

Narrator: Donald "Duck" Mattingly

Interviewer: Carrie Kline

Location: Solomons, 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: The oral history interview of Donald Mattingly, conducted by Carrie Kline, provides a rich account of life and work in the oyster and seafood industry in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Donald Mattingly, known locally as "Duck," discusses his family's long history in the seafood business, focusing on the shucking houses run by his father and grandfather. Born on May 4, 1944, Mattingly grew up immersed in the operations of the shuck house and offers detailed descriptions of the daily routines, the people involved, and the methods used in processing oysters. Mattingly recalls the workers who lived on-site and who stayed in makeshift accommodations. He describes the process of shucking oysters, the role of the foreman, and the equipment used, such as stainless steel tubs for cleaning oysters and various types of cans for packaging them. Mattingly also touches on the economic aspects of the business, including the pricing of shucked oysters and the sales channels through which they were distributed to markets in Washington, Baltimore, and beyond. The interview captures the decline of the seafood industry starting in the late 1970s, detailing how environmental changes and overfishing led to a decrease in the availability of crabs, fish, and oysters. Mattingly shares personal anecdotes about the community, the lifestyle, and the challenges faced by his family as they adapted to these changes.

Carrie Kline: Can you say, “my name is,” and introduce yourself?

Donald Mattingly: My name is Donald Mattingly. I’m called “Duck” in the local towns because my name was Donald; you had to have a duck. Want the address too?

CK: Well, how about a date of birth?

DM: May 4, 1944.

CK: Can you just tell us about your people and where you were raised?

DM: Well, I was raised in the – right here in the seventh. This is my home place. This is what you would call the shuck house we’re in now. We’re talking about the shuck house. This would be the newer shuck house. They used to have maybe a dozen people – fifteen people used to come and sit here and shuck the oysters all day, every day. They would make probably – they would probably get seventy-five cents, fifty to seventy-five cents a gallon for shucking them, which is not very much money back then but seemed to be a lot. Most of them were colored people that used to do the shucking here. They seemed to enjoy it. Like I say, we had – over on the other side, the shuck house here used to be an old tin building, ain’t nothing but tin. It had three colored gentlemen [who] used to live in it – reside in it. No heat, no nothing. Just sit there and went to bed with as much clothes as they could get on, and that was the heat. But he used to go as far as Piney Point to pick up shuckers to bring down here to shuck oysters.

CK: He?

DM: My dad. Joseph Olin Mattingly was his name.

CK: Sorry? His name again?

DM: Joseph Olin Mattingly. He was one of the biggest seafood dealers in the area, at least in St. Mary's County. It's kind of hard talking in the machine.

[laughter]

CK: You're doing great.

DM: Oh, am I?

CK: Oh, yeah.

DM: Oh, good. I can remember when they used to have all these shells out here on the other side of the shuck house, and there used to be – I wouldn't like to say how many there would be, but they used to come – the state used to come in with dump trucks, and they used to load the dump trucks up and carry them to barges and load them on the barges to carry them back onto the bar, to throw back overboard. So the little spat oysters would catch on the shell – a place for it to grow on. The state would pay, I don't know, maybe ten cents a bushel for the shells back then. Not very much. But there was a whole lot here for weeks and weeks at a time – just nothing but shells. And nowadays, you can't even get enough to eat hardly. Very few oysters around anymore. I can remember the fishes come in and used to be another, older shuck house we would call it on the other side over here, was hooked to [the] ice house. We'd have to go to

Leonardtown to pick up ice, bring the ice back, chop it up, throw it down the chute, down to the old shuck house, and we'd grind it up – grind the ice up. Used to have wooden boxes. They would hold around a hundred pounds of fish each and used to have to put a layer of ice in the bottom, throw your fish in, hundred pounds at a time and throw your ice back on top. We used to stack them over there, making it four or five high. Two men would stack them. And sometimes we would have trucks come in and we would – soon as they would get iced in the box, we would let them on the trucks. And they would sit on the Washington, Baltimore, Norfolk, Philadelphia, Richmond – anywhere we could sell those oysters and fish, he would do. It would take him sometimes – used to be so many fish, I would say, in the mid-to-late '50s or early '60s, sometimes they would have to work two or three days to get all the fish out of the sand net that they would haul. That's a lot of work, believe me. A lot of work. They used to bring them up here on the wharf and used to put them in wheelbarrows – the fish – bring them up, dump them out, and his crew – whoever would be catching them, would stand there with shovels and separate different size fish and different species of fish. When you got a hundred pounds and scaled it, put them in that box like I told you and stack them. And it would take sometimes two or three days to unload the nets with all those fish, which is a lot of fish.

CK: What kind are we talking about?

DM: Back then, the biggest fish was probably called croakers. We used to call them locally hardheads, what they were called. And you had the big croakers, and you had the smaller croaker that was called pinheads. We used to have spot, perch, – rock was a big fish, as it still is today. But back then, hardheads was the big catch. Big catch. Used to be, if I remember correctly, about six whole (seiners?)

used to be living on this creek, St. Patrick's Creek. I think my dad used to buy from four of them and one that lives down the road here now, Mr. Brown – well, it was Tucker Brown. I think he still has it down here. His dad came up to dad's one time loaded with fish in the boats, and he wanted dad to buy his fish. Dad had nowhere to sell the fish, so he couldn't buy them because he had nowhere to sell them. So Mr. Brown had to take the fish back out in the river and throw them over, and they were already dead. Back then, they would die from the trip in. And I would say at least probably a thousand boxes, which is a hundred pounds each box. He would just have to throw them back over because you couldn't sell them. My dad couldn't. So he ended up suing my dad about it, and they went to court and stuff about it, but nothing ever came of it. Dad couldn't sell them nowhere, so they couldn't hold him responsible.

CK: Why couldn't he sell them?

DM: We had nowhere – you could only – you could take orders from different people in D.C., Baltimore, and different areas, and if you didn't get orders, you couldn't buy them. You didn't have nowhere to sell them to. So my dad didn't want to be stuck with them – get them where you couldn't get rid of them. So anyway, he had to go to court, and everything worked out fine for dad. But Mr. Brown never would sell no more to dad after that. He used to go down to Arthur Marshall down on (Abel's?) Road and used to sell all his fish and stuff to him after that. But the biggest one on this creek used to be Buster Morris. Whatever his real name is, I don't know, but he always called him Buster. And he was a good old guy. He used to like his drink, but he was the captain of the ship – of the boat. And used to have four, five men that worked for him, that dragged the net, pulled the net, load the boats – did whatever. He would go out just about every day, or

maybe four times a week and lay his haul seines out. Sometimes he would catch, like I say, a thousand boxes or more at a time. Sometimes he'd catch five boxes at a time. You never knew what he was going to catch. His favorite place to haul that was out here at Blackstone Island – St. Clement's Island, now – on the back part of it. He used to take that net and pull around, and it would be probably a quarter of a mile to half a mile, the length of the net. It would pull it around. Sometimes he would catch so many fish he would – they used to call – they had to stake it out, they called it. Load the boats up – as many as he could get in the boats. There were so many fish still left in the net. They would close the net up, bring all three boats that he would have – bring the fish in, unload them, ice them, and soon as he did that, he would go back out with his people and get another load of fish in the boats. That would go on for two or three days sometimes before we could get all the fish out of the boats. That's a lot of fish, believe me. My dad also used to go to Piney Point down to Carl Sheehan's. Mr. Sheehan would buy from my dad. He would buy fish and oysters pretty much – and some crabs. My dad used to send trucks down there and pick them up. Whenever he needed to be picked up, he would go do it. He had shuckers down there – maybe ten, twelve, fifteen shuckers that used to shuck down that area with the oysters. We'd bring them back. Back in that area over there is where they used to – this area used to shuck them in. That area, they used to store them in. I'll show you later when we walk around. I'll point them out to you. But crabs – I remember crabs. There'd be so many crabs – hard crabs – that you couldn't even hardly give them away. You would have the icehouse full of bushels of crabs. Used to come to Washington and different places, wherever he would go, and try to sell them crabs. Sometimes he could sell a few; sometimes, he couldn't. He would bring them all the way back from Washington, Baltimore, or wherever he went, and put them in the ice house again and cull through them, pull the dead ones out, and the live ones

out – separate them. After that, the live ones would be loaded back on the truck the next day and shipped back to Washington or Baltimore again to see if they could sell them. My dad used to buy them for no more than maybe seventy-five cents to a dollar a bushel. That’s all he would pay for them. And people just would not buy them at no price. They just had nothing to do with crabs.

