

Narrator: James Oliver Foote

Interviewer: Carrie and Michael Kline

Location: Coster, Maryland

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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: James Oliver Foote, born on June 6, 1918, in Coster, Maryland, shares his experiences growing up in a community with deep roots tracing back to slavery. Raised on Coster Road, his family worked in both farming and oystering to make a living. He began oystering at a young age, working on his family's canoe, Marie, until 1947. Foote describes the challenging working conditions, including long hours and pay disparities between Black and white workers. Despite efforts to unionize in the 1940s, local authorities and industry leaders thwarted these attempts. He recalls the cultural life in the shucking houses, where workers sang spirituals and blues to pass the time. Foote reflects on significant events, such as a near-hurricane in 1939, and discusses the decline of the local oyster beds. Overall, he provides a rich, personal perspective on the history of the Chesapeake Bay's oystering community.

Michael Kline: Today is June 16th, I believe. It's a Thursday. It's a real clear, dry – you might say – hot kind of day.

JOF: Hot. Yes, right. Better than yesterday.

MK: Yeah. Could you start off by saying, "My name is, "And telling us your name?"

JOF: My name is James O. Foote.

MK: James O. –

JOF: Foote. James Oliver Foote.

MK: And your date of birth?

JOF: June the 6th, 1918.

MK: So you're the big flu – influenza?

JOF: Yeah. I was born just the year that the Army ended World War I.

MK: So you were a sign of peace, I guess?

JOF: [laughter] I don't know, but it was a hard time for me.

MK: A hard time for you? What was it like then? Tell me about your people and where you were raised.

JOF: I was raised down in Coster. My parents were there – the Georges – I don't know whether you know them or not. The Georges down – or the Tongues – you know about the Tongues. The Tongues and Georges were my fore-parents' slave owners.

MK: Who was that?

JOF: The Georges and Tongues were my great-grandfather's – owned my great-grandfather.

MK: And they were located where?

JOF: Right there on Coster Road. We all was right there together. They was all on Coster Road. His name was Tom Foote – Thomas Foote.

MK: Who was that?

JOF: My great-grandfather.

MK: Do you know what year he was born?

JOF: No, I really don't. [laughter] It was before my time, and they never kept no records, you know?

MK: But he was born into slavery?

JOF: Yeah.

MK: Did you ever know him? Were you ever acquainted with him?

JOF: Never.

MK: He passed on? Tell me about the rest of the generations.

JOF: Well, the Johnsons – my grandmother was a Johnson. They all came from the same area, too, right down in – we called it Elms Creek. Not Coster, but Elms Creek. Just before you drop down the bottom going into Coster.

MK: Elms Creek?

JOF: Elms Creek.

MK: How would you describe that place to somebody who'd never seen it before?

JOF: Well, it's easy because you go right down – you go to (Byrd's?) Corner and you go right on down the road to – you know where (Baffert?) Road. You know where (Bragman?) Road? My home place was right between (Bragman?) and (Baffert?). My cousin got a big brick house on the right-hand side going down the road there now – (Burton?). Of course, he's passed on. But our home place – our family gets together, and they act up a little bit and let everything go away.

MK: They would do what?

JOF: The place where I was born, that was older than any house down there. It was – yeah, (Emma Bailey?) – my aunt, great-aunt, Emma Bailey. It was twelve in my family, nine boys, and three girls, and we all were raised up right there.

MK: What was the place like? Can you describe the house to me, the barn, the outbuildings? What was there?

JOF: It was just a building with an A-front. Remember them old-fashioned A-fronts? Because my father – he raised tobacco.

MK: Your father raised tobacco?

JOF: Yeah.

MK: Did he work on the water any, too?

JOF: Yes, he did.

MK: Tell us about your dad working on the water and how he came to be doing that.

JOF: Well, you see, on this end, in the fall of the year, it was oystering. And in the summer/spring of the year, they worked anywhere they could to make a living until oystering opened again – oyster season opened up again. It used to be the 15th of September that the river would open up for oystering because you couldn't sell them then. Most people planted them until the weather began to get cool. Then that wasn't a whole lot. I started oystering when I was thirteen. And the first man I saw, my father used to follow him, and I don't know why he did it. He just called him two (Grover?) boys. There was Captain (Alvin?) and his brother. And we would never come in from outside – up the river – not until he'd see him. Most times, we would be down the lower shore. I don't know if you know where the lower shore is or not. Or Point Patience. And he would be up [inaudible] coming in, and we could see that old big white boat. He'd say, all right, boys, time to go now. [laughter] We would go to (Sounds?) Wharf, put out oysters, and get back home at night about ten o'clock at night because we lived in Elm's Creek, you see? But we always followed him.

MK: You were oystering off of who's boat?

JOF: Off our boat. Off our own boat.

MK: You owned the boat?

JOF: My father.

MK: Can you describe the boat?

JOF: It was a canoe.

MK: What does that mean? How would you describe it?

JOF: Canoe – that's both ends sharp. You know what it is. The name was *Marie*.

MK: How did your dad come by the boat?

JOF: He bought it from Mr. Jim Siles (sp?). It wasn't a young boat. It was an old boat. I worked until – let's see. I worked until '47.

MK: On that boat?

