

Narrator: Mary Ridgeway

Interviewers: Carrie Kline and Richard Dodd

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

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

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Abstract: In this oral history interview conducted by Carrie Kline and Richard Dodds, Mary Ridgeway reflects on her life and experiences in Tompkinsville, Maryland, particularly her time working in the local oyster and crab processing industry. Born and raised in a close-knit, rural community, Ridgeway describes her upbringing with three brothers and two sisters in a family led by her carpenter and farmer father and homemaker mother. Ridgeway recounts her early career after graduating from high school at sixteen, when she was employed at an oyster house run by Mr. Coulby. She details her responsibilities in the small office, which included bookkeeping, recording and paying for seafood deliveries, and general clerical duties. Ridgeway paints a vivid picture of the work environment, describing the factory-like building, the activity as boats delivered crabs and oysters, and the communal spirit among the predominantly Black workforce. She reminisces about the sounds, smells, and sights of the oyster house, highlighting the camaraderie, singing, and banter among workers. Ridgeway also notes the different seasons and the types of work involved, from shucking oysters to picking crabmeat. The interview touches on the changes in the industry over time, the impact of the death of a key partner on the business, and the broader socio-economic context of the rural area, where employment opportunities were scarce. Ridgeway concludes by emphasizing the honest and friendly nature of the community and her positive memories of working at the oyster house.

Carrie Kline: Thanks. Now, if you'll switch seats with Mary, we'll put her in the talking chair for a while. It's good to get up a stretch a little while, anyway.

Richard Dodds: Do you want your water [inaudible]?

Mary Ridgeway: I tell anything but my age, so don't ask me.

CK: [laughter] All right. Can you start by saying "my name is" and tell us –

MR: My name is Mary Ridgeway.

CK: Once more?

MR: Mary Ridgeway.

CK: Okay. I'm sorry. Would you introduce yourself one more time?

MR: I am Mary Ridgeway.

CK: Great. Your date of birth? Is that okay to tell?

MR: A lady doesn't tell her age, and so I'm not telling mine.

CK: No date of birth?

MR: No date of birth.

CK: Eternal youth?

MR: That's right. That's right.

CK: Sounds good.

MR: To the end.

CK: [laughter] Well, talk about your people and where you were raised.

MR: I was raised in Tompkinsville, which is midway between Newburg, where Mr. Coulby lived, and Rock Point. I've lived there all my life. I love it.

CK: Who was in your family?

MR: I had three brothers and two sisters. There were six of us. And I'm next to the youngest.

CK: Okay. And their names?

MR: Their names? You want the family name? The family name was Jackson.

CK: And your parents' names?

MR: Emma M. Jackson and Sankston Walter Jackson. It's probably a name you never heard. I don't know the origin of it. I would like to know if anybody knows Sankston.

CK: Wow. Tell us a little bit about your parents.

MR: They were great people. My father farmed some. He was a carpenter. He was a good carpenter. They worked the river also. My mother was a homemaker, stayed home, and raised her family.

CK: Did you see shucking houses when you were a child?

MR: Did I see what?

CK: Shucking houses.

MR: No. As a matter of fact, I graduated from high school when I was sixteen. Mr. Coulby would come to our place. We lived on the river. He would come to our place for years and pick up crabs in the summer, oysters in the winter. He came one day after he had established this oyster house at Rock Point, and he looked at me, and he said, "How would you like to come to work down there?" I was ready for it because I was out of school. It was near home, and it was work I liked. That's how I got there.

CK: So, talk about how you got there, your first day, and your first day on the job.

MR: My first day? Well, at that time, it was Greek to me. They had all these people around. The boats were coming in. I worked in a small office. It was easy work, enjoyable work.

CK: What was the work?

MR: What was the work? Oh, I kept the books. When the people would bring in their crabs or their oysters, I would record that, pay them, give them checks and pay them, then record it in the books, answer the phone, take orders, whatever came along.

