

Narrator: Roy Ballard

Interviewers: Paul Ewell

Location: Willis Wharf, Virginia

Project Name: Chesapeake Bay Watermen

Project Description: The purpose of this project is to work to preserve the heritage of the commercial fishing industries in the Chesapeake Bay region by collecting and archiving oral histories of the men and women who are and were a part of this valuable history.

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Abstract: In this oral history interview conducted by Paul Ewell on June 15, 2013, Roy Oliver Ballard recounts his life and experiences on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Ballard, 57, lives between Exmore and Willis Wharf and has spent his entire life in the area, growing up in Hadlock. He provides historical insights into the region, including the transformation of Hadlock and Exmore, and his family's involvement in the seafood industry, specifically the Ballard Fish and Oyster Company. Ballard discusses the challenges of growing up under the shadow of a prominent family name and his work as a carpenter. He details the evolution of the local seafood industry, the significance of Willis Wharf due to its deep-water access, and the shift from traditional fishing to modern aquaculture. Ballard emphasizes the environmental changes and pollution impacting the seafood industry and stresses the importance of sustainable practices. The interview also touches on broader social issues, such as the integration of newcomers to the Eastern Shore and the importance of inclusivity and progress. Ballard reflects on the need for humanity to address past mistakes and work collectively towards a better future, highlighting the roles of both men and women in this endeavor. The interview concludes with Ballard's hopeful outlook for environmental conservation and community development on the Eastern Shore.

Paul Ewell: We'll go ahead and start. This is Paul Ewell interviewing Mr. Roy Ballard on June 15, 2013, at about 1:00 PM. Could you please tell us your full name and approximately where you live if you don't want to give away your address?

Roy Ballard: My name is Roy Oliver Ballard. I live on the Seaside Road, which I still like to call Route 600, personally, just outside of Exmore and Willis Wharf. I'm nestled in between the two. I grew up in Hadlock, Virginia.

PE: Where's Hadlock?

RB: Well, Hadlock, it was the property that was due south of the town limits of Exmore. Hadlock existed before Exmore did. Exmore's townnage was not named until 1883 or '4 when the railroad came in, and that also has its own colorful story. But Hadlock existed because Hadlock was a Pony Express stop and a stagecoach stop back in the earlier days. The building that was The Pony Express building is still in existence. It's still a residence. People still live there.

PE: Really?

RB: Yes, they do.

PE: Do people still refer to it as Hadlock?

RB: Well, anybody that grew up there is going to call it Hadlock, but all of a sudden, not that many years ago, Exmore decided it wanted to be a little bit bigger, so it reached out and tried to grab the area that I live in and that area. They managed to grab that area. They did not grab my area, thanks to my beating the bushes, getting signatures, and trying to shut that down. But, no, basically, Hadlock has been absorbed into Exmore, but it's not forgotten.

PE: Now, have you been in this area your whole life?

RB: Yes, I have. Yes. I've lived on the Eastern Shore all my life. I guess I have an Eastern Shore voice.

PE: Can I ask you how old you are, approximately?

RB: No, it's fine. I'm fifty-seven years old. I've been pretty much a carpenter most of my life. I've worked on boats. I realized that working on a boat, you take your level, your squares, and those things, and you leave them home, and you bring your rasp, your plane, your T-bevels, and calipers, outside, inside, if you have them. Then you just say a little prayer and hope you get it to look like what it used to look like.

PE: Eventually.

RB: Eventually, yes.

PE: So now, is that your connection to the water?

RB: Not really. For anyone who knows much about seafood, the Ballard name was a huge seafood name. Unfortunately, without going into a tremendous amount of conversation about that, it was a little difficult growing up in the shadow of such a big name in the community when my parents were not directly – we were directly connected. I'll excuse myself on that point. But however, we were not in that immediate corporate power, which was Ballard's Oyster and so on and so forth, which later on took the property that they had in the Chariton Area, Cherrystone, and subsequently moved into a world of making that into a campground. So the Ballards –

PE: So that was your family. It just wasn't your direct –

RB: Oh, absolutely. No. They were my father's second cousins, which made them my third cousins.

PE: What was your father's name?