JOF: On that boat.

MK: Tell me more about the boat. How long was it? How was it powered? Tell me everything about it.

JOF: Well, it first had a sail before my father got it. Then he turned around and put a (Midas?) engine in it.

MK: A what?

JOF: A (Midas?) engine – engine by the name of Midas Company. And then we put a [inaudible] in it. And the last one we put in was a four-cylinder Chevrolet.

MK: A four-cylinder Chevrolet?

JOF: A four-cylinder Chevrolet. She [inaudible] to the wind now. She was [inaudible]. In – I think it was 1939, we had a terrible – almost like a hurricane come down the bay, and I was the only one that went and headed toward it. Everybody else went to the lower shore. I went straight on to Saint Leonard. It so happened that a wave –

MK: [inaudible] what?

JOF: The waves blew over and hit two cylinders. See, that cut them cylinders, and that gave me two cylinders – enough power to push on. So I pushed on.

MK: Why did you decide to head into the storm instead of trying to run away from it?

JOF: Well, I always was taught that if you didn't drive the boat too hard, that you could go on. When we was oystering, we was supposed to have fifty bushels. That much water was – boat was underwater in the middle of it at all times. And, of course, oysters wasn't bringing nothing, either. I sold oysters for twenty-five cents a bushel off (Lump?). You know where (Lump?) is? It's right off from [inaudible] Creek. [inaudible] – sold them to him. Captain (Ben Woodman?) [inaudible] – twenty-five cents a bushel. I sold crabs for ten cents a dozen and couldn't sell them. I mean, soft crabs, not hard crabs. Now, Mr. Bill (Rutledge?) – you heard of him? You heard of Mr. Bill Rutledge, who used to have a hotel down in Solomons? Yeah.

MK: What about him?

JOF: We'd sell crabs to him – ten cents a dozen, soft crabs.

MK: Ten cents a dozen.

JOF: Worked Solomons Island [inaudible] for a dollar a day. Worked on the farm for seventy-five cents a day. That [inaudible] in 1940. I was getting a dollar – seven dollars – nine dollars a week.

MK: For?

JOF: Work on the farm. When the war broke out, I went and [inaudible] for five dollars a day and paid a dollar a day for going, and they'd take out a penny for Social Security – a cent on the dollar for Social Security. So it left me nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents.

MK: Tell me more about the *Marie*. Was that the name of the boat?

JOF: That was the name of the boat.

MK: How long was it?

JOF: Twenty feet long, seven feet wide.

MK: Seven feet? And how long were the tongs you were using?

JOF: Anywhere from twelve to thirty.

MK: Anywhere from –

JOF: Twelve feet to thirty feet long. Most of the time, we was working twenty-fours and twenty-six. But when we planted some oysters deeper, we had to go deeper – twenty-eight to thirty. Mr. Grover [inaudible] because he had patent tongs, too, but he stayed more up the river instead of going down the river, you see? And we had nippers, catch one at a time. We caught our forty bushels, me and my father and everybody, all the way from [inaudible] Creek to Elm's Creek. There was a boat nipping [inaudible] on this side. And on the other side, over at (Tucker's Point?) – you know where (Tucker's Point?)? Down that shore. That worked until they put the (manual?) diggers in there.

MK: Worked until what?

JOF: The (manual) diggers. The (manual?) diggers and trap [inaudible] because we had oysters all the way up and down them shores. If a little frost come, you could look – that water would be just as clear, and you could see the oysters just as nice. I'll tell you something else we had [inaudible] – a lot of eels. The shore was just – rock stone was just full of eels. We had a lot of seahorses in the grass, shrimps – sand shrimps. We had it all, and it all disappeared. I was struck by a shark in this river in the cove.

MK: You were what?

JOF: Struck by a shark in the mouth of the creek – Elm's Creek. It wasn't dug out then, and it got in on a high tide, and it couldn't get out. And we were swimming one morning, and it come up and rain. The boys weren't sure, [inaudible] Johnson, that old fat boy, got in the cab. And I put my head in the skiff, they [inaudible] the skiff, holding up [inaudible] while someone pushed me right on in the boat. A shark – a little shark. It split my foot open. And a couple days later, then a man saw him. He gradually got out.

MK: When you were working with your dad on the *Marie* when you were thirteen, what was a typical day like for you? What time did you start out, and when did you come back?

JOF: Four o'clock in the morning.

MK: Four o'clock what?

JOF: In the morning. Eight or nine o'clock – nine, ten o'clock at night. Because what we would do – we'd go out in the morning and fish to have fish, you see? Then when the time come [inaudible], we could go on oystering. And everybody did the same thing, fished – in fact, we didn't sell the fish because my father would salt them down, have them for the winter. You could buy five fish for a quarter – five [inaudible] like that for a quarter. [inaudible] was a penny a piece.

MK: So you started out at four o'clock in the morning?

JOF: In the morning.

MK: And where did you head for?

JOF: For the (Lumps?). For the middle of the river, then (Lumps?), where the fish would be feeding, you see?

MK: When you were thirteen years old, that was in 1931?

JOF: Yeah.

MK: Early '30s. How many boats would you see out on the river at that time?

JOF: Thousands.

MK: Thousands of what?

