

Narrator: Stephen Norris, Jr.

Interviewer: Carrie Kline

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

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Abstract: In this oral history interview, Stephen Norris Jr. recounts his life and experiences growing up in Cobb Island, Maryland. Born on September 10, 1941, he provides a detailed account of his family's involvement in the seafood industry, particularly through his father's ownership of the Hill and Lloyd Oyster Company. Norris describes the operations of the oyster business, including the processes of buying, shucking, and selling oysters and crabs, and the challenges faced by the industry over the years. He discusses the community of Cobb Island and neighboring areas, highlighting key families, the socio-economic dynamics, and the impact of World War II on local industries. Norris also shares his personal journey, from working with his father to joining the Marine Corps, and eventually starting his own seafood business. A significant portion of the interview addresses the systemic issues within the seafood industry, such as the use of scrip to pay workers, the racial dynamics between white owners and Black laborers, and the economic hardships faced by shuckers. Norris reflects on the decline of the oyster industry due to overharvesting and disease, as well as the changing attitudes and regulations that eventually allowed him to establish his own oyster house in 1986. He concludes with a pessimistic outlook on the future of the oyster industry, citing the long-term effects of diminished oyster populations and the potential introduction of Asian oysters to the Chesapeake Bay.

Carrie Kline: Can you start by saying, “My name is,” and say your full name?

SN: My name is Stephen Norris, Jr.

CK: And your date of birth?

SN: September the 10th, 1941.

CK: Okay. And just take your time. Tell us about your people and where you were raised.

SN: Well, my father was Stephen Norris, Sr., of course, and I was raised in Cobb Island. He was raised in Rock Point. He was born and raised in Rock Point. He worked for Hill and Lloyd Oyster Company. Sometime in the middle '40s, he bought Mr. Hill out. A few years after that, he bought Mr. Lloyd out and owned the company himself, and he ran it from the late '40s until '58 when it burned down, and the county didn't want it back there. [laughter] But I rode on the truck with him when he delivered crabs and oysters and stuff when I wasn't in school. I think I rode on the truck any time I didn't have a diaper on. [laughter] After high school, I worked the water for a year or two, and then I worked for the United States Post Office, and then I joined the Marine Corps for four years. When I got out of the Marine Corps, I went into buying and selling seafood, and I've been doing that ever since.

CK: That's great. Talk about those early years around Issue with your parents. What were their names?

SN: Stephen and Margaret Norris. I'm kind of lost for words.

CK: I just want to try to understand what that community was like. Who were some of the oldest people around at that time?

SN: Well, I guess the Lancaster Family, the Hill family, and the Lloyd family were the older families. The Ferbushes and Steins. The farming and the water was the main two things in that Cobb Island and Rock Point and Issue because that's almost the same place. The water business was the main thing. Of course, when I was very small, I don't remember, but most of the men was in the military in World War II. When they came back, there appeared to be plenty of oysters, and there continued to be until '72, I guess, with peaks and valleys. The seafood business always has good years and bad years, but it's never been this bad before. [laughter]

CK: Never?

SN: No. Maybe it could have been bad at the turn of the century when they had dredged and harvested a lot of stuff, but I don't think it ever was this bad – never was almost depleted as it is now. My father worked for Hill and Lloyd, as I said. When Mom and Daddy first got married, he would get up in the morning and go on the ferry to Virginia – maybe it was before he got married – and go across on the ferry to Virginia and go down and buy rockfish and drive Route 1, I think it was, to Washington and sell some of them into Baltimore and sell some and come back home. It made a long day. I think in 1941, Mr. Lloyd gave him a ten-thousand-dollar savings bond as a bonus. Well, in 1941, that was a bonus. [laughter] And I think again the next year, he gave him a ten-thousand-dollar savings bond as a bonus. When you're making fifteen dollars a week, that's a heck of a bonus.

CK: Why did he do that?

SN: Because they had had a good fishing season buying the fish because nobody else would have done what he did – go across to Virginia and buy the fish and drive all the way to Washington to Baltimore and sell them and then come back home. Some days was twenty-four hours long. In 1947, the men came home from World War II, and they started the fire department on Cobb Island in 1947. I'm just trying to think of something to say.

CK: Well, you mentioned some of those old families. To me, they're just names. Tell me about them.

SN: Well, the Stein family came from Germany. It was, I think, seven brothers, but don't hold me to that. They came to Baltimore, and somehow they migrated to Charles County, and they became watermen – or their children became watermen, anyway. They're still there, and the seven families has multiplied considerably. The Lloyd family were a farm family, but Mr. Eugene Lloyd opened a store at Rock Point when they allowed sailboat dredging in the Potomac River, and him and Mr. Hill had a grocery store. One year, they made a hundred thousand dollars in the grocery store. That's how many dredge boats was there, and that's who they sold the groceries to.

CK: In the early years?