RB: My father's name was John Edward Ballard. The gentlemen that were pretty much in control of the oyster business in the early days were my grandfather, Oliver Dale Ballard – the gentleman who started that initial business were his first cousins, I would think. That was probably brought together by the fact that those individuals' fathers were brothers. So it all stemmed down in that sort of manner. But as I was pointing out, it has been strange to grow up in that shadow to have people always asking, "Oh, well, you're a Ballard. You must be with the seafood business." Immediately, I go, "No. I'm a Ballard that was in the woodwork business.' My father was always very close with John Ballard and Elmore Ballard. It was very confusing to have another John Ballard. And that John Ballard was John Eichelberger Ballard. He was the gentleman who always stayed at the campground and did most of the campground's functionings.

Then there was also an Elmore Ballard, who was the other half of the Ballard Brothers Camping project. But my father stayed close with them. My father built the store, the rec house, the bathhouses. Most of the construction projects that were taking place at the campground facility, my father was involved in building a lot of those buildings. I have great fond memories of the campground opening and going down and camping in that first year. And how today it is a – well, if there is such a thing, it should be a seven-star campground. I don't know.

PE: Do you remember about when that was when it opened?

RB: You're really grabbing at me now. I think the campground opened somewhere in the early part of the '70s. That's just a guess. I'm not absolutely positive of that. It may have been. No, actually, it was probably more towards the end of the '60, I suppose, when it started.

PE: Now, let me ask you one thing. I know what the Ballard seafood story is, but I'm not sure everybody knows. Could you just tell me a little bit about what did they do? Did they catch stuff? Did they grow stuff? What did the Ballard's food business entail?

RB: Well, I have a lot of paper products that were associated with the Ballard Fish and Oyster Company. But mainly, John and Elmore's fathers got the business going, and they were buying seafood as well as producing it themselves. Of course, the face of Willis Wharf changed so much that there were huge fish houses there, as well as oyster houses and all the other things that were associated with the shellfish industry. The big fish industry was there as well. I often remember during my work as a carpenter working on the building that was Ballard's seafood business in Willis Wharf. That was, of course, the shucking house. I could remember the concrete shucking tables and the drains in the floor. They'd sweep the floor down and all that kind of stuff with water.

PE: Is that building still there?

RB: No, the building's been torn down many years ago. It ended up in the hands of American Regional Foods. They were doing the sea clam production through that building. That, in turn, was the last thing that the building was used for. At some point after that, it was torn down. But as far as the overall solid working of the company, I only have as much of a recollection as my parents would talk about – my dad would talk about it – because I wasn't in the middle of it. From the paperwork, I can tell that they were buyers of different seafood. They even handled the odd stuff. I think they even handled frog legs and things of that nature. I'm not sure people are too aware of that, and the toadfish, and all the things that were quite popular back then. Of course, then the oysters was the big thing. A little tale about the oyster can; everybody seems to love the oyster can. That's a fascinating item just because we no longer put items in cans too often anymore, except Budweiser. But at the time when American Regional Foods had the building, I was doing some carpentry work, and a fellow that I was working with was approached about doing a job there. Well, little was ever thought about at that particular time about oyster cans being of any great relevance. I would say this was about the mid-'70s when I was doing this project. Well, anyway, we added a piece on the building, and in the process, they were cleaning out the building to put their items in, and they needed the space for their storage. So there was an upstairs area above the initial front door in the office area, which was a very modest office. They were more production than worrying about having an office. Well, upstairs, there were untold hundreds and hundreds of gallon oyster cans. So, anyone who hears this, you want to scour the North Hampton County landfill; that's where they're at. They were all sent to the landfill and destroyed, hundreds and hundreds of them. What my father used to do with them was keep old rusty nails in them. As far as the collectability of that point in time, no one thought about an oyster can as being a historical piece of interest. It just wasn't thought of.

PE: Willis Wharf is close to Exmore, for the people that don't know where it is. Why was Willis Wharf such a significant seafood area?

RB: Well, it had deep water access. The channel that goes in and out of there is quite deep. It can accommodate a rather larger vessel.

PE: Something on Seaside has deep water access?