JOF: Boats. Everywhere you looked, it was nothing but boats. You could go to Elm's Creek and get on one skiff and go boat to boat. You could walk right to almost every boat. They were tied up so close. And Hawk's Nest was below it. We worked Hawk's Nest. Practically everybody from [inaudible], Solomons, [inaudible] Creek, all around, and the oysters grow – looked like overnight had them little bills on them. Overnight. We'd catch fifteen, twenty bushels every day. I don't know whether you knew him or not, the police captain, Captain Tom (Ropner?). He would come and take his feet and put them right into the oysters [laughter] – push them down. That would break the bills off of them and make them smaller.

MK: The bill of an oyster?

JOF: Yeah. See, oyster grows a bill – real thin. And if you just push on it, it'll fall right on off. So then you could get a measurement on you. He had a little cup – one oyster over that cup, he can charge you for it.

MK: So he was the enforcement officer?

JOF: Yeah. [inaudible]

MK: Did he have a pretty fast boat?

JOF: Oh, yeah, his was fast. His was faster than ordinary boats – had a bigger motor. But – what's his name? He had one fast and a small one, too. What was the man's name? He had a son named (Grafton?). Did you know him? He had his arm like this. That was [inaudible] Solomons. [inaudible]. Grafton [inaudible] – you know him? Lived on Solomons. [inaudible] You know them. [inaudible] He used to work the bay.

MK: But you all weren't out in the bay too much, were you?

JOF: Only when it froze up. When it froze up, or we had [inaudible] over here. So we'd go to [inaudible], go down and cut ice and tong oysters on ice. We did that for two months one time – two straight months. See, because when it froze up in the river, there was nothing you could do.

MK: How many bushels could you tong up a day through the ice?

JOF: Fifteen, twenty, thirty bushels. See, some people was faster than others. Yeah. Then drag them – [inaudible] up to (Flag Point?) and [inaudible] Denton's oyster house ...

MK: What about the oyster houses – shucking houses themselves? What do you remember about them?

JOF: I remember when they started at twenty-five cents a gallon to shuck them. The first one, I think, was Old Man Dowell – down in Dowell. No, I'm wrong. The first one was Old Man Jess Coster. He had a little place in Elm's Creek. Then Old Man Dowell. And then below us, the (Woodburns?), the (Silases?) – there was two sister (Silases?) – (Ellen?) and (Linwood?) Silas first. And then Old Man Jim (Silas?) and Edward and [inaudible] Dowell. They was the ones that closed it up. And then Denton – because Denton had the biggest house. One time, he had a hundred shuckers. And then there was a picture in the back of [inaudible]. Then [inaudible] Silas went to (Benedict?), because years back, there was some barrel packers when the steamboats was running – pack them in barrels and ship them to Baltimore.

MK: How big a barrel?

JOF: Ordinary-size barrel.

MK: Ordinary size?

JOF: But they was all (selection?) counts oysters like that, you know?

MK: Did you ever work in any of the –?

JOF: Oyster houses?

MK: Yes.

JOF: I worked (Silas?). I [inaudible] shells from oysters.

MK: How old were you when you started that?

JOF: I was twenty-eight. I was married.

MK: That was the first time you ever worked in a –

JOF: Oyster – oh, we left out one oyster house, Dan (Barry?).

MK: Dan –

JOF: Dan (Barry?). He was in Elm's Creek. And then, across the river, he was buying for Denton. He was selling some to Richard (Knott?) and Herbert (Knott?).

MK: Tell me what it was like when you went to work in – was it (Silas?)?

JOF: Silas – two dollars a day, four o'clock in the morning to seven at night.

MK: Four o'clock to –

JOF: Four o'clock in the morning to seven at night.

MK: You were standing all that time?

JOF: Oh, no, you're not standing. You're running. When you got thirty or forty oysters, shuckers, and by the time you [inaudible] your oysters and [inaudible] the shells out – we had to [inaudible] the shells to the top of a telephone – electric pole. Go right on up, make it until you get to the top of the electric pole, up until your head almost hit the electric wire. And I [inaudible] oyster shells, too – [inaudible] throw them on the boat and took them in the river and throw them out. We put on ice three thousand bushels a day – [inaudible] them, put them on the boat, and carry them out. (Silas?) had the old (Sterling?), sister to the boat that [inaudible] had. He had William T. (Sterling?). Them was boats from Eastern Shore. It was owned at Eastern shore – Todd [inaudible] ...

MK: Let's see. You were twenty-eight years old when you went to work there.

JOF: Yeah.

MK: Could you describe the shucking house, how big it was, and how many people worked there?

JOF: It was about thirty-five that worked in that house.

Carrie Kline: The (Silases?).

JOF: (Silas?).

MK: Was it as big as a tobacco barn? How big was the building?

JOF: Not quite as big as a tobacco barn because a tobacco barn is sixty feet long. Most of them is. That's what I had. I had two sixty-foot barns.

MK: So this wasn't that big?

JOF: It wasn't quite that big. But he had an oyster thing in there that would pick the oysters out. A fellow from Jersey brought it. It had little spoons – just looked like spoons – and just was the size of an oyster. And it selects, counts, all that, and you'd put it in that spoon, and it would drop it in the right buckets all the way around. A fellow from Jersey [inaudible] brought it from Jersey up here because he would shuck a lot of oysters for Jersey.

