said, “I don’t know. I don’t want him to kill me.” So I went in, and I tried to apologize and “Sorry.” So she said, “Well, don’t be sorry because sorry didn’t do it; you did it.” I said, “Yes, ma’am.” So anyway, I went on to bed at night. The next day, she told me to go downstairs in this little (tavern?) and wash clothes. I washed the clothes, folded them like I was taught, and brought them back in the basket. I didn’t wash mine. I washed mine by hand in the bathroom and hung them up over my bed, around my bedposts. So then, later on that week, she said, “We are going to leave, and don’t you tell nobody that ...”. [inaudible] she called him (Martin?). I didn’t say a word. I don’t know who is this. But the next day, she came back. She had this thing of water – I thought was water. She set it in her refrigerator. And so that night, I just taken a paper cup, and I’m going to pour some of this water

and drink it. And [inaudible] up to my head, I almost died. I [inaudible] my head, up to my throat. I was choking. I said, "Lord, what is this stuff?" Then [inaudible] it seemed like my head was going around and around and around. [laughter] And here, I was telling another girl that I met down in the bar. She said, "Girl, you drank that stuff [inaudible] now? That's corn liquor." I said, "God, no wonder this woman was crazy." She got bad on me, so I snuck out that night. I didn't have but two or three pieces. I threw them out the window. I said, "I'm going to run in the woods somewhere and stay until I can find me a place to live. I'm not going to stay here no longer." That's how I got to meet Mrs. Barnes. I went to Mrs. Barnes' house. She told me, she said, "You is nothing but a child. Why are you straying around here on the streets?" I was a big girl. And there were so many boys and things watching me and calling me. And I said, "I'm not talking." I said, "I don't know why they're calling me." And had one guy, he'd come over there, and he caught me around the waist and playing with me. And Mrs. Barnes called me. She said, "Come here quick." Said, "You don't need to go around there." I said, but they are my friends. She said, "They are not. They are the wrong friends." I said, "Yes, ma'am." So I started listening to her. So, this particular man told me, he said, "You don't need to be in there with that woman. You need to get out and go places." I said, "For real?" Said, "Yeah, so you can meet some real nice peoples around here." I said, "Well, who going to take me to meet them?" Said, "I'll take you." I said, "You got a girlfriend?" I said, "You got a mama? You'll take me to meet your mama?" I said, "I want to go see your mama. I want to see somebody that's going to ...". I said, "I really want to see somebody's going to tell me where maybe I can get a job and make some money, where I can go and send some money home to my dad." Being a child in elementary school – I was only around the fourth grade – I didn't know, couldn't remember my address and phone number and stuff like that because we didn't have a phone, and I couldn't remember our address. It was a long, long time. When I got to be seventeen, some way, somehow, a policeman come looking for me. He said they had got a message from my dad that he wanted me to get in touch with him. I told the police I didn't know how to get in touch with my dad. I wanted to [inaudible] in touch with him. I didn't know how. So he said, "Well, I have a address." He don't have a phone number. But he said, "This address – if you just send some words, I'll write it up." I didn't know how to write. I was just learning. See, back in those days, children didn't learn how to read and write and do a lot of things until they was about the sixth or seventh grade. I was just learning how to say A, B, C. Almost didn't go to school very much when I was home with my daddy. That's why I didn't know. He kept us home. He wouldn't let us go to school. I don't know why. That's another story that I didn't get a chance to ever ask him why he didn't send us to school. My oldest brother told me many years ago since I've been [inaudible] and I went home. He said the reason my daddy didn't send us to school [was] because he didn't have – he couldn't send us to school. We had to walk about ten miles to school. He said that we didn't have clothes and shoes and things to go. One time, I'd taken a cardboard box and made me some shoes. [laughter] I'd taken strings and looped them in the cardboard box and tied them around my ankle and made me some shoes, so I could go out in the yard and garden and do things to help my other [inaudible] – excuse me – sometimes I get – I can't tell this. I kind of get emotion when I think of these things, and I try to not think of them so much. But going back to my daddy, he would buy shoes for us, and we couldn't wear them. They was too small. You can't guess at a child's feet. You have to make sure to take that child and try those shoes on them. I said, "If I ever would live and the Lord would spare me, I would take my children to the store and try their shoes on their feet and make sure they fit because I didn't want them to come up having to walk with their shoes tied together just to show