SN: This was in the '20s and '30s. This is just rumors that I have heard. And I'm sure they've been exaggerated some. [laughter] But they made a hundred thousand dollars when a hundred thousand dollars was the national debt, maybe. The Hill family were farmers, and naturally, they got into the store and then they built an oyster house, and the oyster house supplemented the store because they paid the shuckers and the employees with scrip. Of course, the only place they could spend the scrip was in the store. They rented houses that possibly were slave quarters or something a hundred years before. Then they rented those quarters to the shuckers and so

forth that came from Eastern Shore over there to shuck oysters because the oysters in the Potomac was better oysters than the bay oysters – so they thought, anyway. The grass is always greener.

CK: What'd the scrip look like?

SN: If I remember, it was little wooden coins. But I just heard people talk about it. I didn't see it. They had a coin for a gallon of oysters, and whatever price shucking a gallon of oysters, whether it was fifteen cents or a quarter or whatever it was, they got one of these coins each time. And they would carry these coins up to the store and spend them. And they'd pay their rent. Of course, naturally, each week, they was a little further behind.

CK: Further behind? How come they kept falling behind?

SN: Well, the rent and the groceries and whatever they spent cost more than what they made. Of course, I think we're carrying on that same practice today. [laughter]

CK: Was that common to pay shuckers in scrip?

SN: I think it was. I think it was throughout the industry. I think that was a common thing back in the early days.

CK: Early?

SN: In the '20s and '30s, teens probably, or even before that. In a small community, I would assume that the man who ran the oyster house and owned the store – that was the only thing around there. There wasn't no banks. I never heard of the Bank of Cobb Island or Rock Point. So, I guess that was the way it was done.

CK: Nowhere to cash in your scrip?

SN: At the store.

CK: So the Hills had the store –?

SN: The Hills and Lloyds had the farm, the store, the oyster house.

CK: Talk about the beginnings of that Hill oyster house.

SN: I don't know the beginning. Things that I've heard over the years was he started out with the grocery store, and the dredgers would come over there and spend their money, and they would haul the oysters back to Crisfield. I would assume that was how it got started. If the people in Crisfield can buy these oysters and make money, we ought to be able to do the same thing. So they opened an oyster house. I don't know whether that was in the – we got pictures of it in '29, I think it is. So it was before '29.

CK: It was still standing in your day?

SN: My father ran it until '58, when it burned down. The oyster house belonged to the Lancaster family, which is another big family there that had farms and so forth. They owned the land that the steamboat landed at the same place, and the oyster house was there, and around the corner, a little ways, was a hotel. Of course, any of the people peddling whatever they sold, fertilizer or brushes or tackle – I don't know what they would be selling – but they'd stay in the hotel, and they'd sell in that community. Maybe oyster knives, you know?

CK: Is that how people would get their oyster knives?

SN: The oyster house had oyster knives, but I'm just trying to think why the people would come there and stay in the hotel that came on the steamboat because the roads weren't that good. That was the transportation up until, I guess, the '40s when they started really building halfway-decent roads. And of course, then in the '50s, they built most of the bridges and roads and stuff that we got in the country now, I guess, in the '50s – the interstate highways. The Bay Bridge and the Potomac River Bridge was built in '39 or '40.

CK: So this shucking house – can you describe it inside and out?

SN: It was a rectangular building. I'm going to guess it was fifty feet wide and a hundred feet long. It had one long room that was thin that they put the loose oysters in before they shucked them, and another long room next to that where the people shucked the oysters. Out on the wharf, they had a big, round wooden drum that they cooked crabs in, and they picked crabs in the same room that they shucked oysters in the summer. They picked crabs. And they had another room, probably twenty-five by twenty-five, that was the packing room. I'm looking at that from a ten- or twelve-, thirteen-year-old boy that – things looked much bigger than maybe they were. And they had a small icebox because it wasn't refrigerated. They had ice in it, and they put the oysters in there with ice on them. But most times, they put them on the truck and delivered them to somewhere – to Baltimore, Washington, or to the Railway Express and sent them to Ohio, Chicago, or wherever they had orders for them.

CK: Railway Express?

SN: Railway Express Agency was the way stuff got delivered by train.

CK: Where was that?

SN: In Washington. I drove the truck there sometime after I was sixteen, and it was H Street and maybe First or Second Street Northeast, Washington.

CK: So you'd load up a truck with –?

SN: With barrels that held twenty gallons of oysters and ice on them, and they'd put a canvas top over them and tie a hoop around that or bale a hoop around that. And you'd carry them up in. They'd have a tag on them where they was going, and you'd go up to the Railway Express and you'd sign the papers, and they would put the stuff on the train somewhere and ship it wherever it was supposed to go. That was the UPS of that day.

CK: Those barrels sound fairly heavy.

SN: A gallon of oysters weighed maybe nine pounds with the can. So a hundred and eighty pounds, plus the ice in the barrel. It's an art to handling them. Not me, but people that knew how to do it could take one hand and just roll that barrel just as fast as they could almost run with it. The reason it was round was so they could maneuver it. They'd grab it and put it up on the hand cart and just shove it up there just like it was nothing.