MK: So it was a machine?

JOF: A machine – oyster grader.

MK: Oyster grader. But they still had to be opened by hand.

JOF: Oh, they had to be opened by hand. I had a cousin who could shuck – in fact, my wife could shuck twenty-two gallons a day. I had a cousin who could shuck around thirty gallons a day. Another boy – I don't know whether you heard of him or not – anybody on Solomons Island would know him – called him James (Polk?). And he could shuck thirty-five or forty gallons a day – a long day shuck. He could make one shell, catch the other before it hit the floor.

MK: Faster than the eye could see, huh?

JOF: I'm telling you, he really could. Now, my wife won the shucking contest at Saint Mary's one time.

MK: How many did she have to shuck to win that?

JOF: She had to shuck – there was so many oysters. I just remembered now, but she had to shuck so many oysters in so many minutes.

MK: And she won the contest?

JOF: She won the contest.

MK: Back to the shucking house. Was everybody standing all day long? Were they on their feet?

JOF: Standing all day long on little boxes about that wide, and you'd stand up in them all day long, and you got them oysters – you'd put oysters up on the table a little hole for raking shells back. And sometimes, we couldn't keep the shells down. They would be walking in shells. Four men [inaudible] shells, and the benches were that tall.

MK: So they were standing on a box, did you say?

JOF: In a box.

MK: Why would they be standing in a box?

JOF: That would keep everybody equally. There was some left-handed shuckers and some right-handed shuckers. But most left-handed shuckers learned to shuck right-handed.

MK: So this box helped define the space that they worked in?

JOF: That's right.

MK: Can you say that?

JOF: Yeah.

MK: And what did people do all day? Did they ever sing?

JOF: Oh, yes, they'd sing. They'd curse one another. They'd do a little bit of everything [inaudible]. But they were more happier. There were pretty happy people. You might once in a while get a little grouch, but they always was off to himself.

MK: So there was a good spirit in the place?

JOF: It was. It was always a good spirit, except they'd try to cut them on the oysters or something. Then everybody would get mad. See, that would happen a lot of times in the river, especially. Mr. Denton would go to [inaudible] and get a load of oysters and come back and tell you that he got cut. He got a raise, but he'd tell us that he got a cut. And he'd cut the oystermen. See, another thing – at that time, you didn't buy the oysters. You bought the man and the boat. Now, the white man got from five to ten cents more on a bushel than the colored person got. Same oysters, but that's the way they worked – the system.

MK: What did that feel like to you?

JOF: Well, there was nothing we could do about it. There was nothing you could do about it.

MK: The pay rate was different for white and colored?

JOF: Yes.

MK: What did that feel like to the colored people, the people who were getting less money? How did they feel about that?

JOF: Well, they talked about it, but there was nothing they could do about it, so they just [inaudible] go ahead and take what they could get. Because, like I said when I was telling you about Hawk's Nest, you was getting thirty-five cents a bushel, but the white man was getting forty cents and forty-five. [inaudible] and Captain John (Russell?) and all them fellows – yeah.

MK: Was that true in the shucking houses, too? Did they pay less?

JOF: Oh, no. They paid the same in the shucking house.

MK: Whether you were Black or white?

JOF: Because there wasn't too many whites in the shucking house.

MK: Did any whites work in the shucking house?

JOF: A few. Not too many.

MK: Do you remember who any of those people were? Were there certain families that tended to do it?

JOF: Yeah, [inaudible] and – let's see. He shucked there a while, but he didn't shuck too long – (Humphrey?) and James (Bonds?) and different ones. Old Man Johnson – Norman Johnson. Now, how many worked in Solomons, I don't know, but I'm talking about in my area.

MK: So it's just a handful of white folks?

JOF: Yeah. That's hard work.

CK: [inaudible]

MK: What was the other shucking house? Was there another one that you worked in, or was that the only one?

JOF: That's the only one that I worked in.

Richard Dodds: Were you there when they closed?

JOF: Yeah.

RD: Why did they close when they did?

JOF: Run out of beds of oysters. They couldn't get the shuckers – see, when they went to shucking by the pound, it was a different thing. See, because then you shuck eight [inaudible] cup for a pint. Then when the inspectors wasn't around, they would slip the eight-pint cup out and put in a ten-pint cup. He threw more pints on you. The same they did with the tubs of the oysters. They did a twenty-one-and-a-half-inch tub, but when the man wasn't around, they'd put a twenty-two-and-a-half-inch tub in because they could switch them down [inaudible], you see? But you still had the privilege of measuring that tub when it got in your boat. When it got in your boat, you could take and measure the tub. If you didn't like it, then you'd send it back.

MK: So I'm trying to get it straight now. Your job at the shucking house was to keep the shell –

JOF: Keep the oysters in the building. Take the oysters off the boat. Keep the oysters in the building. Keep the oysters on the table and the shells out. Then late at night, help pack – load the trucks and send them to Baltimore.

MK: For two dollars a day?

JOF: Two dollars a day.

MK: And when did the plant actually close?

JOF: That was right after the war.

MK: So you were out of a job then?

JOF: Oh, no.

MK: No?