somebody that you had shoes and you couldn't wear them." I would take them off. They would hurt my feet so bad; I would take them off and tie the string together and put them across my shoulder and walk bare footed because your shoes wouldn't fit. But anyway, we had a hard life coming up, very, very hard. But we made it, thanks be to God. I can say thank God for all the goodness. We made it. But as the years went by, I came to St. Mary's, and I said, "Oh, well, this is much better. I can stay here with this lady." I didn't eat no food. She always would ask me, she'd say, "Why don't you eat?" I told her, I said, "What am I supposed to eat?" She said, "I got a big bowl of salad." I said, "Ooh, I said, I can't eat that stuff. That's for the rabbits." [laughter] I said, "I can't eat that kind of stuff." I said, "That's for rabbits, pigs, and whatever else kind of things I could think of that eat grass." She said, "I can fix food. You will eat a tomato." I said, "Yeah, I like that." And she said, "But you won't eat no lettuce." I said, "Now, well, I eat them if you cook them." And she said, "Well, lettuce is not to be cooked." I said, "Well, I don't want them." I could eat a carrot and go all day long. That's how I survived. And for number-one thing, they used to have Vienna sausage in a little can, and they'd come about four. I learned to eat some of those. That's another story – through Mrs. (Sophie Reed?) and (Mary Barber?).

CK: I'm still stuck with you being in fourth grade and asking this guy if there was any way you could get some work.

OMC: Fourth grade. And he said, "I work." He said, "Can you fill out a application?" I said, "No, I don't know about application." So he said, "Well, you're doing a good job. He would work. I would work, and it was just a miracle. I was just a miracle. That's all. And God – no, it wasn't like that. It was just the mercy and the goodness of the Lord. That's what it was. That's the only thing I can see.

CK: When you say work, what do you mean?

OMC: Well, he took me to his aunt's house, and I said, "What am I supposed to do?" He said, "Well, you babysit." I said, "For who?" He said for this little boy he had. I babysat for that child and come to find that that was his child. And his wife had left him. So I [inaudible] messing around, and I said – he kept telling me the strange things he could do for me and how I could do this and that. [inaudible] young girl – it kind of blew my head up. I was beginning to fall for all this good stuff he was telling me. So, as it went by, I got pregnant. When I got pregnant, I didn't know. I wanted to know where the baby going to come from. Said, "You pregnant." I said, "Pregnant?" I had went nine months, nine months with a baby, had never – didn't know. I said, "My belly keep getting big. I don't eat, but my belly keep getting big." And I kept on saying, "Oh, something's wrong." And the night that I went in labor, I kept crying and moaning and crying with these pains in my stomach. This lady told me, she said, "You sure you ain't pregnant?" I said, "What's pregnant?" I felt something jumping in my stomach. And she said, "You're going to have a baby. We better do something with you." So they carried me up to St. Mary's Hospital. I remember pulling and crawling up the back step, going all the way up the back, way up the back. I remember crawling up the back step. I got up there. They come over to me, say they got to shave me, and I start crying. [laughter] I started crying. I say, "Where are you going to shave me?" They kept on pulling on my legs, trying to go up there to check on me. I didn't want them to do that. They said, "Well, that's the onliest way the baby