CK: Somebody had to do that down at the southern end, too, I guess.

SN: Yeah, they rolled it out there, and two men would lift that up and set it on the back of the truck. Then, two men up on the truck would pile them, one on top of the other. Of course, when you took them down, you would just lean it over and let it drop and made sure that it hit flat. Because if it hit on the edge, it would break the barrel apart. But if it hit flat, it wouldn't hurt it any.

CK: There's a lot to this, isn't there?

SN: It was just like we was talking the other day. Nobody ever took a picture of all the buy-boats and all the dredge boats because that's going to be forever. Doing this was an everyday occurrence. Never thought there was an art or – what word would I want to use? – a skill. You wouldn't think that's skilled labor, and it really wasn't skilled because it wasn't like building a television or building a car. But it was a skill to it. It was an art to it. Shucking oysters is an art. Filleting fish is an art. People can fillet a shad with millions of bones into them and get every

bone out. I can't do it. But I remember when I was a boy, we'd carry shad to Southern Maryland Seafood, which is in the Central Market off Pennsylvania Avenue. A man there was filleting those fish [who] got a dollar a fish for filleting them. This is back in the '50s. That was big money. He could make a hundred dollars a day and get every bone out of them. Of course, shad roe was a big product, and the shad after they took the bones out was a delicacy in hotels and high-priced restaurants in the city.

CK: Down at your end, who were some of the people working there? Who were these really skilled laborers?

SN: Well, they were mostly Black people – Joe and Jim. [laughter] There was some people – last name was Hill.

CK: Also Black?

SN: Yeah, all of them – of course, the Black people had the same names as the white people. I guess over hundreds of years, they adopted the name of the people who owned the farm, plantation – I don't know that. But I know it was Lancasters that was Black and white and Hills that was Black and white, and I'm sure the other families. So I assume that's where they got their names. I'm sure that wasn't their name when they came from Africa ... [Recording paused.] – riding in the truck, there wasn't no radios, and to ride from Rock Point to Washington to sell the crabs, you spent a lot of time talking. As you can tell, I'm very loquacious, and I would ask him every question there was, and he would give me an answer.

CK: Who?

SN: My father. And whether they was the truth or not is another story. But we would talk about the old times, and of course, old times then was when he was a boy, and we talked about stuff. That's why I remember what I remember. One thing he would tell – when he was a boy, he cleaned fish for people. People would come down to Rock Point and go fishing, and they caught croakers by the washtubs full. He would charge them a quarter a washtub to clean them. Now, there ain't no way in the world he could clean that many, so he must have hired other people to help them clean these. But he would get in their cars and ride them around on the starters and kill the batteries. They had a starter in the floor. You remember when they had starters in the floor? You shoved a starter in the floor, and the car would ride along until they killed the batteries in the cars. So the people had to charge their batteries up before they could leave, and he'd have more time to clean fish. [laughter] My father had two sisters and two brothers. It was five of them. Their father died in 1914, so their mother raised them from – my father was four years old, and Uncle [inaudible] we called him – Uncle Miles was three years old, and the oldest one was probably ten or eleven, and she raised him until he was grown by herself. When their

father died, he had a thousand-dollar life insurance. And when they was grown, she still had a hundred dollars. She didn't waste much. But they raised hogs, and they raised a garden, and they fished and crabbed and whatever they could do. Even the children could make money to help because there wasn't no welfare or social services or anything like that then.

CK: Any other stories that he told you about the old shucking houses?

SN: Well, after the hurricane of 1933, they had a gas hose on the wharf, but the pump was up at the store. After the storm, the pipe broke, and there was a sheen of oil on the water. One of the boys down there wanted to see if it would burn, and he threw a match into it. Of course, it was gasoline. It burned the oyster house and burned the steamboat wharf down. That's why from [the] 1929 pictures to the 1936 pictures, part of the place was never replaced. That was at the oyster house.

CK: What's that?

SN: It had burned several times, and the last time, of course, it never was replaced. But it burned several times in its life. Up in the attic – of course, being a little boy, I went everywhere – up in the attic, the rafters were still charred. Some of them they didn't replace. They just replaced what had to be replaced, not what was necessarily burned.

CK: When else did it burn, and why?

SN: Well, it burned in '58 when my father owned it, and why it burned, I don't know. But the price of oysters had dropped fifty cents a bushel, and one of the oystermen said. "You won't buy any tomorrow at that price. I'll burn this place down." It burned that night. Whether that had – it's a hell of a coincidence, but stranger things have happened, I guess.

CK: So, what happened?

SN: Well, the county decided that if they didn't build the oyster house back, all those Black people would move away, and that would be good for the community. So they wouldn't give him a permit to rebuild an oyster house.

CK: In '58?

SN: Yeah.

CK: Why would that be good for the county?