CK: You're doing a great job. I love how you talk. You have a nice way of putting words together. I'm trying to imagine what the place looked like from your eyes.

MR: Frankly, it looked like a long factory-type building. The inside – cement floors. They had the long room for the workers. They had a long pier out into the water, where the boats would come in and bring the crabs and the oysters or whatever. They had little small shanty-type houses for the workers. They had large oyster piles, shell piles. It had its own distinct smell, with the crabs and all. You can smell the salt and all of that. I don't know. I guess that's about it, as far as looks. I had a small office there. I could look out. I could see these boats come in. I

could see the truck when it would come in and bring the crabs because Mr. Coulby would go and get crabs from various places and bring them in by truck a lot of the time. I could look out the window and see the boats bring the oysters in. I could watch the men take them from their boats and put them into something that they lifted them up with. Then they would put them in tubs and dump them into the wheelbarrows and bring them ashore into the building. Let's see. I could see the small boats. They had boats that I would call a skiff that people oystered out of. I knew most of the people. There was one old fellow there [who] had one eye, and he and I got along just great. I loved to talk to him. He'd come in and just talk to me a lot. He always had a dog he took with him.

CK: A what?

MR: A dog.

CK: A dog?

MR: Yes, on the boat. You could see across the creek to some of the other places. I watched the people work inside. I talked to them. It was a fun place to work.

CK: Talk about the people who worked there.

MR: They were all Black people, except for the people that would bring the oysters or crabs in or the ones who were doing the actual – not the workers, the shuckers, or the crabbers, but the other people. I can't think of what I would call them now. I called them a lot of names at times. But they were all good people. Most of the people who came – Mr. Coulby here said that a lot of them were natives, but a lot of them also came from Virginia and from the Eastern Shore. They also, a lot of them, brought the oysters in, and all came from the Eastern Shore or St. Mary's County. The thing that I noticed in particular, I guess, was the ones from the Eastern Shore had the larger boats. I guess that's what I remember back then. But I can remember them bringing the oysters or the crabs in and preparing them for processing. Just like he said, remember the singing, the banter, all kinds of things.

CK: Talk about the singing.

MR: Well, sometimes it was melancholy. Sometimes it was full of life. But it was nice. Now, I didn't hear it all the time because I was in the office doing work.

CK: What do you mean, full of life?

MR: Oh, they were happy people. They enjoyed talking to one another. And every one of them got along, as far as I know. I never heard a disagreement, although I'm sure there had to be. There had to be a little jealousy now and then about who's getting the most crabs or who's doing this, or who's doing that. I never heard it. But I did hear the happy part, the laughter, and all of that.

CK: Banter?

MR: Yes. Oh, yeah, plenty of that.

CK: What kind of banter would go on?

MR: Well, they'd joke with one another and talk about their outside activities and things like that, their families or their ex-families.

CK: Sometimes, you say, the songs would be kind of melancholy?

MR: Yeah, or you know how they get into hymns or something like that and that type of thing.

CK: Somebody keep the rhythm going?

MR: Oh, yeah, sure.

CK: A little drumming on a bucket or?

MR: Sure. Sure.

CK: Can you talk about that?

MR: Well, actually, no, because I was in another part of the building. But I could hear it.

CK: Hear what?

MR: The sound of it.

CK: Describe that in your own words.

MR: Describe that. How in the world would you describe something like that? I don't know. The loudness, I guess. Sometimes it was just good.

CK: Yeah. We talked about the smell and the look. But we haven't talked a lot about the sounds. What did it sound like in there?

MR: What did it sound –? Noisy. Always noisy. Not a loud noise but just a continuous type of noise. Of course, the steamers and the blowers and all that were going at times. You've heard that sound too. A lot of people coming and going. Mostly, my business was to try to take care of the people who came into the office, so I didn't have a lot of time for that. But I did watch the boats and all come in and record what they brought in and paid them and that type of thing. But I noticed that you did not get into the processes.