going to come out.” And, oh, Lord, have mercy. “The baby’s got to come out that way?” Said, “Yeah.” That’s what the nurse said, “Yeah, that’s the way you got him.” I was like, “I didn’t. I don’t remember doing that. I don’t know why [inaudible] that’s happened to me. [inaudible] child and didn’t have a mother. I didn’t have a father. But I had Mrs. Barnes. She kept telling me that she thought there was something wrong with me. But I kept telling her I didn’t think so. So she said, “Well, you want to go live with the other lady, you go ahead. So I went to live with the other lady, Mrs. (Maisie?).” And then I had the baby. Was such a pretty little baby and had so much hair on its head. The lady told me, said, “You can’t raise this baby. You got to give this baby to this lady. She’ll take care of it.” I said, “Well, she’ll take care of it, but can I come see it every day?” Said, “Yeah.” I said, “Because I’m going to get me a job, and I’m going to work, and I’m going to buy a lot of pretty things for this baby.” And I did. I didn’t spend nothing on myself. I went bare-footed. And I took care, went to the thing, bought milk – didn’t know what I was buying, but I bought cans of Pet milk. I bought whatever a little baby, I thought, could eat. I bought it for the baby. This lady, she got ready to go places; I would go babysit for her and take care of the baby. But finally, I got married and, after I got married, I come to visit the baby and coming to get it. She told me no, said, “You can’t have the baby.” I said, “Well, if I have some more children and can I come get the baby then?” She said, “Well, one day you might have to her because I might be going home.” I didn’t know what she was talking about, “going home.” I said, “You got another home?” She said, “We all got another home. We’re going home with Jesus.” I said, “Well, He’s up in the sky. You can’t go up there. Not yet a while. You’re going to come back and get us.” She said, “No, one day, I’m going to leave, and this baby will be yours.” Which, it happened like that. The child was seven years old when she passed on, and she came to live with me. Ms. Reed and them taught me how to shuck oysters at the seafood factory. They taught me how to pick crabs.

CK: Seafood factory?

OMC: Yeah, down (Charles E. Davis?). That was the first time I got a job that I could work and make a little bit of money. Wasn’t paying no more than seventy-five cent. But if you was fast, you could make a few dollars. They paid – I think it was five cent a gallon. They had gallons of oyster like that. That’s what it was, fifty cent a gallon. It took so many of those oysters to fill up that gallon bucket. But we had some people that could really shuck fast, and some people could pick crabs fast. But I took – and I got married. I become to be a mother of six children. I worked. But when I first went down there to work at the seafood factory, I think I wasn’t married then. I was about fifteen. I had left the other job. I was about fifteen. And I walked in the place, and I saw all these oysters up on a box. I said, “They’re shucking bricks.” I thought they were big, muddy bricks, all the muddy oyster [inaudible]. I said, “What is –?” Miss Mary said, “Come here. I’m going to show you.” They had these big old rubber gloves on to put on your hand. And they had this knife. I said, “Lord, I don’t know what I’m looking at, shucking bricks. This is what my mind – I didn’t tell them nothing. Then I told Miss (Sophie?) – I said, “Miss (Sophie?), how you get something out of these things you all are shucking?” She said, “Now, if you just wait up for a minute, I’m going to show you what you do.” And Miss Mary said, “I can’t talk to – that girl’s just a dummy.” [laughter] Say, “She’s just as dumb as she can be, saying ‘never seen an oyster.’ You never seen a crab. You must be really out of the woods.” Miss Sophie said, “You know what, Mary? I wouldn’t say that about her. You know this might be –we think this girl is ...”. They all gave me an age. Everybody give me twenty-five. Some