Nowadays, you know, everywhere you go, it’s thirty, thirty-five, forty-dollars a dozen at a restaurant to eat them. That’s different times, different places. Used to have soft crabs. Used to be three varieties he would get. He would be – well, same crab, but it would be three sizes – jumbo, medium, and prime. He used to pay two to three cents a piece for the primes – smaller ones – a nickel for the mediums, and twelve cents for the jumbos. So he’d just catch dozens and dozens and dozens of them. My mom used to get the truck and go to different people’s houses that lived on the wharf that used the soft crab. She would go there and buy them for that price and bring them back, and we used to pack them up, clean the ones that were dead, freeze them, [and] pack the live ones up in boxes. Maybe there’d be three [inaudible] in a box. There would probably be maybe ten to twelve dozen crabs in the crab box, they would call it, and the dead ones we used to clean and freeze them and sell them as bait or come to D.C. or wherever and sell them for probably a nickel a piece just to get something for them. And that was this crab business – soft crab business.

CK: So your mom would go around, what, in the pickup truck?

DM: Yeah, kind of a pickup truck. Maybe a little bigger than a pickup truck. But they used to call, and they would say that you got any crab and you got some soft crabs, and we always knew where everybody lived, so she would go to different places and pick up the soft crabs and bring it back. Like I say, we would cull

through them, collect the dead ones, clean them and freeze them, ship the live ones in boxes to wherever – Washington, Baltimore, Norfolk – wherever you could just get the chance to sell them.

CK: So there was a little bit of a market for the soft crabs?

DM: A little bit better than the hard crabs. The hard crabs – believe me, back then, you couldn't really give them away. Nobody wanted them. I mean, you would buy them, like I say, fifty cents a basket – a bushel – and you just couldn't sell them. So you had to end up stopping buying some weeks because you had nowhere to sell them. Instead of just buying them, losing this money and letting them die, we'd just have to wait until we got orders or something going. Like I say, nowadays, you can't get enough to – can't get enough to haul to get a mess to eat. And if you do, you can't afford them. They're thirty, thirty-five, forty dollars a dozen at the restaurant. Go ahead. I'm sorry.

CK: What about crabmeat?

DM: He never had no pickers. We never picked crab meat. The area right there where that stovepipe is right now, used to have a big tub there. Used to be an old oyster tub. It'd be stainless-steel. He used to put hard crabs in it and steam them. And people would come. The shuckers would eat them up here and eat all the crabs you want and used to go down to Captain Eddie Bailey's – Captain Sam Bailey's son – had a restaurant on the water, and he would give you all the crabs you could eat that day for a dollar on Friday and Saturday nights. All you can eat for a dollar. He really made his money always – the beer. You'd drink beer with your crabs. That's how he made his money. I guess it must be in the middle '70s

or early '80s, they came up with manoes, which is soft shell clams. In this area, you would them manoes because they had a little snout on them. Pee clams, you'd call them sometime, too, because you'd squeeze them, and they would squirt water out. That was a big thing. It was so many of those doggone manoes – I worked on a boat that – I worked for the captain of the boat, and I was a picker. There was a conveyor belt – used to bring them up on the conveyor belt, and you would have a bushel basket in front of you, and you used to pick them off the conveyor belt as fast as you could, and you still couldn't get them all off of there. That's how many soft clams there was back then.

CK: They just showed up in the '70s, you were saying?

DM: Well, that was the market finally come for them. I never knew – I knew you could go out and dig a few, but nothing like it was back then. Out in the river, you could go down so deep – ten, fifteen, twenty feet. With the conveyor, we used to bring the manoes up, pushing through the sand. The boat would push the conveyor belt through the sand, and you used to have another motor hooked to it; it would blow air through it. It would make them manoes out of the sand, get on the conveyor belt and bring up to the top of the boat. You'd pick as many as you could – you could get a hundred bushels in about two hours. And then they had – supposed to be a certain size or whatever to have them. But they would be a foot thick on that belt. The mariners would be a foot thick on the belt coming up to the boat. There's no way two men could pick all the manoes – that many coming up on the belt. What we couldn't pick just went back overboard. And unfortunately, they couldn't re-bury themselves, so they just died. What you couldn't pick died pretty much. If they were small, they had a chance of recovering down in the sand. But anything with any size just rotted – just stayed on the bottom and rotted. We

used to run through them sometimes with the boat the next day or whatever, and you run through a rotten patch of them, and they would come up on that belt and stink. I mean, you wouldn't believe how they stink. But it was so many clams. So many that you could not possibly pick them all off of that conveyor belt. Two people. And I got forty cents a bushel. Every bushel that was picked, I got forty cents. The captain got like a dollar and a half or a dollar-seventy-five a bushel. Out of that, he had to pay gas and pay me forty cents for each bushel.

CK: And he paid another fellow, too, you're saying?

DM: Well, the captain – would be the captain of the boat.

CK: You were the only –?

DM: I would be the mate. Just two of us would sit there picking. Both of us would be picking. He got a dollar and a half to two dollars a bushel, give me forty cents out of that, and he had to buy his gas, oil, and everything else for the boat to keep the expenses up, which nobody made a lot of money on it, but it used to be a whole lot of manoees around here. And now you can't get enough to eat.

CK: Was that the same process as getting oysters or –?

DM: The clams were in the sand down in the bottom in the sand. The oysters was on top of the bottom. You could just take the oysters tongs and run from anywhere from sixteen feet to twenty to twenty-four-foot-long tongs, which is made of wood, and at the bottom, they had these two metal shafts, they would call them, and you worked the wood back and forth on the oyster bottom, and you'd shake them, and

you'd rake them some more. You get the tongs full, you would bring them up – raise them tongs up, throw them up on the boat, up on the culling board. They had a culling board. Just a board that run across the middle of the boat. Throw the oysters that they collected on the tongs up on each board, and another man would sit there and cull them – take the big oysters out, let the small ones in the shells go back overboard. Two or three people on each boat back then, and they would do it all day. Believe me, hard work cracking them things all day. And they used to have as many as – some people come – well, they had buying boats – buy boats, which is called barges in this area. But we used to have two of them. One was named the *Eagle*, another one was named the *Magnolia*. I remember going out in the summer. Dad would give me money to buy oysters. I would go out in the *Magnolia*, and he would take the *Eagle*. He would go one part of the river, and I would go the other. You go to the bar where the people are catching the oysters, and they would come to your buy boat.

CK: What kind of boat?

DM: It would be different boats – dory boats, box sterns. It was different kinds.

CK: But your buy boats – what were they?