SN: Because they didn't want these people – these lowly people – they didn't want them there. They thought that they would all move away. And he probably employed forty or fifty of them, and the forty or fifty he employed had children, and they went to the schools, and I guess it cost money to educate them and whatever. The mindset in '58 is a whole lot different than it is in 2005 or even in '68 or '78, you know? You're too young to know how things have changed in fifty years. Black people wasn't considered to be very valuable in the community. People that hired them probably paid them what they had to because they was competing with other oyster houses that had the same people and the same practices. They didn't pay them much money. The only difference in being a slave and not being a slave, even up in the '40s and '50s of the 20th century, was you paid them. But there was the same thing. You paid them with the scrip, and you gave them a place to live, and you took the scrip back away from them. It wasn't much different. Until the Great Society, that's the way it was. [Editor's Note: The "Great Society" was a set of domestic programs and initiatives launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s. It aimed to address various social and economic issues in the United States and bring about significant social reforms.]

CK: How were you taught to regard Black people?

SN: Well, my father was probably different than other people because he grew up and played with them when he was a child, and he grew up and worked with them, and he worked at the oyster house, and he worked at a Black man's job until he got a driver's license and started driving the truck in – however old he was. He was born in 1910, so he would have been '26 before he got a driver's license, and I'm sure they didn't put him on the truck driving when he was sixteen. So whenever he was mature enough to get a driver's license and be trusted to drive a truck, he started driving a truck. I would say that would have probably been, say, '35. So he worked with them, and he respected them to the point that they respected him. Some of them, you couldn't respect because they just didn't know how to act. But the majority of them did, and they treated him that way, and he treated them good, except he paid them low pay because he still had to compete with other oyster houses and other crab meat plants. We go to the grocery store now, and you buy a pound of crab meat. It's ten, fifteen, twenty dollars. Well, back then, claw meat was forty-five cents, and regular meat was fifty-five cents. Regular was the lump and everything. It was everything that come out of the body of the crab, and it's fifty-five cents. Well, you're selling it for fifty-five cents, and the person that got it out of the crab didn't make much. A gallon of oysters was anywhere from two dollars to three dollars. You know, the person who shucked it didn't get much by the time you paid the man that caught it and a man to shuck it, and you put it in a tin can and put it in a barrel and iced it up. There wasn't much profit there. And if you was selling your oysters for three dollars, I sure couldn't get five for mine. It was all competitive. It's still competitive. It's probably more competitive today than it was then because everybody eat oysters. That was a staple. Even in the '40s and '50s, it was a staple. Salt herring was a staple. Herring roe [and] shad roe was not necessarily a staple. Herring roe

probably was a common thing to eat. Shad roe went to hotels and big restaurants and places like that.

CK: How common was it for the average person to eat oysters?

SN: I would say the average person probably eat a couple gallons of oysters a year. I don't know that, but I mean, it was thousands and hundreds of thousands of bushels of oysters caught and shucked and sold in the United States – not just in Maryland or southern Maryland. I mean, the Eastern Shore, Virginia, North Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi – there was oysters harvested and caught everywhere. Of course, when you lived at Cobb Island in the '40s and '50s, you thought the world ended somewhere about ten miles away. [laughter]

CK: Who were the best shuckers back then that you can remember from your childhood?

SN: Oh, it was (Worthy Waters?) and (Harold Waters?), and I don't know whether they were brothers or cousins or what, but they could shuck thirty gallons of oysters a day.

CK: As opposed to –?

SN: Today, somebody shucking eight or ten is a good shucker. If somebody really got fifteen, it was a really good shucker with really good oysters. Of course, back then, you only bought good oysters, so you had a head start. If the oysters wasn't good, leave them in your boat. I don't want them.

CK: Not good would mean –?

SN: Something that was harder to shuck or not much meat in it. The oysters where the tide moves fast – the oysters have more food available to them because more water passed by. Those oysters have a bigger meat in them. Where if you're off the edge of the bar, where the water's deep, and possibly the water passes over top of them rather than to them, they wouldn't have the food available to them, so they wouldn't be very good. So if somebody would come in with those oysters that come out of the deep water or something, the man that ran the oyster house would say, "I'll give you twenty dollars for the whole load, and you come right there and put them on my oyster ground." Or he would say, "I don't want them at all for no price."

CK: And you could tell by looking at the size of the shell?

SN: He might step down in the boat. Of course, you can look at an oyster and tell whether it's going to be fat or not, and ninety-nine times out of hundred, you'll be right. If it's a black oyster,

if it's a long shell, they're liable to not be fat. If it's a bright brown or yellow oyster, it most likely has come from shallow water, and it's going to be fat.

CK: So what about these men, then, these two who could shuck thirty gallons a day?

SN: They were the foremen, and they'd kind of run the shuckers. Those guys got paid a little extra, and they would make sure everybody got to work on time, and they would give them the dickens if they wasn't. They got a little bit of extra money. They also had to come in an hour early and fire the steam boiler for sanitizing the buckets and the equipment that was used. Now, you use chlorine. Then, they used steam. All the buckets was put in a steam cabinet, and they would open a valve and sanitize them before they used them.