gave me thirty. Some give me – everybody had a age for me. But I know I wasn't what they were saying. I just sat there. I wouldn't say nothing. I just would listen at them. They would talk about – [inaudible] old woman. They always called me "old woman." Said, "That old woman came here and trying to come up here trying to fool somebody. I bet she got a whole bunch of old children at home somewhere." I just listened. But they don't know that I had – advocating and communicating with Jesus. But I didn't say nothing to nobody else because I was taught to be obedient. And I was taught not to talk nothing against grown-up peoples. My daddy whipped me with one of those long, old switches one time because I said something. I didn't say nothing bad. But he told me whatever or wherever I go, you always obey grown-up people. And that was in my heart. And they just said everything about – and say, "Can you see how dumb she is?" Because I didn't say nothing, because I didn't talk back at them, they thought I was dumb. But I wasn't dumb. I wasn't dumb at all. I just was [an] obedient child. And they told another man, they said, "You think you'll be able to teach her how to shuck oyster?" Mr. Brown said, "You would be surprised. You can see something in that girl. See, that girl might wind up being able to out-shuck the average person out here. See, she ain't saying nothing, but she may not be dumb." And Miss Mary said, "She's dumb all right." [laughter] I just laughed to myself. Said she's dumb all right because anybody that stupid and can't get out there, now, how's she going to make a living?" Miss Sophie said, "Well, maybe she might go back to school." They all were grown. These were grown people, older people, grown, so I didn't say nothing. So finally, a guy came over there and told me, he said, "Now, I'm going to show you how to shuck the oyster." I said, "You can't shuck bricks." He said, "They're not bricks, honey." He said, "Wait a minute, I'm going to get some water." I said, "Well, what you going to do with it? Just throw a glass of water up there? Just show me." I said, "Maybe somebody'll wash them off." I started taking the hose and washing the oysters off, washing the mud off of them. But they were shucking them with nothing but mud on them. You couldn't even see what they were. So I asked him – I said, "Can you wash these down some?" He said, "Go in there and get you a bucket of water," is what the man said. "Go in there and get you a bucket of water and just keep carrying it and throwing it up on there, throwing it up on there until you get them washed off like you want." Well, I did that. I got them down to where I could see what they were, and I started shucking them. So after a while, the man started – when they'd take them, they had a oyster house, had a house in there where they put the oyster. The man started saying, "Okay." Gave him an idea. He told me he had a guy that would shove the oysters up and bring them in there and put them on [inaudible]. He said, "Take that hose and take some cold water and wash them off in there, where they're at. Wash them. Wash them down. Get that mud off of them and bring them in there." And did you know the whole house start washing them oysters down and shucking them? As it went along, that man said, "Hey, I got a little bit of sense, and she showed them the oysters wouldn't have so much mud, and you could shuck them like that." So I didn't say nothing. I didn't look for no whole lot of credit, and patting me on the back about nothing. It just was good for me. I could tell what they were. So anyway, they started then putting them in baskets and washing the mud off of them. Then everybody started washing the mud off of them, getting them up and bring them up, put them over the thing, and wash the mud off of them. And then you could tell they were oysters. So I shucked a few. I didn't shuck very many because your arm and your shoulder would be so tired, and you had big pads in your hand from holding that wooden knife in your hand. One time, my hand was just swollen. But I stayed there, and I worked.

CK: Somebody wants to say hello.

OMC: Well, it's a true story. And it kind of makes me kind of feel sad about it. But the truth sometimes make you feel sad.

CK: Your hands were sore?

OMC: My hands were swollen and all big and big pad [inaudible]. Sometimes, I could run my hand into it right now and feel that, feel that.

CK: Just a minute ...

OMC: So I went along like that for quite a few years. Then I decided I was going to go to night school, and I was going to try to change my life over and do something different.

CK: Well, before you go on to night school, talk more about those years. I've never been in an oyster-shucking house.

OMC: Oh, in the oyster shucking house, it had – it's nothing but a cement floor you stand on all day long. Had a cement floor and box with the hose into it. And then, by it having the box with the hose into it, you would shuck the oysters, you'd stab them, and you would open them. And the oyster be set [inaudible] ... and you put your hand, pat it like that, and it's a shucking block that you stab the oyster, and you raise it up in your hand, and you run the knife, and you ... [Telephone rings.]

CK: Just wait until the phone finishes. So you stab it?

OMC: You stab the oyster. You turn the shell over, and you cut it out, and you put it in the bucket. You continue doing it until you get the bucket full. The bucket would run up and be full. Then you could take that to the skimmer and dump it in the pan. The skimmer thing had holes in it. All the water would run off. They had a thing where they would wash them and [inaudible] them over there and put them in there, and they would weigh them. And you got fifty cent – I think it was fifty cent a gallon or fifty cent a pound or something. And days you would go in there, this shoulder [inaudible] thing, and I guess that's why sometimes I have a problem with shoulder now because pain and lift up – sometimes it would hurt [inaudible] doing something. I need to go back to my exercises and stuff like that for that. But sometimes, it'd be so cold, when you get in there, your gloves would be frozen with nothing but cold water into them. And sometimes you just had to stick your hands in some warm water or put your hands in something to try to warm them up so they [inaudible] be so cold sometimes. That's a hard living for – to [inaudible] the way they're doing it now. Now, they got a oyster house. They had a boiler plant in the oyster house, but it was all – you only had it in one corner. But there was a whole big, wide place that a whole bunch of people was working. And the water – standing in that water. You're wearing boots. You got boots on up to here.