DM: Oh, I think the *Eagle* was a box stern, they call it, which is a big boat, would be open in the middle. You would dump your bushels of oysters down in the belly of them, and they would hold anywhere from five to seven, seven-fifty, eight hundred bushels at a time. And just bring them up to the wharf here, unload them, each one by hand, shovel them in a bucket, crank them out by hand, have a truck there. You would load the trucks up with oysters – big trucks. Just keep loading

them, loading them, loading as many as they could get on the truck. As soon as they got them on, they would take off, go to Washington, Baltimore, or wherever with the different ones. I believe that's a lot of oysters. (laughter) Believe me. He used to even have – sell tarpons – water tarpons. Back here, used to have a pen down in the mud with water and used to keep them in there. The people [inaudible] haul seine used to catch them, and usually, you'd buy turtles from them. When [Hurricane] Hazel came through, I guess I was eight, nine years old. My brother was probably a couple of years older than I was. But the water got so high that the tarpons started getting out of the pens. So me and him went out to the pens and swim – you could swim back there – and tried to put a net over the top of the pens to keep the tarpons in – stop them from getting away during the hurricane at the time.

CK: Were they pretty big?

DM: Yeah. I don't know how to describe the size they would be, but they would probably be ten to twelve inches long, six, seven inches wide.

CK: So there would be a market for them?

DM: A few. Yeah. A few. Used to sell them sometimes, but he always would buy them. Whatever they caught, he would buy. And even the carp, which is a – you'd say a bottom-feeder, probably. Nobody really likes to eat them much, except the Jewish people used to like to buy them and eat them. You used to have certain people to come and buy them, and he would come to wherever and buy them, and they would enjoy getting them. So even had, like I say, call them carp

back then, up in these creeks. These bloodsuckers, they call them. Mudsuckers, they would call them. But anything else? I don't know what else to go with.

CK: Well, more on the shucking house.

DM: The shucking house.

CK: Tell me about the guys who worked here, the guys who lived in the building. What were their names?

DM: Well, one would be – Kenny Jones used to live in there. Howard Maddox and Dick Arnold. I think Dick Arnold was another. Three of them used to live in there. Dad used to let them use that place to sleep. He just built it out of nothing like this sheet metal – tin – and they would have the beds made, the bedrolls made. They would be going there and sleep. They'd get up five or six o'clock in the morning and come to the shuck house, start shucking oysters, and even had female women used to come. Colored female ladies used to come and shuck oysters. You see here? Probably fifteen to twenty used to be in this house shucking, and they would shuck all day, every day. There was that many oysters back then.

CK: What were the names of the people working here? Do you remember?

DM: We had one guy who used to work here called Robert Ellis. He used to stay – his house – excuse me – not a house, but he used to live on one of the barges – the *Magnolia* – in the pilot house. There's a big pilot house on the back of the boat [that] had beds in them, and he could stay there. He slept in that bed. Another guy who worked there named Bryant Bowles. I don't know how old he was. Ever

since I can remember, he was there until he died. But he just stayed in the shuck house here. He used to have his little room back here in the office, back here. And he used to be – I would probably say the foreman. He wasn't very educated or nothing but he knew about oysters and what to do, whatever. And he was pretty much in charge of the –

CK: That was interesting. Talk again about this foreman.

DM: Well, I guess he wasn't a foreman, but he was more or less in charge. He would always be here when the oystermen – when the shuckers got their buckets full of oysters. He would be the one that – they would go to that window over there and dump them on this – like a sieve. All the water and oil would come out, and there would be nothing but oysters left. He would have a can in there – a gallon can. He used to rake them off that sieve into a gallon can. There would be – I think he got maybe fifty to seventy-five cents a gallon for shucking oysters back then. He used to take them out of that gallon can and dump them in five-gallon cans and store them back in the corner, back there where we had ice. He'd store them there, and that evening, we used to – dad used to have some great big – used to call them tubs. Used to be in stainless steel, and he used to call them – when you clean them like that, you used to call them blowing. They would mix these oysters up being – maybe thirty or forty gallons in these big tubs of oysters would be in this tub. He would have air coming through them. Make them blow and make – clean them – like cleaning them. He would blow them probably for half an hour, forty-five minutes until they were clean. They used to take the oyster and put air in it. When you blow them, you put air in the oyster, which is – you can't get as many in a can when you blow them. That was an advantage, you know? They would get bigger. The oyster would get bigger.

CK: I wonder who in the world came up with something like that.

DM: Well, it was – I think it was law – state law or something – you had to clean them or whatever. But I remember the state had to come and inspect all this stuff. But he had these big stainless-steel tubs – thirty to forty gallons of oysters in them, full of water, and that air would – like boiling. The oysters would float and load their-self up with air. And you can't get as much oysters with air in them in a can as you can without blowing them. Because that was, I guess, a way of making more out of less. You always left water with them. You never had nothing – always had water left with the oysters. In the can it would be some water left, and you used to have gallon cans with – you'd have to close them by hand – gallon cans. But you also had machines back here – twelve-ounce machine which was automated, and you just put the tops in the cans in, and they would go through, fill their-self, seal their-self, and all you had to do was just count them – how many you put in a barrel – the twelve ounce cans. He had another machine was a one-man machine. You put the half a pint on this machine, press it down with your hand, the top would come down, it would seal the top on half a pint of oysters for that thick little can.

CK: About how thick?

DM: Maybe three inches thick, which would be half a pint. It may have been ten to fifteen oysters in that half a pint, roughly, with the water in it. They always had water in it. It takes up more space – not as much oysters. So that's the way he made more of his money, I guess, by selling water and air. [laughter]

CK: Water from the creek?

DM: No. The water would be in the tubs. They would have a well – fresh water. And just turn this valve on. The water would fill up in these big – had to be, I guess, seventy to eighty-gallon tubs, it would be – I would call them tubs. Stainless-steel, put the oysters in, clean them, blow them, pack them. If you pack them in gallons, you had to put them in by your hand. Load them in barrels, going from there back to the back door where the truck would be. It probably be thirty to forty gallons in a barrel. Me or whoever was here – two people would have to take in barrels, throw up on the truck, load it with ice and oysters, and it would be maybe ten to twelve barrels of oysters in gallon cans would go, plus the others that were half-pints, pints, twelve-ounce cans. Back then, even, he used to sell them – used to have – gallon containers used to be made out of cardboard. I guess waterproof cardboard and even had pints made out of cardboard. Had the tops on them. If you didn't want them washed, which is – washed is always better – unwashed – better flavor. A lot of people come down, buy a quart, a pint, two quarts. They would get them unwashed. They'd want them in that waterproof cardboard box or container. For some reason, they always taste better. Juice is better. The oysters is better. Air and water don't taste like much when you clean them. But before that, they're real good eating. I don't know what else to tell you.

CK: Where did those come from, these cardboard –?

DM: We used to order them from Baltimore or Washington, and you'd pick them up. They'd come in boxes, so many in a box. Same way with the gallon cans. The gallon cans were made out of aluminum. Used to have dad's name and stuff on them. Wherever they made them at, put his name on them.

CK: What did they say on them?

DM: Probably Joseph Olin or J.O. Mattingly. He used to have a gallon of oysters, and would come in medium, prime, or jumbos or whichever size they were on the can. Well, back then, the oysters would be counts – standards and selects. Selects would be a middle grade. Standards was the small one. And your counts were the big ones. He would just order his cans from whoever made them in D.C. or Baltimore. I can't remember who really made them, but that's where he used to get them from.

CK: He'd pick them up?