JOF: No, I went crabbing. I've done a little bit of everything. I'd done everything, I guess, that a man can do. I've put in swimming pools. I've done all of it. And drywall – that was my last job, doing drywall. I did drywall for 18 years. You got a family; you got to keep moving. I hung sheetrock in this house. That was my last job.

RD: Do you remember a fellow by the name of McManny coming down from Baltimore for a few years and building an oyster house there on the river?

JOF: Maney?

MK: McManny

JOF: McManny. Yeah, he was the big man. He was the man that buys all the oysters from the rest of the people.

MK: Do you remember much about him or about the oyster house?

JOF: No, I don't. See, he was the one that was buying oysters long before they put oysters down here. He was buying from them when Old Man Webster – [inaudible] Webster and Woodburn and all them fellows was running oysters in sailboats back and forth to Baltimore. He was buying them. Old Man Ed (Breedon?) and all of them. I got some nails down at the house that Old Man Ed (Breedon?) bought for Old [inaudible] that he had running oysters in galvanized square nails, I guess about a hundred and some years old. But what them fellows would do – they'd wait for a freeze. That's when they would get that big sail, get a load of oysters, and get into Baltimore and freeze up. They could sell them much more – get more money for them.

MK: What do you mean?

JOF: You see, they'd buy a load of oysters in the wintertime, and when they'd get up there and freeze up, they can't get back, they can't get no more oysters, and they'd get a better price for what they got on the boat.

MK: So, they'd just go up there and hold them until the freeze?

JOF: No, they wouldn't exactly hold them, but they would pray for a freeze. [laughter] And see, they would get more money. The oysters they bring in now were five dollars a dozen. I looked at the price of them yesterday. [inaudible] were \$3.45, I think, now a dozen.

RD: You mentioned a fellow by the name of Jesse Coster who had a shuck house on (Helen's?) Creek, and you told me a little bit about him on the phone. Can you remember anything about him and his shuck house, the little place that he had?

JOF: [inaudible]? Yeah, he had a sailboat.

MK: Who is this, now?

JOF: Old Man Jesse Coster. When I was six years old, he carried us to Eastern Shore to pick strawberries in that boat. But he had – Old Man [inaudible] – you wouldn't know him. He was the skipper on that boat, and he had a little oyster house. His oyster house wasn't much bigger than this room. They were Truman's Point. He had two or three shuckers, you know? He lived in [inaudible]. You know the curve going out in [inaudible] when you make the turn? That was his place on the left.

RD: What happened to that little shuck house?

JOF: It fell down. It wasn't on [inaudible]. It was on Truman. Little place – that's what they called Meathouse Cove. You got it there?

RD: Well, I couldn't find it on the map, so I brought a copy with me. If you could indicate it before we leave, I would appreciate it.

JOF: In coming out there on the left-hand side, that was Horseshoe Bottom. They're the [inaudible]. And then my old grandmother's place, that was going up there where Captain Dan [inaudible] had the oyster house. That was (Gordon's Cove?).

MK: Gardens?

JOF: Gordons.

MK: Gordon's Cove or Gardens Cove?

JOF: Gordon's Cove.

MK: Gordon's Cove.

RD: You also mentioned a fellow by the name of Pitcher up by (Broom's Island?). Could you talk a little bit more about him – what you remember about him and his operation?

MK: Who is this?

JOF: Pitcher. He used to buy – he had a little old boat – what do you call it? It come from up there around Shady Side. But he had a place on the back of the island. He used to buy oysters.

RD: Did you ever sell oysters to him?

JOF: Yeah.

RD: Did he actually shuck oysters or just buy them?

JOF: Well, most of them, he bought them. And also, Captain (Sewell?) – (Sewell?) always bought them and carried them to Baltimore.

MK: What did they sing when they sang in the shucking houses?

JOF: Well, most of them were singing spirituals. One or two might have been singing the blues, but most of them – people was – of course, they were more middle-aged people. They were happy.

MK: Do you remember any of the spirituals particularly that they sang?

JOF: Some of them – “Old Time Religion” and it was – let's see. “If I Walk Through the Valley” and “Shadows of Death” and different ones like that. They was all old, old people singing. “How I Got Over.” “My Soul Look Back and Wonder.”

MK: Can you sing a little of that one?

JOF: Nope, I can't sing at all.

MK: You're not a singer?

JOF: I'm not a singer.

MK: But you liked to hear it?

JOF: Oh, I liked to hear it, but I'm not a singer. My family was. See, I had a throat operation, and I done had everything. The doctor told me to not even whisper. See, I was – the doctor gave me three years to live in 1937. I had a big knot. You see that? Radiation did that. And I came out and went in the Army – come out and got married and went in the Army, came back and raised a great big family. So he's still got something for me.

CK: [inaudible]

RD: [inaudible]

MK: Did people bring their dinner with them to work?

JOF: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they brought their – they couldn't buy their dinners. They would go out and buy dinners sometimes, but most everybody bought their breakfast and dinner because most of them would – sometimes would start shucking around three or 3:30 in the morning. Then sometimes, they wouldn't shuck all day. They'd shuck until all the oysters was gone.

MK: Did they give them time for lunch?