CK: Help me out, then.

MR: They would bring these oysters in. I think that they washed them. I'm not sure. They would – some type of cleansing. Then they would shuck them. They did that, of course, by hand. But I never heard a single one or saw a single one that got hurt badly by cutting, shucking those oysters. It was remarkable. They knew what they were doing. They also knew what they were doing when they were picking crab – very good. That's about it.

CK: Who were some of the best pickers and shuckers?

MR: Well, I don't have much knowledge of how good they were. To me, they looked extremely good. It was something I could not do or would not attempt to do, but they were good. They worked all day at it, standing up, most of them. Some of them had stools that they could sit on but – or lean or something, but mostly they just stood there. They worked all day. I'm sure that it was hard work, trying to lean over and do that all day. I'm sure it had to be. So they had to be good.

CK: When you say all day?

MR: Well, they would come in. When I got there in the morning, they were usually there, most of them. When I left, of course, they had finished and gone home. But when you stand on your feet all day long, and you're doing the repetitious, same thing over and over and over, it's hard work.

CK: Just trying to picture what it would be like. Was the door open from your office, so you could –?

MR: No, no, no. I was separate. The door was almost always closed. It was connected to the building, but I think it was – as I remember, it was a cinderblock building, and it had the walls and all. And I was in a little separate office, so unless I got up and went in there, actually, I didn't have that kind of contact, but I did go in quite a bit.

CK: You went in anyway?

MR: Oh, sure. Sure, we could do what we pleased. We did our work. But we were not confined to just sitting there all day long. Years ago, work was different than it is now.

CK: What do you mean?

MR: What do I mean? Now you go to work, [and] you work at a computer all day or something like that. This type of work was different. You could get up and walk around. You were there when the people in the office – when the people came in. You took care of the phone. But you were still free to see what was going on and to move around if you chose.

CK: Sounds nice.

MR: It was nice.

CK: Remember anything about this fellow?

MR: This one? I don't know that I should tell it.

MK: Go ahead. [laughter]

MR: Well, I know one thing. Used to come to me, and he'd tell me, "Comb my hair." [He'd] give me a comb and tell me [to] comb my hair.

CK: Who are we talking about?

MR: I'm talking about him – (Mousy?). I guess I should not have said that, either, but –

MK: It's all right.

MR: That's what I have always known about him. His father was a great person, great sense of humor, a good person, had a good family. Even his sisters would come down once in a while and just sit with me in the office. I loved having them because I really did like – I like people. His brother, his older brother, would come down a lot.

CK: What was his name?

MR: I beg your pardon?

CK: What was his name?

MR: I called him Buddy. I'm sorry, but I can't remember his real name.

CK: Buddy?

MR: I know it, but I can't remember right now. Buddy. And he's gone on to do his own business in Georgia. I think probably he's retired now. I'm not sure. But anyway, he kept up with the same type of business. See, the community down there is a water community mostly. It was then. Usually, or most of the time, that was the main living of most people around there. The oysters were very plentiful, like forty or fifty bushels to a boat. A lot of boats came in. Now, the crabs were the same way. For instance, I lived on the water there, and you could walk in front of my father's place. If you really tried, you could get almost a bushel of oysters – of crabs – before you stopped if you chose to do that much. But now there's nothing. It's just depleted.

CK: How were they crabbing then?

MR: I don't know. I guess they used trotlines, or maybe they – well, yeah, they had larger boats. And they had these lines that they let out, used the salted eel bait or something they call tripe. They caught the crabs that way. But it was a larger thing at that time. You don't see that now.

CK: Did you used to go out?

MR: No.

CK: Did girls go?

MR: Yes. As a matter of fact, there was a woman down there who crabbed all the time. And she would bring crabs in. But I can't remember her name. She would. She worked just like a man, and she did that. But I just can't remember who she was.