CK: So what were these fellows like, then? They'd come in a little early and –

SN: Well, they was good guys because they had to be. They had to be a little bit more sophisticated than the average oyster shucker. They was a little smarter and a little harder working, and they wanted to make a little extra money. They came from –

CK: I'm hearing your thumbs a little bit. It's a very fussy microphone.

SN: They came from Deal's Island, mostly, and they would send a truck over in September, and they would get a whole truckload of shuckers from [inaudible] Island. That was before the Bay Bridge, so they had to go to Conowingo and come that way and get a truckload of shuckers and bring them over. They'd have houses for them, and they would stay there all winter, and they'd go back home in April.

CK: Houses for them, huh?

SN: Little shacks, what me and you would call a shed. They had outhouses and a one-room house probably half as big as this room.

CK: With kids? Would families come?

SN: Well, sometimes they would bring families. Sometimes, if it was four or five men, four or five men would get one house. And if they had a family, it would be the man, his wife, and children would get a house. They just wasn't very big houses. But they managed some way. Of course, nobody had big houses. My father had as big a house as anybody, and it had two bedrooms and six children. [laughter] Had a living room and a kitchen. Of course, now, the house has – well, now it still has two bedrooms, but it's got two living rooms and a dining room and two bedrooms and a kitchen and bathroom. So the house has grown some.

CK: But back then, a bunch of kids in the bedroom and a couple in the living room?

SN: Yeah, the girls slept in the living room, and the four boys slept in the bedroom. I guess, before that, when we was really little, the boys and girls all slept together. I was the oldest of six. Let's see. The youngest is a girl. She wasn't born until 1949 or '50. She says '50, so I assume she's right. So, in nine years, it was six children.

CK: And then the children of the shuckers – where would they have gone to school?

SN: There was a school at Rock Point until '47 or '48. There was two schools in Rock Point: the colored school and the white school. And in '48, they closed the colored school, and they had a colored school at Tompkinsville, which was five miles up the road. And they had buses. Once they had buses, they could haul them to – consolidate some of the schools. Somewhere about 1950, they had a brick school that was built at Wayside for the colored children, and the white children went to [inaudible] which is sixteen miles from Cobb Island or Rock Point.

CK: So you got shuckers from Deal Island, from Hoopers Island, from nearby?

SN: From nearby. On the farms where they stripped tobacco and cut tobacco and everything – well, in the winter, they would come down and shuck oysters when they wasn't stripping tobacco. So you had the farm people and the professional oyster shuckers that they brought back from Deal's Island.

CK: What was the feeling in the house, then?

SN: Everybody seemed to get along fine until afternoon on Saturday when they got paid. It was some people that would go out and fight and hurt one another if they could. Of course, my father would be the referee. He would go out there and break them up. He was a little guy. He was a little bigger than I am, but he was a little guy. But he'd go out there and smack them upside the head and make them go sit down. They'd go sit down, and he'd have a place like would you tell your children – time out. Go over and sit down on that fish box. They'd go over and sit down on the fish box, and after a while, they'd calm down – Mr. [inaudible], can we go back?

CK: That's what they called him?

SN: Yeah, Mr. [inaudible].

CK: So they'd work on Saturday?

SN: Yeah, half a day. Noon Saturday, everything stopped, and they got paid for the week. Then they would booze it up, most of them.

CK: Only on the weekend?

SN: Monday, they was broke. [laughter] That's how they kept falling behind. They didn't have scrip back then. I'm talking about the late '40s and '50s, the scrip thing was gone. But they got paid on Saturday, and if they still had money on Monday, they wouldn't come to work. Same thing today, too.

CK: If they still had money, they wouldn't come to work?

SN: Yes.

CK: And he'd be shorthanded?

SN: Yeah. Or else he'd go over there and beat on the door and raise hell and maybe get two or three more to come to work.

CK: And then things changed in '58. So, we left off with the fire. How did he respond to this?

SN: Well, they had a meeting in the courthouse, and it was four or five hundred people that were some of the people that lived on Cobb Island and Rock Point that just came down on weekends and in the summer, and they didn't want the oyster house. Anyhow, they had a meeting, and (Reed McDonough?) I think was the head of the county commissioners. They had a meeting, and they come out, and he was up there on the judge's bench. So we decided that we're going to take the building permit from Mr. Norris back. He said, "Mr. Norris, do you have anything?" Daddy got up and said, "I've been pretty conservative, and if them people can live the rest of their life, so can I." That was the end of the oyster house. That was in '58 or '59.

CK: What did he mean by that?

SN: Well, Daddy had enough money for him to live the rest of his life. Those people didn't have any money. They didn't have any money. And from the time the oyster house burned down until that time, the Red Cross had been down there doling out food and paying rent and keeping them subsidized. There was no jobs down there for them. Wasn't no nursing homes or restaurants for them to work in. Now, it's a lot of work around. The government is a hundred times bigger than it was in the '50s, and they have several nursing homes in La Plata, and there's a lot of construction work. Anybody can get a job now that wants one.