DM: Yes. Used to buy barrels up there – wooden barrels – he would buy in D.C. or Baltimore. He used to buy them fish boxes, and that's a big enough box to hold a hundred pounds of fish with ice. Used to buy them up there in Washington, Baltimore. He would go up probably four or five times a week, he would go either Washington or Baltimore. Back then, Washington had a place called The Wharf. It was called The Wharf. It was only waterfront, which is not – well, the waterfront's there, but The Wharf is gone. It was just like you carry anything to market. You back your truck in, there'd be trucks lined up, different seafood. People walk down the aisle, look to see what fish they want – “I'll take that. I'll take that.” They would just order whatever they want off the truck. “I'll take ten boxes of rock. I'll take twenty boxes of perch. I'll take ten bushels of crabs or soft crabs or whatever's on that truck.” They just walk down like an auction, pretty much. Like an auction, and ask them, “Well, what are you charging for them?” If they thought the price was right or whatever, they would buy them. If they thought

it was too high, they would go somewhere else and buy them. But different companies named (Claxton?) – (Claxton's?) in Washington, D.C. I can't remember all of the people that dad sold to. But dad got started – when he first started, he had a place up on 6th and North (inaudible) Avenue. It was a market. They had flowers, fruit, oysters, fish. He ran the seafood part of it. My granddad used to run this place.

CK: Your granddad?

DM: My granddad.

CK: Named?

DM: Clarence Mattingly. Clarence Zachariah Mattingly, to be exact. He's buried locally up here in Sacred Heart Cemetery. The new shuck house that we're in now, it wasn't built then. They hadn't built this shuck house. But the old one, which is tore down now, was the one granddad had. Granddaddy worked on the – he had it all. Dad was in Washington. That's where he got all his contacts – who to sell oysters to and who to buy them from. He had this seafood place in D.C. Our family had some kind of disease that runs in our leg muscles. Some people have it; some of them don't. My granddaddy had it. So he gets crippled. When he was in his sixties, he couldn't walk anymore. So he wanted to get out of the business. So he wanted to move to Washington. So dad bought him out – bought my granddad out and just [inaudible] here. Sold what he had in New York. He came down here and started buying seafood like my granddad did.

CK: When was that?

DM: This would probably be – my dad probably moved down here when I was two, three – that age. So it's been around sixty years ago.

CK: And you were born in '44.

DM: '44. I was probably two years old or something. The house now where the guy lives at – that's the second house. We had a house there. The first house burned down. The only fire department around back then was in Leonardtown. We didn't have no seventh district fire department. So by the time Leonardtown got here, the house was burned to the ground. So that's the second house. It used to be the biggest and best house in the seventh district for a long time. Now you look at it, it don't look like nothing, you know? Back then, it was something. I can remember dad having a safe up in the store. It'd be that length. What would you say? Two feet and so high. About the same size as that. He had a safe in the store, and he used to have that safe full with money two-thirds the way up with paper money. Two-thirds the way up with money. You could just imagine how much money that would have been.

CK: And that was in the store, you say?

DM: Right up here, on the other side of this thing up here.

CK: So that was a store.

DM: It was a store. Not this place, but in front of here was a store. Used to sell canned foods – all kinds of canned food. Had a little bit of meat supply – ham,

bologna, soft drinks, cookies. And all the shuckers used to run a bill. You would shuck, they would go eat lunch in the store and buy stuff – like the company store. You heard of that? They would eat from the store, charge it, and he would take what he charged for the food at the end of the week – take away from the shuckers. They shucked oysters during the day. You would get both ends if you know what I mean. He'd get the work, get the oysters shucked by them. He would pay them so much money, keep it on the book at the end of the week. He would pay them, and he would have whatever they bought in the store – beans, bologna, sodas – whatever it was they bought used to come out of their wages at the end of the week. So people only got half what they made, you know, and he kept the other half – whatever they owed, you know? Because I don't know what it would be, but whatever they ate or got groceries for the house or whatever. It was always kept on a book. You shucked oysters. You made so much shucking, [and] you bought so much groceries. You'd take one from the other, and that's what you would go home with. It's like the company store back in them old days. Company owned the company, they owned the store, they owned the people. No way around it. No way around it. You had to eat, you bought from the store. You wanted money, you shucked the oysters. You got money to pay for your food from the store. Dad had them going both ways. [laughter] That was a true story.

CK: These were all Black people, then?

DM: Yeah, most of them were Black. Occasionally, be a white one here or there, but majority of them always be Black folks. Usually, go as far as Piney Point, like I say, and pick up shuckers and bring here to shuck. He would carry them back that evening, back and forth. He would pick them up and carry them back – back and forth.

CK: What time?

DM: Oh, they would probably pick them up around 4:30, five o'clock in the morning. Come to shuck house, start shucking around six. Used to stop for their lunch. Ate their lunch. Shucked to four, five o'clock. They cleaned up, carried them back home. Next morning, you go pick them up again, four, five o'clock and bring them back. I mean, it sounds crazy, maybe, but that's the way it was back then.

CK: What time did they lay off work then, in the evening?

DM: What time they would leave? They would probably shuck to about four o'clock, 4:30. Clean up. They had to clean their own shells and stuff up, had to stock their own benches in the evening before they left. They would fill the benches up with oysters for the next day. They would come back and just start shucking again each day, over and over and over. Many a oyster.

CK: I'm sorry?

DM: Many an oyster come through there. Many a one.

CK: And they'd leave with the tubs ready for the next day, then.

DM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We had three tubs. You would be shucking oysters – there'd be different size oysters in the shell. Be up here on the counter, and you just shuck. You had three-gallon jugs. One of them would be small, one for the

medium oyster, and one for the big oyster. You had three different size oysters, three different cans you put them in. When you think you had a gallon or so, you would carry them up to that window, dump them right on that sieve, like I said, measure them off a gallon can, mark them on the board, one gallon, and at the end of the week, you would find how many gallons they done shucked. You would pay them fifty cents, seventy-five cents, whatever it was, for that gallon. Go to the store to get paid, take off what they had bought from the store from the salary, and whatever was left, that is what they earned. A lot of time, they would just – all their money they earned shucking was took up in groceries. They'd take groceries home – they had to buy it. But it was just the way of life back then. That's just the way they went about business. So any more questions? I don't know what else to add.

CK: Oh, you're doing great. This is really fascinating.

DM: Well, it is. My daughter would like to hear all this, too.

CK: Well, we'll get you a copy of it.

DM: Oh, that would be great.

CK: Yeah.

DM: That would be great.

CK: So in other words, whatever was left, time they took out for groceries along the way, they might just – they'd get paid, and they might go ahead and spend it right there in the store for –

DM: Yeah, they could. You'd drink beer. You buy beer. You buy sodas. You buy whatever you want. If it was in the store, you could buy whatever, but you had to have money to buy it. But occasionally, he would run a bill – a tab for them. They could get groceries for two weeks or something. It would carry on for the children, wives, or whatever. He would carry them two, three weeks without paying, but you had to pay at the end of the month or whatever. But you could get credit – I guess you call it credit – and had a little book with names on it and what was taken, what was made, everything on this little book. I guess it's called a blue book, I guess, or black book, or whatever. But that's how they survived.

CK: I wonder if there were times when they didn't take home any money at all, paying back the book.

DM: I'm sure there probably was. Because some oyster shuckers shucked faster than others. Some shucked good; some didn't shuck so good. And some were slow; some were fast. All the females seemed to be fast shuckers. They were the fastest. The older men was the slowest. It was a job, I guess. That's what they wanted to do. Or maybe that's the only job they could get at the time, and that's the way they made their living, pretty much. The ones who used to stay here was rent-free. We just let them use the old tin building out there – make your bed up in there somewhere and just sleep and live there – local people. Like I say, the other foremen used to live on the boats. Had two barges, had beds in each one of them. One would stay in one barge, and the other would stay in the other barge, and the

foreman of the building here used to stay back in this little room back here. He was a heavy drinker. He used to drink probably two-fifths of liquor a day. The guy would drink that much every day every day. A fifth or two a day. But that's all he had. That's all he wanted to do. He had a chance to work anywhere he wanted, but he chose to work here doing that. It's amazing to me – all these stories. It's hard for people to believe, but they're true. True stories.