JOF: Oh, they gave time for lunch because they'd take time for lunch. They were their own bosses. They could take as much time as they wanted to for lunch.

MK: Because they're working by the piece?

JOF: Piece.

CK: Was there competition, then?

JOF: How do you mean by –

CK: Well, I want to get more oysters on my table so I can –

JOF: Oh, no, you would be a split. Well, sometimes people would reach over and take some of your oysters. But you had a certain split for each person.

CK: Sometimes they'd reach across, though?

JOF: Oh, yeah. Sometimes they would reach across. Somebody had a better-looking pile of oysters – of big oysters, they would reach over and pick up – you know?

RD: At the time you were there, how were the oysters graded, and how were they packed?

JOF: They were graded on standards, selects, and counts – three grades. Sometimes extra counts and extra selects. And they were packed in gallon cans. Because we had a packer, we would pack pints, quarts, and gallons.

CK: What do you mean, a packer?

JOF: You just would run your oysters around it, and you had a container sitting, and then the tops come right over and flipped down.

MK: Can them right there?

JOF: Right there.

MK: Did those go out by steamboat or by truck?

JOF: Truck.

MK: Later by truck?

JOF: Later by truck.

CK: Do you remember the steamboats at all?

JOF: Yeah, I remember [inaudible]. Yes. She used to run this [inaudible].

CK: Do you remember the steamboats?

JOF: Yeah. Yeah, I remember the steamboats. [inaudible] up here had a garage [inaudible] – his uncle had a steamboat run from Solomons to Lower Marlboro.

CK: What was it called? Do you remember?

JOF: (Fizi?). The boat was named (Fizi?).

MK: (Fizi?).

CK: What's that mean?

JOF: No, I'm wrong. He was named (Fizi?). The boat was named *Anne Arundel*.

CK: *Anne Arundel*?

JOF: They'd run from wharf to wharf all the way up to Lower Marlboro. How he got turned around at Lower Marlboro, I don't know, but he did.

CK: Why do you say that?

JOF: It's a narrow place to turn around in.

CK: What were the boats like?

JOF: The old boat was – the boat was forty, forty-five feet long, about, and tall. It carried everything – horses, cows, sheep – it carried everything. Bought it in Solomons and put it on the big boat in Solomons. That was big – the one in Solomons was a side-wheeler. You seen a side-wheeler? Yeah.

CK: But this one wasn't a side wheeler?

JOF: No, it was a straight motor. It was beautiful at nighttime. You'd see them light boats going up and down the river, all lit up, you know?

CK: So there were other steamboats?

JOF: Yeah, there was a lot of steamboats around here once. Yeah, my dear. That was the only transportation you had was water. You see, these later years, they started transportation with vehicles. But all the other transportation was by water. Everything was hauled by water. [inaudible] – everything. Tomatoes. I don't know how they kept the tomatoes going to the factory without going bad.

CK: So you remember seeing a lot of them?

JOF: Oh, yeah. I've seen [inaudible] going up this river.

CK: What's that?

JOF: Fish, them big – dolphins. I've seen them go up this river with good, clear water, jumping up and down, playing.

CK: So, what happened to the steamboats?

JOF: Well, the trucks run them off the road. They couldn't get the trade after the trucks started running. It was much faster.

MK: When did all that happen?

JOF: Well, it's kind of hard for me to tell you, but the last one – I think it was in the '30s I've seen come up this river.

MK: So you worked on your dad's boat until '47? And then, did you work on Grover's?

JOF: Oh, yeah. Him and I, we used to catch oysters just for catching oysters, you know? We'd go about once or twice a week. Because him and I – we'd been working farms close together all the time, and we were just like this all the time because his farm was in back of the one I was working. We always have been close.

RD: When you were at the oyster house, who was there, mainly from the Silas family? Were they down there every day supervising or looking after things?

JOF: Yes, one. Edward Silas. He would be there.

MK: How was he to be around?

JOF: He was okay. He was all right.

CK: What was he like?

JOF: He was a gentleman. He was a nice man. Because my parents and my mother's people grew up under his people all the time. So we had no problem. My mother was a Bishop, and his father and my mother's father – they was all just real close together all the time.

CK: What other characters were around there?

JOF: Huh?

CK: What other characters were around the place?

JOF: Well, you'll always find some, but you don't like to mention them.

CK: We don't need names, just personalities.

JOF: Now, his father was a comical man – Edward Silas's father was.

CK: Comical?

JOF: Yes, he was. He would say funny things. He would curse. He wouldn't curse like nobody else, you know? You would know what he would mean to say, but he wouldn't come out with it.

MK: Do you remember Pardoe's store?

JOF: Yeah. Pardoe was the one that gave [inaudible] their name.

MK: What do you mean by that?

JOF: He had a little store up there, and he would stay up there all night long and write money orders and different things for people. And it ended up people was coming in and leaving the other post office behind. He really made Lusby. Now, Lusby come all the way mostly down in Solomons. Old Man Pardo had a post office. He'd run a little post office in the corner of that store up there, that old green store. He was a nice man. The whole family was.

CK: You said they'd cash their checks there?

JOF: Money orders – make money orders, write money orders. See, one time, you'd go to the post office, and the postmaster would write the money order. And he'd sit up all night long, writing money orders for people from Solomons every which way.