CK: Was he concerned about them back then?

SN: Yeah, he was concerned, but what could he do? He couldn't force the county. He had got his building permit, and he had hired a contractor. He had spent a lot of money that he couldn't even get back, because you make down payments on a boiler to have a boiler built and things that he just couldn't even get his money back. Some things, he had to go ahead and finish buying and then resell them to somebody else to get his money back out of them.

CK: What happened to all those people, then?

SN: Well, I don't think there's but one that I know that's still alive. They stayed there, and some went back to Eastern Shore. And the ones that lived at Rock Point stayed around in the community and got old and died. They was mostly on welfare or something like that until they died. Very few them ever really got out and got jobs. Their children did, but they didn't because they wasn't trained to do anything else. Matter of fact, they wasn't even trained to go get a job. Back then, you'd just say, "Okay, you guys come on to work." Yeah, they didn't know how to go out and fill out applications and get a job. The first time you go get a job, it is hard to go into a personnel department and ask for a job and fill out the applications. I can remember doing that. It was hard.

CK: But meanwhile, you had a shucking house as well? Talk about –

SN: I had a small one.

CK: A small what?

SN: Oyster house. I bought a place in 1986. And I think I had as many as fourteen or fifteen shuckers, and we packed a great many oysters. We bought oysters already shucked and repacked them. Labor was a problem, and you had to do things that you didn't want to do. You have to turn the microphone off. [laughter]

CK: Don't say anything you don't want on –

SN: But you had to pay people under the table to get them to work.

CK: Why in 1986 –?

SN: Because the same attitude is in some people now as it was in '46. They don't want to pay any tax.

CK: Tell me about starting the oyster shucking house.

SN: Well, I just had made up my mind that if I could ever open up an oyster house, the county wasn't going to stop me. And when it got so having an oyster house was a popular thing again – it wasn't a lowly thing. The county wanted the oyster house then, and they would kind of bend over backwards to not necessarily financially help you but to get the health department to come in and help you make sure everything was right, rather than saying, "That's wrong, and that's wrong. Fix it." They would come in and say, "You're going to have to do this, and you only have to do this to get it right." They wanted you there. It wasn't that they was trying to get rid of you. Back in the '50s, those kind of businesses they didn't want. They got if they got rid of the business that employed poor people that we would have a community like, apparently, the counties want [inaudible] now – you know, hundred thousand, three hundred-thousand-dollar houses rather than fifty-thousand-dollar houses.

CK: So it took until 1986 for circumstances to change?

SN: Yes. It might have changed a little before that, but for it to be – for my turn to come – I bought oysters in '67 and sold them in Virginia. I bought from the watermen – the oystermen and sold the oysters in Virginia and sold them on the Eastern Shore. Sold them as far away as Louisiana. Matter of fact, I brought oyster right over here to Langley Point Marina. I don't know what it's called now – Solomons Marina or something. But bought oysters over there and loaded them on tractor-trailers and sent them to Florida and Louisiana and Alabama and Mississippi when they didn't have many oysters down there, and we had quite a few here.

CK: But then, finally, in the '80s –

SN: In the '80s, that was about the end of the oysters in the Patuxent and in this part of the bay, down from Point Lookout to Flag Pond. That was about the end of the oysters here. There's been some oysters up the bay after that, up around Kent Narrows and Chester River, but they're just about depleted now from disease.

CK: Talk about running an oyster-shucking house yourself, then.

SN: Well, it's really not much to say. You buy the oysters, and after '86, most of the oysters I shucked came from Louisiana, Mississippi, or Texas. I didn't shuck many local.

CK: Who'd you find to work there?

SN: It was unemployed people, and I had a brother – well, I still got a brother, but he worked for me for several years.

CK: Doing –?

SN: Running the skimming room, the packing room, packing the oysters in pints, quarts, gallons, whatever.

CK: You call it the skimming room?

SN: Yeah. You dump the oysters on the table, and the water would run out of them. You skim the water out of them, you scrape the oysters off the top, and they got the water out of them. So you would get dry oysters from the shuckers. You didn't pay them for the water. Then you'd wash them and put them in pints and quarts and gallons, half-pints, twelve-ounce cans, whatever the customer wanted, and deliver them to Food Shoppers Warehouse or wherever.

CK: How was all that different in your day from your father's day?

SN: There was a whole lot less oysters, and that's about the only difference.

CK: No technology changes?

SN: We had a better capping machine. We packed a whole lot more in glass. He packed them in tin cans, and we packed them in either plastic or glass.

CK: And a better capping machine?

SN: Well, we just had a machine, and it probably was available when my father did it, but he just didn't have it when he first started that had a plug top like on a paint can. You just popped the top on it. Then he got some – sometime in the '50s, you got a can that you would seal the top on, like a can of beans or a can of soup now, only it still had to be refrigerated. Now, they have a plastic can that is very similar, and you seal the top on it. But you can see through it. But we packed most of ours in glass because the consumer preferred the glass. The reason for it – that plastic cup has got very thin walls. Let's say that holds twelve ounces. But a glass jar that holds twelve ounces would appear to be twice that big. So the consumer would see this glass jar, and that's got twice as many as that sixteen-ounce cup, and that's what they'd prefer to buy.