CK: Well, you just paint such a vivid picture. So there was this one foreman in the back and then two others on those two barges.

DM: Right. Well, they weren't like the foremen. They would be workers. But they would have no place to live, so he would give them – they could stay on the boat. In the pilot house, they called it.

CK: And who were those men?

DM: One was named Robert Ellis – I told you before. And Bryant – Bryant Bowles. He used to live on the boat occasionally, but after a while, he got to live in this little back room, back here. And he's the one that drinks the couple of fifths a day. I can remember. He was always here. I mean, he never left. He was always here. Even on weekends, the store would be open, he would open the store and run the store. Dad would be at the house or going somewhere, and Bryant would run the store. People used to come to this place – this place was like a magnet. The local people would come down to that store, play cards, drink beer, drink sodas, get cookies, eat bologna sandwiches, or whatever. That was their meeting spot. Every day, they would be there. Every day. Every evening they would be there just playing cards and drinking beer and drinking sodas.

I can remember they had a cement floor in there. I was a kid. Me and my brother, Goose – my younger brother – we used to take a potato. Used to get potatoes in bags. On this concrete floor, we used to take a potato and make a big circle with the potatoes, and we used to put our marbles in there, playing marbles. You put the marbles in that circle. You probably remember playing marbles. And you would shoot your marbles, playing in the store on the concrete floor with a potato-marked circle. Later on, he put a pool table in there. That went real good.

CK: So the potato would draw a circle?

DM: Yeah. It was moisture in the potato. You just mark it on the floor. You would make a big circle. And that juice out of it – use it and shoot marbles. All the men would be down. We were just kids. We would be in the store, and these men is all around. Just loved it. Loved it. Learned to play cards when I was probably five years old. I was just a good card player [inaudible]. Poker. You wouldn't believe how much money would go through there. Them guys would bet playing cards and stuff. I used to play games of poker called stud poker, and they would play anywhere from twenty dollars a card to fifty dollars a card. This was back when there was no money. I mean, no money. But the watermen had money, and they would play that much money at a time. I was a small kid. I used to play five, ten, fifteen-cent games. I didn't have money. But we used to beat them men. All the time we'd beat the men just as well as anyone else. You learned how to play in that store.

CK: Fights?

DM: Yeah, there was a few fights in there, too. Yeah, there was. I can't really remember who they were or whatever, but I can remember fights being there occasionally. One guy got cut. I remember one guy got cut with a knife. But that was years ago when I was just a kid. But I can remember it.

CK: You mix cards and alcohol, you got to have some –

DM: Oh, yeah, it's a mess. It's a mess. All of them big drinkers. Watermen are big drinkers. They like their beers. Like I say, when a hurricane came through, they used to come up in these little rowboats to the store. Had their boots on, be up to the knee – the water would – and they'd be standing there drinking beer in the store in the water. [laughter] Just drinking beer.

CK: Would he outfit them, too? Boots and clothes?

DM: No, they would own their own stuff. They would have their own homes.

CK: But he didn't sell any of that?

DM: No. He didn't have any boots. Just buy them wherever you got them from. No. But he would have nails, he would have potatoes, onions, pork chops. Used to have his own big block – he would cut his pork chop with a big chopper, separate the pork chops in a big wooden block with a – I guess you call it a hatchet. He would separate them – made hot dogs – anything you want pretty much to eat was in that store – all kinds of canned stuff, coffee, milk. Anything that was canned would be there. And he had a meat case – like I say, bologna, ham, hot

dogs, pork chops. Whatever you wanted, he had a little selection. Not a very big store. Not a big freezer. Maybe big as that box over there. Square.

CK: How big?

DM: Oh, I would say – what's that – three feet by six or five? Three feet wide, five feet long? That would be the meat box, you know? Keep it cold.

CK: And buying from the local farmers, then?

DM: No. The meat always was bought from someone else away. I don't know who they would – what company it was. But they would come down every week or every two weeks and see whatever he needed to order – he would order whatever he needed, and they would bring it – deliver it that next day or a couple of days later they would deliver it. It's like going to an A&P, I guess. They'd bring stuff to the A&P to sell. You ran out, you order it, and they bring it. That's the way it went.

CK: Nothing hot for folks to eat or sandwich fixings?

DM: Not until later on. I guess in the '70s, they probably got one of these microwave things in the store. You put your sandwich in, you warm it up, be all wrapped up in aluminum – well, not aluminum, but clear-through paper. Hoagies like – you just put them in the machine. You set it for two minutes. Two minutes is up, you take the hoagie out, tear your paper off and eat it, already made up. I don't know what else to say.

CK: Otherwise, people sit around – did they have a potbelly stove in there?

DM: Oh, yeah. They would burn – occasionally, they [inaudible] a coal stove, but most of the time, it was a wood stove. You'd burn slabs of wood. Used to get slabs of wood from Mr. Tennyson, who was in Chaptico. He'd bring a load of slab of wood down, put it on the woodpile, load the stove up, and just keep bringing the logs back and forth, putting it in the stove.

CK: He'd bring it or you all would go?

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DM: He would bring it. He would come – you call him, tell him you need a load of slabs, he'd bring it down, unload it, pay him his twenty dollars or whatever it was for the load. Away he would go, and you'd bring wood in, put it in the stove and get the place warm. Usually, close around eight to nine o'clock every night – the store would close. It would open about seven in the morning. People come back and forth each day, a few people during the day. But in the evening, it was always ten to twelve people in there just sitting around, shooting the bull, just like we doing now, sitting on these chairs. It was blocks of wood. Coca-Cola boxes just sitting there, just shooting the breeze about the day, play a little cards.

[laughter]

CK: All men?

DM: Yeah. Well, occasionally, a woman would come in, but not very often. Some shucking women would come in and get the beer or whatever. But most of the time, it was all men.

CK: Did those shucking women live around here?

DM: Most of them come from Piney Point – majority of the women did. Most all the men was from this local area. But he used to go to Piney Point and pick up the women – colored women to come and shuck oysters.

CK: Oh, this is great. So what were some of the local names, then of the folks who used to work here? Some of the men. You mentioned a few. Any others come to mind?

DM: Well, Jimmy Jones, Tom Sawyer, Sam Mack, Ben Dyson.

CK: These are all Black men that –

DM: Black men. A lot of them lived on this road here – a few of them. And Tom Sawyer – my dad had a workboat he had (inaudible) here on the wharf. It was a shorter boat, not like a big barge or nothing, just a regular workboat. He used to rent it to Tom Sawyer. He would rent it for the week. He would go and oyster – whatever he want. Dad would come in and take whatever he wanted from the – to pay for the using of the boat. Tom would get the rest of the money. Even in the (fall?), Dad used to have plants. (inaudible) getting small oysters to throw overboard. Wait two or three years, they got big enough to sell in the creeks. He would get Tom Sawyer and his workboat to go down on the creek, where his plant bed was. Tom got the plant oysters, and he would get so much for – Tom would get so much a bushel for doing that. That was his own private oyster bed, I guess you would call it, in the creek. He would throw maybe four or five hundred bushels of shells with little spat – little oysters on them. Wait three years, and the

oysters would be big enough to sell. You'd go and catch them, bring the boat – bring them up. Shuck them. They were called plants back then. Plants is nowhere near as good oysters as bar oyster. A bar oyster is good, round oyster. Your plants is usually in mud, and your creek is mud. Your oysters have a tendency to get long and narrow in the mud. But on the bar, it's hard bottom; they have more of a tendency to be round oysters. The round oysters are a whole lot better oysters than that long, slim one is. Taste different – entirely different. Used to get a tub – like a tub would be – a tub you put your oysters in would be a tub, but it would be over a bushel. But it's supposed to have been a bushel, but it's over a bushel. It's called a tub back then. You could take a bushel basket full of oysters and put it in the tub, empty them in the the tub, and the tub would still be [inaudible] by that much. So actually, it was over a bushel of oysters. That tub would be over a bushel. The oystermen used to catch – I remember they would catch seventy to eighty bushel or ninety bushel of oysters. Come to the buy boat about eleven o'clock in the morning, unload them and go back out there and work another two or three hours and get another twenty or thirty bushel and bring them back and sell them. Now you go in there, you can't get enough to eat. Ain't that a shame?