CK: She crabbed? Did she work in the other season, too, then?

MR: I don't know that. I don't know. I don't think so, but she could have. And she, too, had a dog she took with her.

CK: I'm trying to imagine how big an outfit this was in terms of people.

MR: At that time, it was a big business. It employed people who otherwise probably would not have had work because most of the people around there were farmers. And sometimes there's nothing to do on a farm. Sometimes it's a lot of work. These people came in and did that like they had to – sometimes they had a different set of people in the summer who did the crab working, and then, in the winter, they had a different group of people. But most people would come back and work there because there wasn't a lot of other work. It was a very rural area. I remember to go to a grocery store, unless it was a very small store with a limited amount of groceries, you would have to drive to LaPlata, which I guess is twenty-some miles away. And you didn't go every day like you go to the grocery store now. You went once a week or maybe once every two weeks. So you see, these people, this business really was a blessing to them. It gave them money. It gave them something to do.

CK: No sorts of company stores around?

MR: No. Just like mom-and-pop grocery stores or something, and very few of them, very few. He mentioned the steamboat. They had a large, long pier at one of the oyster – there was two oyster houses there. This was the newer one. And the steamboat would come down from Morgantown. It came down from DC at first because my father managed it at Morgantown before my time. And then it would come down to Rock Point, so I've heard a lot of tales about that too. But this was all gone at that time. There was nothing like that down there. As he said, they had that one hotel. I don't know much about that. It had a tiny bridge going across to the island.

CK: The island?

MR: Cobb Island. So it was just a real rural area.

CK: So if you broke a shucking knife, did something like that ever happen?

MR: I guess they did. I don't know. But I never had one in my hands because I'd probably cut my hand off. But they didn't. They were good at it, very good and very efficient.

CK: I'm trying to imagine how many people might have worked there.

MR: How many people? I would say when they first started, and the crabs and oysters were plentiful, thirty, forty, maybe fifty at times. At times.

CK: Can you say thirty, forty, or fifty people worked there?

MR: I would say at times, yes, not constantly, depending on the demand and the supply.

CK: Say the whole sentence.

MR: Excuse me?

CK: Say it one more time. Say thirty, forty, or fifty people worked there.

MR: Yes. You want me to say a number? Okay.

CK: I want you to say the whole –

MR: Thirty-five is a good guess.

CK: – want you to say the whole sentence.

MR: Now, I am saying these thirty-five people were the inside workers who did the actual shucking or picking of the crabs. Now, they had from – I would say, from one to maybe six other people who did the actual business end of it, like bringing the things in and getting them on – loading them on trucks and sort of a supervisory type of thing.

CK: And then what was pay like back then?

MR: What was pay like? Very cheap. I was trying to remember the price of oysters, and I couldn't do it. But there was a lot of it, and you did not get a lot of money. But back then, a little money was a lot of money.

CK: How were people paid [inaudible]?

MR: How were they paid? They would come into the office. I would have the ticket telling me how many bushels of oysters they had or how many pounds of crabs they – crabmeat they had picked or something like that. And the prices would vary. They were not always the same because sometimes they got a little more [inaudible] a little less. And I would write the checks for them and give them. The pickers, as far as I can remember, I think, were paid at the end of the week. The people who brought the oysters in, the regular oystermen – or every oysterman,

rather – was paid as soon as the oysters were brought into the building. They got paid when they brought them in.

CK: In a check?

MR: Yes, checks always, Yes.

CK: Was payday a big deal?

MR: Payday was every day.

CK: Well, I mean for the workers.

MR: Oh, for the workers? Not especially, I don't think. Yes, I guess it was. But if you mean did they celebrate there, no. No.

CK: Were there places to go and celebrate there?