CK: You knew how to read the consumer.

SN: Well, not that I could. The retailer could. He knew what the consumer would buy.

CK: Did you have your own label on your products?

SN: You had to put your name on it, yes, and the health department number.

CK: I know Richard's got some more concrete things he wants to know.

Richard Dodds: Yeah, just a few specific things [inaudible] we're talking about your business now. I think I heard that you used those oyster breaker machines for a while for your shuckers. How did that work out?

SN: It didn't work out good for me. It worked out good for [inaudible], but my shuckers was determined that they wasn't going to change the way they did things. For the breakers to work good, you had to pick the oyster up and hit the breaking machine every time. My shuckers would try to shuck it, especially in September and October, when the oysters have really got their mouth closed hard. They would try it first, and if they couldn't get the knife in it, then they would hit the machine, and that slowed them down. Where the breaking machine – if they would pick the oyster up and hit the breaking machine every time as a habit, it would have helped them. But they had made up their mind that that wouldn't work, and you convince a fool against his will, he's of the same opinion still.

CK: What was that?

SN: Convince a fool against his will, he's of the same opinion still.

CK: Who is that from?

SN: I don't know. Abraham Lincoln. I don't know. [laughter]

CK: That's great.

RD: I know you had to have several different kinds of licenses to do what you do. Could you explain to me – I think you've got a repacker's license. You've got a shell stock license. Just a little bit about the different kind of licenses.

SN: Well, an oyster packer's license is a license to shuck oysters, pack them, and sell them. A repacker's license, you would buy the oyster already shucked, and you could just repack it into your label. Then there's a shell stock dealer. You would just buy the oysters in the shell and sell them in the shell. That was through the health department. Then you had – from the Department of Natural Resources, you would have to buy a seafood dealer's license. At one time, you had to buy an oyster buyer's license, a crab buyer's license, and a fish buyer's license. You would have to buy two or three. But at some point in time, they consolidated all of them into a seafood

dealer's license or fish dealer's license. I don't know what they call it. Of course, you'd have to have a DOT license – Department of Transportation. I guess that's most of them.

RD: You've been repacking quite a few years.

SN: Well, we repacked all the time, but I had a shucker, and I could do it all.

CK: Repacking?

SN: Well, I shucked and repacked both. In other words, if you had a shucker/packer license, you could shuck, pack, and repack.

CK: What do you mean, repack?

SN: Repack is if I buy oysters from you, and they're in your can with your name on it, and I dump them on the table and then put them in my can and resell them. I repacked your oysters. In other words, I bought them from you and repacked them. I'd buy them from you in a gallon, put them in pints, resell them, and hopefully make a profit.

CK: That's profitable?

SN: Some days. At Christmas and Thanksgiving, it's profitable.

CK: To put it in a smaller –?

SN: Smaller container. In January and February, it probably is not profitable. You'd almost have to shuck your own.

CK: And your name – is that part of what sells?

SN: I'm sure your name has something, but everybody has got them in a pint jar. It's a clear – like a mayonnaise jar. And you put your name on the top. Unless you really go and look for it, his top, my top, and your top all look the same. It's just got a different name on it. And you just put a seal over the top, and you hit it with a heat gun, and it shrinks the seal on there so you could tell if it had been tampered with. The seal has a name on it. Well, after you shrink it and it fits the contour of the jar, you could read it, but if his jar was sitting next to mine, you probably wouldn't even see the difference.

CK: I'm going to look for yours.

SN: Well, you won't see mine anymore. I quit.

CK: You quit? When did you quit?

SN: About a month ago. The health man come down there one day, and I took the license off the wall, and I said I quit. [laughter]

RD: Is this the oyster shucking, Steve?

SN: Yeah, I quit.

CK: What happened?

SN: I just was fed up with my help. After a while, you beat your head against the wall as long as you can stand it, and I just quit.

RD: Will you continue with the fish?

SN: I'm going to continue with the fish and crabs, I think, as long as I can get some help to do a little bit of work.

RD: Over the years that you've been involved in the industry, Steve, how has the importance of the oysters, the crabs, and fish, the three of them, gone? I assume the oysters probably started off –

SN: Well, oysters was the main attraction. That was the main thing.

CK: What was?

SN: Oysters. And then I would say, starting in the '90s, crabs was the main thing. Right now, rockfish is probably the main thing. Oysters has just gotten unprofitable. Crabs are still profitable, but in the quantity – even though there was a few more last year, it's just nothing like it was 10 years ago. And fish is profitable for one month: March. But I probably made as much in March last year as I made the rest of the year. I know I made more in March than I made the rest of the year.

CK: Why March?

SN: Because that's when the fish come up the river to spawn, and the season runs until the 25th of March in the Potomac, and that's the end of it.