CK: Amazing. What kind of sounds would you be hearing in here? What kind of carrying-on would be going on?

DM: Oh, there'd be radios going, and you'd (inaudible) be talking, and you had – they were laughing and carrying on and radio going. Just days – like I say, a big thing over here – used to cook crabs and stuff you couldn't sell them. He'd give them to the shuckers to go and eat. Carry home. You take the manoees, steam the manoees, stick up there, and just up there and eat right here in the – right in the

shuck house. Great times. Great times. I just wish I still lived around here. I still live in Hollywood now, but I would prefer living over here.

CK: You would?

DM: Oh, yeah. For sure. I'm proud of my heritage, believe me. Very proud.

CK: You just grew up in the middle of it all.

DM: Yeah. Yep. Didn't know how good I had it. Really didn't.

CK: You were just a little tyke, and you come through –

DM: Yeah. It was just normal, I mean, you know? Just every day. Every day was just a normal day. Now I've got older, and you don't see these things around anymore. You appreciate what you had.

CK: You gradually probably got more and more work to do with the shucking house.

DM: Myself, personally?

CK: Yeah. As you grew up.

DM: Yeah. I would say I started working – I would work – Maybe I was ten years old. I would start working a little bit, and he would give me a couple of dollars a week or something, my dad. When I got fifteen, sixteen years old, I used to take

on – get on one of the buy boats and go out to the bar, anchor out, and wait for the people to bring me the oysters. I used to have a big bucket full of money, you know, and just pay them whatever it was then – oysters for the day. Bring the boat back, put the oysters in the – what was left of the money.

CK: How did you know at that age how much to pay them?

DM: Well, oh, he would tell you how much to pay that day. Sometimes he would go out, and you would run a flag up – up on the mast, a white flag. That means that the price of oysters went up. The ones that was catching them. You see that white flag, it went up a dime. He would pay you ten cents more than what you were getting earlier. Every time you see a flag flying, it went up another dime or whatever. That would make them come up and buy that dime. You would get more just by that – just to have that dime.

CK: So he'd put up a flag, and you and everybody else would know.

DM: Well, right. He would let me know during the day before I left. But he would go himself, and if he felt in his mind that he knew he could get more money for – or sell more oysters, he would run that flag up himself and get more oysters to come to him if he ever had sales for them, like, “Okay, I’ll give you ten cents more a bushel.” Up that flag would go, and here they come.

CK: Did everybody do this?

DM: Everybody. Everybody. There used to be probably eight to ten or twelve buy boats out there – different companies. And all of them would run that flag up

or bring it back down, whichever. Dad was his own boss. Like I say, he knew what price everything was, and he knew what he could sell and what he could get for them. He'd run that flag up right often. Sometimes twice a day.

CK: And these are sailboats or diesel?

DM: No, they were diesel boats. Both of them were diesel. Like I say, they were barges. They would hold probably five to seven hundred bushel each down in the hold of the boat. Used to bring them up in the pier here and get all the men that worked here – the foreman, like I told you – he weren't foreman, but he worked here. Me, my brothers, and the other people would work in that barge until two or three o'clock in the morning, unloading that seven hundred bushel or whatever was in them boats. Crank them up, throw them up on the truck, dump them out, send the bucket back down, get another bucketful, [inaudible], throw it on the truck, get the truck full and barge empty. You can [inaudible] go to bed two or three o'clock in the morning sometimes, that late getting them done.

CK: You were ten when you first started working. What did he have you do then?

DM: Oh, I used to clean oyster shells up. People would be shucking there. You just move them out of the way, and you take your shovel, take the oyster shells they done shucked, put them in the wheelbarrow, roll them out the door, and roll them up out here on the pile of oyster shells. I used to help in the room there – would blow them. I would can them. Put so many oysters in the can, seal them, put them in the barrel. Same way with the boxes of fish. Put ice on them, drag them, help load them on the trucks, and just a regular – just a regular working day, hard working day back then, but didn't know it. Didn't know it. Just went along

with it like everybody else. Just worked. I never get paid over, I think, forty dollars a week was about all I would make from my dad. So I had to leave there and go make some money. I remember I was a teenager. I figured if I could make a hundred dollars a week, I had really done something, you know? It was great money back then if you made a hundred dollars a week, no matter where you were at in the county, and now you got to make a hundred dollars a day. I mean, yeah, day, probably, to even get by. But I always – if I could only make a hundred dollars a week. I mean, that’s what was imprinted in my mind. Yeah. That would be the top job in the world – a hundred dollars a week. That’s the way it was.

CK: Your dad ran quite an establishment.

DM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And not really a highly-educated man. Just a regular guy. Never went to no college. Probably didn’t go to a couple of grades in high school. But he had good book sense, good market sense, and good business sense. He knew what he could buy, what he could sell, and how much to buy and how much to sell. That’s the thing about business. If you can sell what you’re making or getting, you’re doing okay. Like I say, he had that safe half full of money all the time. All the time. Plus, the bank money. I mean, the bank money. This is the money he just kept on hand for fish and oysters and stuff. It was a tremendous amount of money. He very easily [inaudible] through a million dollars. He made a million dollars for sure. No problem. At least that. At least.

CK: That passed through, you mean?

DM: Oh, yeah.

CK: Came and went?

DM: Came and went. He was probably worth a million at one time. He was probably worth a million dollars. Cash money. But he had his problem drinking and everything else. He would go out, and people steal money out of his pockets – different things. That's the way life was. He was a partying guy. Made money, spent the money, and lost a lot of money card games, booze, just the regular vices of life. He liked his vices.

CK: So he was in the middle of all those card games.

DM: Yeah, some of them. Yeah. A lot of them. Captains of the boats used to come in – the fish boats – all of them played cards and that. As much as five or six hundred dollars in the pot at one time. Two minutes. You get the best hand, you won two hundred dollars or five hundred dollars or whatever was in the pot. Just a game. Just a game. Back then, I mean, money went a long way. Back then, that's a lot of money – five hundred dollars in a pot of cards. Christ, that's a month's work for a lot of people back then or even now. It was just one hand. Play twenty, thirty hands an hour. Just one hand. [laughter] That's about all I can remember to tell you.

CK: What kind of a boss was he?

DM: Well, he was pretty strict. He didn't even pay his men very much, I can tell you that. He didn't throw his money away on work people. He always enjoyed his good times. He used to go to Cuba every year – for probably ten years in a row he went to Cuba. He stopped going when Castro took over. Castro come, and the

revolution came. He was there – my dad was there. It was gunshots and stuff in the streets. He come home, and he never went back. He said it scared the hell out of him. He wasn't going back. So that's it. But before that, he would go every year. Three or four other people that he knew, whatever, get together, and they would all go to Cuba every year, a couple of weeks in Cuba. That was his vacation time.

CK: Solo trip?

DM: Well, like I say, different friends with him – be four or five of them go. But his wife wouldn't go. His wife? No. Mom wouldn't go.