CK: To where?

OMC: Up to your knees, up to here, and you got a apron, a rubber apron on. And you had to take your coat off because you couldn't – can't work in no coat. Man, Lord have mercy; it was something then. But now, the way they got seafood things set up, they got heat blowing everywhere, and it's comfortable in there now. I went in one not too long ago; it was pretty good. But I learned how to shuck the oysters. As the years went by, I shucked the oysters, and I become to be the fastest one in there, sure did. I shucked oysters. I used to come in there and get there late, and I would beat the average one that had been there – we usually go to work at 4:30 or quarter [to] five in the morning. We had a truck. A man would come up there [inaudible] truck and pick us up. But the truck didn't have no back on it. We would sit on wooden stools, wooden benches in the back of the truck. And there wasn't no heat back there. You would sit on those big wooden stools, one on that side, one on that. It was about twelve or fifteen people who would sit back there. And just like riding on the highway in a car with no doors or window down – that's how it was. It's unexplainable how it was. Then you would leave home at dark and get home dark; you never know when daylight was at home until weekends. Then picking the crabs, I don't know whether you've been in a crab place or not, but the crab house – you had seats to sit in. It was a much easier job than shucking oyster. The crab house got tables and pans and things for you to pick, and you would cut the fins off of the crab, and you would cut the little thing, and you would pick the crab. But I had problem with picking the crab because those hard fins used to cut my hands all up. Sometimes my hand would be cut up so bad you had to put tape on them. You had to tape up all your fingers all around where the crabs had cut your hands all up, just like a knife. Once your hands got wet, they did tear your hands up then. Some people they didn't bother. But me? I had a lot of problem with picking crab. I had every one of my fingers bandaged up, from that one, this one – all of them bandaged up. My hand [inaudible] bandage. I said, "One day, somebody's going to discover a good glove where they can hold that crab in." They did, but it was a big – it was the big old heavy gloves, and you couldn't work with them like that. You had to have some of your hand. Well, now, if they would have discovered gloves like they have now, those – what you call them? Those [inaudible] gloves, the ones that don't tear and stuff like that, now you could have made some money. But sometimes. my hands would be all cut. All up and down, your fingers would be cut. Most of the time, you put some bleach on them and just keep pouring bleach on it, and you kill them cut wounds on your hand. Something else, I tell you.

CK: Talk about the people in these places too. Was there a lot of them?

OMC: Yeah. It was a bunch of people, like twelve or fifteen people. Oh, no, at first, it was thirty-some people. Each one, every now and then, would find something else. As they come in, other people would teach them how to shuck. I used to shuck beside some girls, and they were so slow, they couldn't make no money. I would help them out. I put a little bit in their bucket or put some crabs into – we used to pick crabs – I and a couple more girls, we used to pick. She would trim up, and I would pick, and I would trim up, and she would pick. And we picked partners to try to make some money because, see, I was fast, and some of them wasn't fast. They couldn't make money. I would help them. It's good to help each other. Now, I know it was taking money out of my pocket. But still, I just wanted enough to survive. I didn't want to try to be greedy. Some people want to be greedy and try to just make it all. "Let me have it all." I would help other people in there. I would cut the crabs and help them pick. I would crack the claws, and I would give that to them to help them out when they went up to collect.

CK: So, is it the oyster house where there was maybe about thirteen people?

OMC: Oh, it was about thirty-something people first. And then they cut it down to – well, they didn't cut it down. All people started leaving because a lot of them started having a lot of trouble with their arms and backs and things. But I used to try to do exercise to try to make mine – to stay strong because they never really find a machine that could take the place of a person shucking oysters. They tried. They made several of them. But if they could have paid people where they could have got insurance and could have made some money, where they could get something done for they-selves or could have just paid them good money, the oyster business would still be going on because people love seafood, oysters, and crabs. But they can't. They won't pay them. They just made all the money for themselves and didn't pay the workers no money. Well, the highest they ever went in paying for the oysters, one guy told me – last week, I visited the oyster house. I like to go around and visit them. He told me they was only making – I think the oysters is about twenty-something dollars a quart. And they would shuck gallons, four-gallon pot, and two-gallon pot; in all that, you're getting four and six and eight quarts out of one. They only get paid for one. I would have liked to – they got places where you can kind of [inaudible] a little bit, where you can shuck. And I worked for Ron, who used to be on the seafood – that's my last place where I shucked oysters.