CK: What about getting paid from the shuck house? How'd that work?

JOF: Huh?

CK: How did it work getting paid at the shuck house?

JOF: At the oyster house?

MK: Yeah.

JOF: Oh, they was getting thirty-five cents a gallon of shucking oysters. They started out twenty-five cents.

MK: When was payday, and how did that work?

JOF: Friday or Saturday, whatever day that they stopped shucking.

CK: And did they pay you in a special token, or how did that work?

JOF: No, they'd give you money in an envelope, just like you do right now.

MK: Did the shuckers ever have to stand up to the boss and say we won't work for that little?

JOF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they'd do it, but that didn't help them none.

CK: They'd do what?

JOF: They even had a union. They tried to get a union in here one time. And it didn't work out.

MK: Who tried to get the union?

JOF: The shuckers. A fellow come from New Jersey trying to develop a union here.

CK: What happened?

JOF: They just [inaudible] and just wouldn't let it come through, the county commissioners and everybody else and [inaudible] – the big leaders around.

MK: When was that, roughly?

JOF: That was in the '40s.

MK: Before the war or after the war?

JOF: Yeah, before the war. But some of the shuckers left here and went to Jersey and went shucking oysters. They couldn't get a job, so they went to Jersey.

MK: And they had a union in Jersey?

JOF: Oh, yeah.

MK: What was it, a shuckers' union?

JOF: A shuckers' union, yeah. Oyster union, yeah. See, because, in the spring of the year, most of these people used to just leave here and go to Jersey to dredge. They'd go up there and dredge for a month, a month and a half up in Delaware. It hasn't been easy around here. It's better now, but it hasn't been easy, I tell you.

MK: Does that mean it hasn't been easy for people of color, or it hasn't been easy for everybody?

JOF: People of color.

MK: Can you talk about that – what do you mean [by] "a little bit?"

JOF: Well, we just didn't get – you didn't get the opportunity to do the things that you had the ability to do. If you know it, they wouldn't give it to you. I know once a carpenter – a colored person couldn't be a carpenter, not on a big job. He could be a laborer, but he couldn't be a carpenter. One time, he could be a bricklayer laborer, but he couldn't be a bricklayer. They just wouldn't give it to him. Did you grow up around here?

MK: No. That's why we're asking – trying to understand.

JOF: Yeah.

MK: Well, the fellow that told me about you was a little boy when you were a grown man around Pardoe's. He could remember you around Pardoe's grocery. That's how come I asked you about it. Ricky Shelor. Do you happen to remember him?

JOF: I know Ricky, yeah. Yeah, I know him. Ricky's grandfather and I worked on the same farm.

MK: Bowen?

JOF: Bowen, yep. And his uncles and his grandfather, all of them – they was working on (Pines?) Farm down there. Ricky's father hadn't too long died. He builds those little model boats, Ricky do.

MK: You've seen them?

JOF: His boats? Oh, yeah. I've seen them several times. I'm one year older than his grandfather.

MK: But his grandfather's been gone a long time?

JOF: Not too long. His grandfather was born in 1919, and I was born in 1918 – Floyd. His name was Floyd Bowen. His father's dead now. [inaudible] father's dead.

MK: Well, he thought a lot of you.

JOF: We've been friends around a long time. I've always tried to treat everybody right, and that's why I've been getting along so good.

MK: Anything else about the –?

CK: I keep wondering whether they used any of those shucking houses when it was crab season.

JOF: Denton did. Denton used them for crab season. But he's shut down now altogether.

MK: So they didn't pick crabs in these oyster –

JOF: Oh, yeah. They picked crabs. (Al Law?) was the first one that started it – picking crabs.

MK: Who was that?

JOF: Law, down in Solomons. Then (Barrett?) and then Denton. See, Denton was bringing people from over down in Mexico and all around up there picking crabs. But they shut down. They went broke.

CK: What did it use to be like?

JOF: What's that, crabs? Well, it's hard to tell because everybody got a different crab to pick. Some picked claws, and some picked the rest of the crab, you know? What they did was picking them – shipping [inaudible] over there, too, you know – over to Denton's. But they went broke,

so they closed. They done tore that place down now and put a lunchroom there. (Stony's?), isn't it? I think (Stony's?).

MK: What's the roughest day you ever had out on the water, do you think?

JOF: Well, the roughest day that I ever had on the water was the day I was telling you about in '33, '34. That was the roughest. It wasn't rough. I thought it was fun the day we had the storm [that] flooded Solomons. That was in '36. Flooded everything from the bridge back. That's when I met the (Langley?) boys – Red (Langley?) and all them boys. They all was about the same age. They was going around and putting numbers on boats then. That was their job, putting numbers on boats.

MK: Numbers on boats?

JOF: Boats.

CK: Why numbers?

JOF: Well, see, any boat that's a certain size then had to have a number on it.

RD: Like a license plate, I guess.

JOF: Yeah, on the bow. They had steady hands. They could put them figures up there.

CK: So they were shucking both crabs and manos together?

JOF: Yeah, some shucked crabs and some shucked manos. But you understand, they had different tables.

MK: So what was all that like?