CK: What about his dad? Did his dad start the shucking house then?

DM: Yeah. The old house used to have a few shuckers in it, too. That was the old house, he called it back then. This is the new one we're in now, believe it or not. But granddad – yeah, he had the old one. Old shuck house. He's the one that really started the business, I would say.

CK: Say that again?

DM: My granddad was the one that really started the business, I would say. Then after he got crippled up and wanted to get out of it, my dad bought him out, and he come down. My dad came down, mom came down, took over the business here.

CK: What about the early years? Do you know when he might have started it?

DM: My granddad?

CK: Yeah.

DM: No. No.

CK: Did you know him at all?

DM: A little bit. A little bit. I remember going to D.C., and he would – him and my grandmother both – they lived here, and I was over here – used to call it the big house; it was his house and my grandmother's house. And she had a part-time – I guess used to sell used clothes. Used to sell used clothes to colored people, colored women, white – whoever. Didn't make any difference. But they were used clothes. She would get them in D.C. or wherever, bring them down, clean them, sell them. When she left here, she had saved forty thousand dollars out of that used market, I guess, for clothes – selling clothes. And I don't remember what granddad had, but whatever dad give him for the place. They went to D.C. [and] bought a home. They bought four or five boarding houses. I can remember going to D.C. and staying with my grandmother, and she'd get on the streetcars. Go down the streetcars and collect the rent in the different buildings they owned. Go to the movies. I'd go to the movies. I stayed all day at the movie. I'd watch it over and over. One movie for a quarter or something. Right on the street. I was probably seven, eight, ten years old. Stay a week or two in D.C. with them. Get these ice – what do you call – ice balls with the flavored drinks in them from the drug store. What do they call them? Snowballs. With the root beer and the grape – whatever. You'd go up there and get some of that. (inaudible) get a quarter, go to the movies, stay all day. She used to go and get ice cream at (Hines?) store.

Come back and have root beer floats and all of that at nighttime. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I really can.

CK: You were just about – I guess if you were seven or eight, about six years since the shucking house changed hands.

DM: Yeah. Pretty much. Pretty much.

CK: So what about in your grandfather's day? What did you hear about the old shucking house?

DM: I'd never really hear much about it. Never did. Never paid much attention if I did hear it. I just was more, I guess, with what was coming – when I was coming up – with this place. This is more the newer place.

CK: So the time your dad got it, you were already in this newer place.

DM: No, it was still there after my dad came down, and maybe two or three years after he got here – built this place. But he had the old place right next door here. And that was the old shuck house. When I left and got married, [inaudible] when he left, it was still there. The old place was rundown real bad, but it was still there. The old place was still there. So he used both. That was the fish house then, and this was the oyster house. This new place was the oyster house. That was the fish house. That one used to be the oyster house when my granddad had it. The whole works for that one building. But the store was there. Granddad had the store.

CK: Same store.

DM: Yes. Still there. Yeah.

CK: What did he call it?

DM: We just called it the store. “Go down to the store and get some milk.” Me and mom – “Go down and get some milk. Go down and get some bologna. Go get some potatoes.” We lived right up on top of the hill where he lives now. This guy lives there. And just go and get whatever you want for dinner and cook it. Want oysters? Come and get oysters. You want fish? Get the fish. Whatever you wanted to eat.

CK: What kind of a character was your grandfather?

DM: He was a quiet, easy going guy. Real kind of pleasurable. Never seen him ever get mad. Never seen him get mad at all. He was a real skinny guy. That disease, like I said, we have running in our family, the Mattingly family – he got it so bad it crippled him. He had to be booted around in a wheelchair. My dad had the disease, too. At the end of his life, he was pretty much crippled, too. He couldn't get around. But my dad died, I guess – I don't know. He was probably middle sixties or something. He died as probably a young man. Pretty young. I just lost my mom, like I said, last February. She was eighty-nine. So I don't know what else to tell you, hon.

CK: Oh, this is great.

Q: Can you describe the old shuck house for us? It was a fish house when you were growing up.

DM: Well, the front of it, like I said, you had your ice house. In the ice house, you had your – it was the old shuck house. He had benches in it like these, back then. It was maybe about the same number of people – fifteen to twenty used to shuck in there. But all the fish – people that caught the fish and stuff always went to the old house. That's where they had the scales, all the boxes were there, all the ice was ground there. That was the fish house when my dad had it. And this was the oyster house.

CK: Let's just wait for this to pass.

Q: Helicopter.

CK: Helicopter.

Q: Very sensitive microphone.

CK: So that's where they had the scales.

DM: That's where the fish – it was set up for the fish over there, pretty much. The scales was there, and they had a big scale. It would hold a hundred pounds of fish. You dump them in the box, you iced, you load it on the truck, or you stacked them up. If the truck wasn't there, you'd stack them up and keep them until the truck came to load them. And the back part of it used to have eels – salted eels and tripe – they call it tripe, pork bellies. They used to be the bait for the crabs – your eels

and your tripe and your pig bellies, they would call it. You sell them to the watermen, and back then, no one had line. There wasn't no pots, crab pots, like it is nowadays. They used to have eels on the line, about a foot or so apart. Another piece of eel. They'd call it trotline. That's the way it was back then. Everybody trotlined. It wasn't no such thing as pots [inaudible] pots. I can remember sitting in the house up here on the porch. It'd be eleven, twelve, one o'clock in the morning, waiting for the fish boat to come in, we would call it. You could sit there, and you could listen. You could listen, and you could hear the boat coming at the mouth of the creek, which is probably three or four miles down the creek. You could listen. You could see the boat pulling – coming down – fish boat. "Here come the fish boat." You could hear it. Hear the engine. You knew they were coming. You could hear it. You could hear them from my house to the mouth of the creek. Well, here comes Buster, coming in. But it was the only sound – it was the only thing that could be out there.

CK: How big was it, the old shucking house?

DM: It was probably – maybe sixty to seventy – maybe more than that. It's probably a hundred yards long. No, I guess it wasn't a hundred yards. Maybe sixty yards long and ten to fifteen yards wide. It was just a regular old wooden shell, pretty much. It was made of wood. This is block here. But that was his wood, and it just rotted away. I mean, when I was kid, it was old. It was falling right around us, pretty much.

CK: I wonder when it was built.

DM: Oh, I have no idea. Ever since I can remember, it was there.

CK: It was old.

DM: The icehouse has been there since I can remember. That's still there, the icehouse. I can't remember when – that was there ever since I can remember.

CK: The icehouse?

DM: Yes. It's still there. Little house on the side of there. I'll show you when we go out. But it's still there.

CK: How big is the icehouse, would you say?

DM: About the size of this room. Maybe a little smaller than this room. I don't know what you would call it. I have no idea. [laughter] What size is this room? twenty by twenty or something – roughly.

CK: Something like that. And talk about the icehouse. Where did the ice come from?

DM: Well, ice come from Leonardtown. You just have to go to Leonardtown to pick up. He would have trucks to go to Leonardtown down at the wharf. I think it's (Goddard?). I think (Goddard?) owned it. He owned a fuel company. He owned an icehouse. There used to be a bar down there called Leonardtown Wharf [inaudible] bar, and we used to go down. We'd carry the truck down, get a load of ice, maybe it would be fifty blocks of three-hundred pounds apiece, drag them [inaudible] ice house, get it unloaded off the truck, go back and get some more

because you know you're going to be needing it. Of course, you had to have ice for the fish to ice the fish down.

CK: How did they come up with ice in Leonardtown?