CK: Are you processing the fish?

SN: No, just buy them and resell them. Most of them ends up in New York because that's where the most people are. And rockfish in New York is still a delicacy. Every restaurant – almost every restaurant will have rockfish on the menu because in the Hudson River, rockfish was at one time a very popular fish. Of course, being in southern Maryland, you think this is the only place that's got rockfish. Well, the Hudson River don't have many, but if they did, we wouldn't be able to sell them in New York.

RD: Steve, I have two more questions. I know you operated a buyboat for a while. This is going back a few years now. How did that work, generally?

SN: Well, years before, people would come and buy oysters in the buyboat, and they would run the buyboat to the oyster house, whoever they was buying them for, or they would go to Crisfield and almost auction them off. The oyster houses would come down there, and (I.T. Todd?) and (Richard Christie?) – they would kind of bid them up. Of course, when I got into it, it got so that you bought for one or two oyster houses, and you would buy them on the boat, and you'd come ashore, and you'd put them on a truck and deliver them every day. Years before that, you would buy for a whole week, put them down in the hold of the boat, and would go to Crisfield or go to Weems or to Water View, Virginia or Urbana and sell them on the weekend. They'd get the oysters off the boat on Saturday, and you'd leave Sunday night to go back wherever you bought oysters.

CK: What was the name of your boat?

SN: The *GS White*.

CK: What do you mean, bid them up to auction?

SN: It wasn't exactly an auction, but you'd come down and look at them, and you'd say, "Captain, I can give you four dollars for them," and Richard would come down, and he'd say, "I'll give you four dollars and ten cents." This young lady would come down – "I can give you four dollars and fifteen cents." Whoever would give you the most money, and you would work them. "Well, Richard's going to give me four dollars and fifteen cents." "Well, I'll give you the same thing Richie will." "I can't sell them for the same thing." You'd give him a nickel more or a penny more or a half-cent more. It was just who could tell the best fib. [laughter]

CK: For the oysterman?

SN: Yeah, or the man on the buy-boat. He would try to convince somebody that these are better oysters, and whoever he'd convince to pay the most money – and of course, the packers was doing the same thing. They'd get their heads together and – “No matter what they say, we're only going to pay him four dollars.” Of course, agreements never hold up. [laughter]

CK: What about the buyboat buying from the watermen?

SN: Well, it was all kind of little tricks. I was a slow learner. I didn't learn very fast. But some of them would give him an extra bushel or two. Some of them would give them a quarter a bushel extra – no record of it anywhere, but they did it. When you was buying them from the dredge boats off the bay, it got so competitive that they would give the captain a hundred dollars to sell to you. Some of the Smith Islanders started that. On Monday and Tuesday, they could use power, and they'd have a hundred and fifty bushels each day. So if they gave him a hundred dollars, that was less than one dollar a bushel. They would supposedly lose it out of their freight, but I'm sure that they marked some marks on the tally board to get it back. It was all kind of tricks to get the boats to sell to you. Of course, at times when the oysters weren't in demand, you'd be the only buyboat there. Of course, the oystermen would say, “Soon as there's not another buyboat, you always cut the price.” Wonder why them other buyboats are not here? Of course, the oystermen didn't believe that – you'd just take advantage of the situation. When the other buy-boats weren't there, it means that the market is saturated, and the only way to sell them – you got to lower the price, like anything else.

RD: How long did you operate the buyboat for?

SN: From about '68 or '69 until '86, off and on.

CK: What's that?

SN: Until 1986.

CK: Did what?

SN: Bought oysters on the buy-boat, or at least used the buy-boat as a base. Sometimes, I'd go to Kent Narrows, and I would buy on the land, but my buyboat was there. In a jam, I could drop out in the harbor and buy from both sides of the buyboat. You could buy them so much faster on the buyboat because you're anchored in the harbor, and they could shoot up from both sides. It was more convenient.

RD: Steve, when you were interviewed back in 1990, fifteen years ago, you were quite optimistic about the future of the industry. I would say if you –

SN: I'm just the opposite. [laughter]

RD: You're just the opposite, it sounds like now, especially if you just mentioned the fact that you're no longer in the oystering industry. Do you see any future?

SN: I don't. If, in fact, they planted the Asian oysters and they survived and they multiplied, it would take ten years.

CK: Planted what?

SN: The Asian oyster that they're talking about trying in the Chesapeake Bay. If the natural oysters came back, if the oysters that's here reproduced and the disease was gone, and they flourished, it would still be ten years for it to be a substantial supply of oysters. Well, even if it came back and it was a substantial supply of oysters, what would we do with them? We haven't kept a population of people eating oysters because of the limited supply. We haven't had enough to really get new customers. You don't eat oysters. [laughter] We haven't kept the market growing. It's a whole lot more people in the United States, but a whole lot less people eat oysters. It would take another five or ten years to get the price cheap enough that you could get new customers.

CK: So is it a good idea or a --?

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

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