JOF: Well, it was just something that they could make some money. That was it. Crab shuckers – manos shuckers a little easier than crab shuckers. I don't know. I guess they'd shuck thirty, forty pounds a day – got good crabs, you know? And the little manos just about that long.

CK: How long?

JOF: About that long, most of them. Three-something a dozen.

MK: Did they use to be a different size?

JOF: Oh, yeah. Some of them would grow that long. Some of them were called black butts. The shell would be black. Up in Point Patience, up that shore up there, there would be some nice manos. And down on the island – Sandy Point – the tide would make low. You would go way out there and dig out to the big one – to the buoy by hand when the tide went down. That's the

only time you dug manos – when the tide [inaudible] go down. But manos diggers done away with that.

MK: What do you mean?

JOF: What? See, they dig all the time. They'd stir the bottom up, and that's killed everything. They cover up more than what they get, especially oysters. Because manos – he can live in water. He can go back in again. But oysters, once he's covered up, he'll die. Same thing with crabs. I remember we used to have grass that tall around the shoals. So old soft crabs would come up top and lay right up on top of them. That's all gone. Now, they're trying to get it back and planting grass. We used to sell sand shrimps for a dollar a gallon for chumming. Now, you can't find grass with sand shrimps in it.

MK: Well, it's been great sitting in with you this morning.

JOF: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

MK: You're giving us the kind of history that isn't in the books anywhere. We appreciate it. Is there anything else we should talk about?

JOF: Oh, I don't know.

CK: I want to know how in the world you – I've really enjoyed this. I just hear you talk about what it was like, how people were treated different, which color you were when you came in in the boat, and all those differences. How did a mother or a preacher – how did you teach young children to get through all that?

JOF: Well, I guess it was because all these other years, they'd come down with the same thing. After a white person got fifteen, sixteen years old, you couldn't call him by his name. You had to put a "Mister" or "Miss" to it or something. And then your [inaudible] would hold it up to it. I'll never forget – (Clara Baffert?) and I were the same age, and one morning, I spoke to her – "Good morning, Clara." And her father looked up at me and said – old man said she got old enough now for you to put a [inaudible] to her name. I said, "Like what?" He said, "Miss." I said, yes, [inaudible], but not being a [inaudible]." [laughter] I got some kind of beating for that. My mother tore me up, I'm telling you. Yeah, but you had to do them things.

MK: It seems like a kid would get mad about that.

JOF: Yeah. And it was like that until after the war. Even in the Army, it was the same way. But after the war, they changed around. There was just as much Jim Crow in the Army as there is anywhere else.

MK: What's that, now?

JOF: There was just as much Jim Crow in the Army as there was anywhere else. And I know because I was there.

CK: You were where?

JOF: In the Army. I was on Okinawa when they dropped the atomic bomb. And they told us it was an earthquake. That's what they did.

CK: What'd you think?

JOF: What?

CK: What'd you think?

JOF: Well, there wasn't much to think about, to tell you the truth, because we still thought it was an earthquake until we found out it was different. I could look right in Japan since I was twelve miles from Japan. Okinawa – that's twelve miles from Japan. We're right back at it again, only a little different. But we did know who was fighting. Now, they don't know who they're fighting.

CK: So then you came back to southern Maryland, and you say it was a little bit different?

JOF: It wasn't for a while. Because I was in the Signal Corps, I could have stayed in California and got a job with the telephone people. But I couldn't get a job. Could get it now, but I couldn't get it then. I couldn't get a job, yeah. So I come back and go back doing the same thing over again.

CK: Did it continue to be dangerous to be a Black man then?

JOF: In a way, yes. Yeah, I'll tell you – right down here, the Legion, I cleaned and kept that grass cut the whole time I work for (Leslie's Liquor), and I couldn't join the Legion. Every time I asked to join the Legion, they said it was too full. I got a right to join the Legion.

CK: Was there, actually –? It seems like I heard there might have even been some violence around Lusby.

JOF: About the Legion or the people?

CK: About a hanging.

JOF: Oh, years back, they used to hang all over Solomons. That little island down there, [inaudible] Island, that's where they used to bury the people after they'd lynch them.

CK: This was your day? In your day?

JOF: Yeah. In my early days, yeah. There was a store down there called (Webster's Store?), and that's where all the bullies used to hang out – Old Man Johnson and different ones that would be approaching the boys all the time, fighting them, killing them, beating them up.

CK: I know it's hard stuff to talk about, but there aren't too many people left who can give a history. I heard something happened, even maybe in the '60s.

JOF: Yeah. My nephew and my cousin got killed. That was on the highway, though. Nobody ever knew what happened to them.

CK: I mean a hanging.

JOF: No, there just wasn't hanging. Yes, they had a hanging right across here – right across the road there when they was building the power plant. Found a boy hanging on the doors – on the porch, right across here on [inaudible] place.

CK: On what place?

JOF: [inaudible]. Right over there [inaudible] BG&E [inaudible] now.

CK: What happened?

JOF: Don't know. All I know, he was hanging. [inaudible] could find him. [inaudible]. They found him hanging.

MK: So how do you find the strength to –

JOF: I don't know. I guess I better stop the [inaudible]. [laughter]

MK: Thank you again.

CK: Thank you.

JOF: You're welcome.

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

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 4/21/2023