DM: It was just the way they manufactured it. It was a building there made exactly for ice plant. That's all they did was make ice. I mean, these big blocks – I guess you call them molds. Put water in them, they go down to the floor, and whatever's down there is frozen. You raise them up when they froze, dump them out, and load them on the truck. These ice tongs – I used to pull up on the ice picks. You'd cut them in certain sizes. They called it iceboxes back when. You put ice in your icebox. Now it's a refrigerator. Back then, it was ice you put in there to keep things cold.

CK: While you were coming up?

DM: Oh, yeah. A block of ice at my grandmother's place. Not at my dad's place. We had all the conveniences. All electricity. But I can remember the icebox my grandmother had – twenty-five, thirty-pound block of ice. You put it in the box. That's how you kept your stuff cold. You probably remember that.

CK: What was her name, your grandma?

DM: Blanche. Miss Blanche. Everybody used to call her Miss Blanche. Blanche Mattingly. She was a Landingham before she married granddad.

CK: What sort of a process –? Did people ever use anything other than a shucking knife to open an oyster?

DM: No, I always used oyster knife. I see nowadays they got – see these people shucking – a lot of them shuck them from the wedge, from the wedge at the end of the oyster. I never seen oysters shucked like that here. They always go in the front, here. I never seen them opened up from the back like they do nowadays. You know where the wedge is on an oyster? You know what I'm saying? You get the mouth of the oyster. At the other end, is a wedge, where the shell opens up. They shuck them from the wedge nowadays. But back then, they shucked it from the mouth. I mean, they shucked fast. They shucked probably ten or fifteen oysters in twenty, thirty seconds. As soon as you pick it up and stick it, it was cut. It was done. You didn't grind on it. You took the oyster, you put the knife in, it was in. I mean, they knew what they were doing. I would at least say it was probably twenty, thirty oysters a minute they could shuck. But nowadays, they go in the back of the oyster. To me, it's the back. But back then, when I was coming along, you never would shuck oysters like that.

CK: What did the shuckers do off-season, in the summertime?

DM: I have no idea. I really don't.

CK: Place closed down here?

DM: No, it was always open. Always open. We had people – we'd bring crabs and fish and stuff in the summertime. Wintertime was for oysters, pretty much. And then, to be honest, I think most of the colored people around here in this area

used to work on farms during the summer. In the winter, they come and shuck the oysters. You might have one or two that they would hire when needing them at the time. Somebody come in with a lot of fish; somebody would hire a couple of them over here. But other than that, I don't know what they would do in the summer pretty much. But Bryant Bowles was always there. He was just here. He was just the main guy. No education at all, or whatever. You wanted oyster; come see Bryant. You want [something from] the store, he'd be in the store, and he was the one that pretty much run the place, I would say. My dad owned it and runned it, but when he left, Bryant was in charge.

CK: And Robert Ellis, did he stick around, too?

DM: Yeah. During the summer he was always around during the summer, too. He would, like I said, sleep on the boats and just work around [inaudible] the store had. He was a little bit of a carpenter. He could carpenter a little bit. He was a little bit of a mechanic. He could do a little bit [inaudible] things, you know? Kept him around. Dad would pay him thirty, forty dollars a week. Plus, where he slept at and all that kind of stuff – food [was] probably free or whatever. Same way with Bryant. Never paid him big money. Thirty, forty dollars a week he would pay him. But he just wanted to be here and get what they want to eat, a place to lay down, go get his whiskey. Just happy.

CK: Then there's the guys in the tin building – those three. Did they stick around, too?

DM: Yeah. During the summer, they was always around, too. But they would, like I said, work on the farms. They would go cut tobacco or whatever. But they

always lived in that little tin building. I mean, nothing but just tin, real thin tin. It had wood in it to bind your tin to, but no insulation, no nothing. Just a tin roof and tin sides.

CK: I wonder. Did any of those old Black people ever tell you stories about where they'd come from or where their people came from?

DM: No. I can't say they did. Used to be one name Tom Sawyer I was telling you about. He saved my life, I was told, when I was a kid. I fell overboard over here, and I couldn't swim. I was three or four years old. He reached down and grabbed me by the collar or whatever and pulled me out of the water. If it wasn't for him, I guess I wouldn't be here, really. We just had the run of the place when we was kids. I learned to swim – I guess, seven or eight years old, I was swimming. But back when he saved me, I [inaudible] three or four years old. I slipped and fell overboard. He happened to see me go in, and he pulled me up. That's about it. Just the way life was.

CK: Did they used to play with you?

DM: Oh, always kid with them. Yeah. Yeah. Used to call me "ass whup." "You're going to get your ass whupped," them colored guys would tell me. "You going to get your ass whupped." [laughter] They was telling me that all the time. So that's how I got my name, it was from them. They just started calling me – my name was Donald. They started calling me Duck – all the colored guys. From then on, it stuck. Everybody started calling me Duck. Then my brother come along. The colored guys was still here, so they put a Goose on him, and they called him Goose. Duck and Goose. Then my next older brother was called

Seafood. His nickname was Seafood. He was pretty much, I guess, the child that was really into the seafood business more when he was older. He worked here almost all the time the whole time. Herman got told enough to – he's the oldest brother. He got old enough to leave. He left. He just went to do something else. It was like dad, always arguing about money [inaudible] money. Fifteen, twenty dollars a week. It was no money for a kid that had a girlfriend and stuff. But that's what he'd pay you. Didn't like it? You just don't do no work.

CK: But Seafood – he got his name later in life, then?

DM: Well, yeah. He stayed more or less with the business more than we did or whatever. He used to drive the trucks to D.C. He used to drive to Norfolk, run the shuck house after a while when he got old enough to run the shuck house, the fish house, watch the scales, load the trucks, drive the trucks, pick up the money. He knew where to go and where to do this and where to do that with the seafood. He was more, I guess, inclined to do that. He was more into the business than the rest of us, I guess. He stuck with it [inaudible]. But he had a big drinking problem, too, and he died when he was thirty-nine – cirrhosis. He couldn't stop drinking. So thirty-nine, he died. Thirty-nine years old. That's the way it is. That's about all I can remember. That good?

M: Great.

CK: Anything else from your side?

M: I was wondering. Did anyone in the family continue after your father retired?

DM: No. I would say, in the start of the late '70s or '80s, the seafood business started going – it was going. No more crab, no more fish, no more oysters. You could see it each year getting worse and worse and worse. Nobody would catch anything. Nobody could catch anything to sell. The seafood business just went bad. Just went bad. Today, I think it's only maybe five or six people right now that really have a license to oyster. They can make enough money to oyster for a living.

CK: How did your dad do when things went down? How did he survive it?

DM: Well, he had the store. Like I say, he had the store going. He was still buying what he could, here and there, from whoever caught what. Sometimes he'd catch twenty boxes of fish; sometimes, he caught ten boxes. But he just had enough, I guess, to keep going. House was paid for, and he had that little store and all that, and he just made it from that.

CK: Must have been kind of a shock to the system.

DM: Oh, I'm sure. He never thought – back then, you never thought it would ever end. I mean, easy money. You never saved money because every day was Christmas. Every day was more money. And in the '80s, when it started going bad, or late '70s/early '80s, you could see it each year get worse, worse, worse, worse, worse. At the end, all he had was the little store, pretty much. That's all he did. Like to have the money that's been stole from him.

CK: What's that?

DM: I'd just like to have the money that's been stole from him. I really would. [inaudible] without a doubt. He'd be a millionaire without a doubt. But that was all gone, and he wasted it all.

Q: Do you know what year the packing house finally closed or the last year he packed?

DM: No, I can't say I do. I have no idea, to be honest. But I know it was – started getting worse and worse each year starting in, I guess, mid-'70s, late '70s. Start going down. That's when the –

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 11/23/2022