CK: Ron?

OMC: Yes.

CK: That's a first name?

OMC: His first name was Ron. Lord, I forgot what his last name was. But I can remember his first name, Ron. I think it was Stone. He might have been a Stone or something like that. But I shucked oysters for him. That was my last place of shucking oysters. I did it for him because he asked me if I would help him to get out some – do some specials. He had some special orders he wanted to get out. So I come down, and I shucked oysters at night, in the evening, and helped him out because I couldn't go in the morning. But I went down there at night, and I shucked until about ten o'clock at night. And he told me, he said, "Well, since you know how to shuck so good, I'm going to put you in the oyster shucking contest." And I won it. I sure did. I won it, for I was the fastest shucker for St. Mary's County and the county fair up there. They got my name on a plaque. I shucked twelve oysters in three minutes. That's the last time I shucked. Yeah. And he said, "I'm going to sponsor you to shuck oysters." And I did it. So him and (Jackie?) decided they were going to put me in. So I was supposed to go to Ireland to meet the champ there. But I never got a chance to go because you got a family, children, and things, and I couldn't go. But that's what I did for St. Mary's County. I was the fastest lady. Not the guys. I don't know. I never come up against a guy in St. Mary's. But I was the fastest woman because the lady from Virginia who did the oysters – and I think she did it in four minutes and fifteen seconds. She was the fastest in Virginia, so she came [inaudible] facing the champ in St. Mary's. So, I shucked against her. So every year, she's been up there, and she's always calling to let me know that she's going to be in St. Mary's County. She's looking for the champ. But I didn't go

back again because I really didn't have nobody to sponsor me. And then I didn't have a place to practice it, so I didn't go back.

CK: Congratulations.

OMC: Thank you.

CK: What were relations like between the workers and the owners at these places?

OMC: I guess it's like any other job. Some of them gets along good, and some of them don't. Some of them has a lot of complaints against jobs, every job you go on. But there, they didn't – the workers got along good because what you made was yours, and what they made was theirs.

CK: Where are you talking about?

OMC: At the seafood place. Now, all my other jobs, I got along good because I can't remember no time that I never got along with a person. When I used to be shucking oysters, my favorite songs I used to always sing was "I was standing by my window on one cold and cloudy day." I used to sing that song all the time.

CK: Sing a little of it.

OMC: Oh. [laughter]

CK: I love that song.

OMC: [singing] "I was standing by my window on one cold and cloudy day. Lord, I saw the hearse come a-rolling, came to carry my mother away. Will the circle be unbroken by and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better home awaiting in the sky, Lord, in the sky. Lord, I followed close behind her when they lay her in the grave. Lord, I tried to hide my sorrow when they laid her in the grave. Will the circle be unbroken by and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better home awaiting in the sky, Lord, in the sky. Yes, I spoken to the undertaker, undertaker, please drive slow, for that lady you are carrying, Lord, I hate to see her go. Will the circle be unbroken by and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better home awaiting in the sky, Lord, in the sky. When they carried her to her grave, Lord, yes, they lowered her in the ground. Then the tears start rolling down, Lord. I just hate to see her go. Oh, Lord, I tell you. That was such a sad song with me. When I would sing that, and I would look all around, I said, Lord, you know, everybody has a mother that go, but they hate to see her go. They really do, so it's something else.

CK: You used to sing that?

OMC: Yes, I used to sing it. I'd sing it all the time. I would sing that song. I loved it. I sing other songs. But that was my favorite when I used to be shucking the oyster, and I didn't know what the oyster was, and I didn't know what was going on. That was my favorite. [overlapping voices; inaudible] Yeah. I said to them – I had other songs. I sang a lot of other songs, but that was one [inaudible].

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

-

Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/26/2023