MR: No. Absolutely nothing. When you were there, you were there; that was it. There was nothing around there. The people that worked there went to Miss Simms' place for food, or they brought their own lunch in or something like that. There was actually no place to go. I imagine – I can't remember, but I imagine that there was probably a crab house or a restaurant or something on the island now [inaudible] I can't remember back then. Other than that, there was a tiny store at the top. The oyster house is at the bottom of a hill. And at the top of the hill, there was a small store. And you could go up there and buy a Coke or something. But that was it. You –

CK: Not even a – I'm sorry?

MR: You took what you wanted when you went there.

CK: Not even a drink house in the vicinity?

MR: No, not that I can remember. If it was, I didn't indulge.

CK: Well, let's take a break and see what Richard has in mind. Anything in particular?

RD: Well, you answered one of my questions. It sounds like the pickers and most of the shuckers were paid once a week. Is that right, Mary?

MR: Yes. They were paid. They were not paid daily. If you pay them daily, you're probably not going to see them tomorrow, so you keep them working, and then they get their pay, and then they can do as they please for the weekend and come back on Monday, hopefully, come back on Monday morning.

RD: And they were paid in cash? The shuckers and the pickers were paid in cash?

MR: Honestly, I can't remember if the workers, if those workers were paid in cash or not. Every other person – people there were paid by check. I don't remember handling any cash. Well, I had to – well, petty cash or something like that.

RD: Who were the main customers that you sold to, the company sold to, your biggest customers?

MR: The oysters and crabs were taken out of there by truck, refrigerated, of course, with the ice, and taken out to Baltimore or wherever. Sometimes you got a special order, somebody wanted something, and that would be taken in. I think Baltimore was the main place.

RD: Was it taken to the market there, or was it for specific customers up in Baltimore?

MR: Now that I can't answer. But I think that the other partner had a place of business up there and possibly with Mr. Coulby. I don't know that. And I'm sure that he had a sale for everything that went in there before it was brought up there. I imagine that's how it worked.

RD: We talked about crab steaming, Mary. Do you recall the crab steamer that they used? What kind it was?

MR: I don't know about the crab steamer. I called – for the oyster one, I called it a blower. I don't actually remember or know what the name of it was. I know they had long things in there that they sterilized stuff with [inaudible] much steam in there from the sterilization or whatever. And as far as the name of that particular thing, I really don't know, forgotten.

RD: I'm just curious. I've seen a photograph of the one they used at [inaudible]. That was a big wooden barrel.

MR: [inaudible] a tub, a big tub-like thing. And it would go round and round and round. I can see that. I remember that distinctly. But I can't tell you the name of it.

RD: But you remember [inaudible]?

MR: Oh, yeah. Oh, I watched it, sure. Yes.

RD: What happened to all the shells after they [inaudible]?

MR: The barges would come in a lot of times and load them. I'm not really very intelligent on what they did with them, except they would take them out. Some of them would go out in the river. And I think they planted them for some purpose, where the oysters might attach to them or something. I think they did that. Some of them were hauled away in trucks. And I suppose some of them were sold for [inaudible] purposes or something. I've forgotten. Well, I didn't really get into it, either. But I know, periodically, they would be removed because you couldn't keep a whole bunch of shells and things there. It was too many.

RD: I know the building was low-lying, as you said. Did you have much problem with tides or storms interrupting work?

MR: Excuse me?

RD: Did you have much problem with extreme high tides or storms interrupting the work at the oyster house?

MR: I'm sorry, don't understand you.

CK: Storms. He's wondering whether there were big storms that affected the place.

MR: I don't ever remember any storm there, except maybe just thunderstorms in the summertime. Of course, if you had a lot of snow or something, I didn't get out anyway. So, as I say, it was a very rural area. And no, I don't remember any problem with any storms.

RD: Or high water, high tides?

MR: The tides at that time – I believe that the situation has changed now. I think the climate is changing, and I think we're getting higher tides than we ever had before. They had high tides, but the normal high tide, not anything unusual. There's just one other thing that I wanted to mention. They would – if they took out the live crabs or brought them in, they would be in barrels. They'd have these tall (bushes?) going up the middle. We talked about this a while ago – and I was wondering all my life what these (bush?)-type things were doing through the entire barrel, standing up. And I was informed it was for air, which makes good sense to me. That's how they would take the live ones out now because sometimes there was a demand for live crabs.

RD: Did you eat any of the oysters or the crabs when you were there [inaudible] seafood?

MR: Oh, we loved the crab meat. Yeah.

CK: How did you like to eat it?

MR: Oh, after they steamed it or whatever, it was to [inaudible] a little bit, fingers. [laughter] I mean, we didn't have access to a lot of things down there. While it was not a primitive operation, it was just barely – you didn't have a lot of things. You couldn't run to the store and get crackers or [inaudible] and this. You did with what was there.

CK: Isolated.

MR: Well, half and half. It wasn't too far from the other oyster house. But that business was – it was doing – the other one was doing [inaudible] at the time, anyway.

CK: So this was bigger than the other?

MR: No, I'm not going to say that. I'm just saying that the other house, the other oyster house, was – in my mind, it was doing less than what we were doing there.

CK: Great. Questions you have?

RD: One more question, Carrie.

CK: Yeah?

RD: When Adrian's father was killed, how did the business – was affected after that?

MR: As far as I was concerned, it went down completely. I no longer worked there because it was so – it just wasn't a steady place to work, I mean, as for every day or something like that. I was young, and I found other employment. I had other interests.

CK: When is it? When are you talking about now?

MR: After his father was – one of the partners was killed in this accident.

CK: Yeah. Changed the character?

MR: Absolutely. I mean, far as I'm concerned, he was the main one. The other fellow came from Baltimore. I saw him less. And with Mr. Coulby, we had been friends, family friends and all, for years. I knew them well. It just went down, that's all.

CK: I meant to ask: when you were talking about payday, you said it depended; people got different amounts. What did it depend –?

MR: Yeah, because you could go in there, and you could pick twenty pounds of crab meat, and he could pick five. The next person could pick five. Well, you're paid on how much you picked. I've forgotten about the oysters, but I think they were the same way. It depended on somebody who could be very good and efficient at it and the next person not quite so good, or maybe they had a bad day and just didn't do as much, so it depended upon what you produced.

RD: Mary, how did they keep track? Did they use a tally board to keep track of the workers and how many oysters they shucked or pounds of crab meat they picked?

MR: I think that they did. And they had a man who went around and checked on it too, so it was checked on. I presume that's what they did because I imagine – I'm not positive – I imagine they weighed the crab meat. I'm sure they had to.

CK: Can you explain that to me, then? How did they keep track? I didn't quite –

MR: They had a person that would go around and actually watch what was going on in there, not very casually watching them. They could tell how much they had produced or done in that day. They would weigh it and whatever they did; I'm not positive of that.

CK: You sure remember a lot.

MR: Oh, I remember a lot more. [laughter]

CK: What are we forgetting to mention?

MR: I guess that it was a good place to work. The people were all very friendly. They were honest people. I guess that's about it.

CK: Well, thank you so much.

MR: You're very welcome.

CK: Thanks for dredging it all up again.

MR: Well.

Claire Cambardella: Dredging's a good word. [laughter]

MR: Memories come back, you know?

CK: Memories come back, mm-hmm. This was great.

M: There was a – everything came through a window from the shuck house into the skimming room. And there was a tally board there with all the pickers' names on it. As they brought their crabmeat or oysters, whichever it may have been, they were measured and marked on the tally board. I think that's the way they kept record of what everyone did.

CK: Sure sounds like an exciting place to be around.

MR: It was fun.

M: The only difference is I was there for the fun of it and didn't get paid. She was for the fun of it and got paid. [laughter]

MR: I won't answer that. [laughter]

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----
Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/17/2023