RB: Actually, yes. That carves in there pretty well. I can remember, and I would still say that some of the docking area there may still be able to hold a rather significantly drawn waterline

boat – and I mean, steel ships, because in that period of time, the American Regional Foods were operating with steel trawlers. They were bringing in huge vessels that were docked there all the time. The other belief that I understand, the water of the tide flows in and out of that creek so strongly that it's constantly flushing itself, probably more so than some other areas of equal size and placement along the seaside of the shore. This just has that stronger current. If you're ever unfortunate to fall overboard when the tide is moving, you can end up in the water, and a couple of hundred yards won't – it will only take a couple of seconds. The tide moves that fast, going in and out of that creek. It just was an appealing area. A lot of things that probably people don't understand – when Willis Wharf started really booming, we obviously had the barrier island aspects involved in that. There was all the hunting and the fishing from Hog Island, Cobb Island, and others that were too numerous to name sometimes. It was just an ideal port because of that depth that that channel had carved in and out of there. That natural tide flow just put a deep gouge in that creek, and it works good.

PE: How far is it from the actual dock to the ocean?

RB: Well, it's a process in which you have to travel south out of Willis Wharf, and you got to continue on a southern heading until you get to a point that – well, Red Bank Landing is an approximation of where you're going to start to turn to go outward so that in itself is four miles roughly. So, I guess you're probably looking at, in the neighborhood of four to five miles, I suppose, to actually get out from that path that you have to travel. There's no straight lines when it comes to the seaside, only the bay side. A lot of straight lines on the bay side. You don't want to try to navigate the seaside waters without fully understanding a lot of what you're looking at, be it the marsh edges, be it the channel drop-offs, be it the sudden mud flat that didn't exist on high tide but is –

PE: So you're saying you can spend a lot of time out there?

RB: Yeah, and not necessarily moving anywhere. You could get stuck out there and be there for a while. I'm sure that's happened many, many times. My grandfather, Oliver Dale Ballard, worked at the wharf. He worked at the fish houses. He worked at the oyster house. He was a rugged, rugged man. He was about six-foot-two, had hands the size of grizzly bears, had a thick, thick mustache and a really rugged, rugged exterior. He worked very hard for probably hardly anything as time went along.

PE: I think that's the definition of wharfing.

RB: Yes. But some people have a knack of taking that part and turning it into a real structured business. That is certainly what the Ballard Brother's oyster company did. They turned that into a solid business.

PE: Are there any Ballards now still involved?

RB: Well, yes, there's Chad Ballard or his offspring are still fully involved with the Cherrystone aquaculture project, which takes place here on Cherrystone Creek on the bay side. But they have returned to Willis Wharf and have an aquaculture operation going on there. Excuse me.

PE: Is that clams, oysters?

RB: Clams mainly. They're raising the seed clam the same way that Ballard, the Walker brothers, and the Terry brothers are all three involved in seed clam production now. If you've ever seen a sea clam, it's not much bigger than a couple of pinheads to get going. It's hard to believe that in three short years, you're going to have that on your table, enjoying it. But yeah, it's very small. I had the privilege before the aquaculture boom really hit the Eastern Shore to meet a couple of individuals who were innovative enough to come here and try that. I worked with a gentleman that – I'll just leave his name out of it, but we went to Salisbury Airport, and we picked up several thousand sea clams in a cooler that was no bigger than what a case of beer would have fit in. In sheer amazement of seeing how little the sea clams were, at that point, I wondered how in the world would man be able to control something so small. It's out there in the water unprotected by anything more than a few nets that they created. And bull fish love them. Crabs love them. So you have a product that once you start trying to make it go from the smallest, smallest evolution, it has to be a table-size product, you lose a lot along the way to get to that point. Now they're dealing with clams in the millions here now.

PE: Wow.

RB: It's literally in the millions.

PE: So, is that the future of working with water on the Eastern Shore, do you think?

RB: Well, it probably is because a lot of gentlemen that went out and scratched and clammed with a rake today go out connected with a co-op that works through those three individuals. I don't know the degree of how each one of those companies, how many watermen are working for them. I know there are a lot of watermen working for them, though. They're using their seed; they're producing locally, hatching, raising locally. They employ a biologist in every phase of what it takes to go from spawn to table product. It's amazing.

PE: I've heard a lot of people say, and I don't know if it's true or not, that it's a difficult business to get involved with because there is such attrition for this, whether it's oysters or clams. Then I've heard a bunch of folks say that they don't know if they can be profitable. What's your thought on that?

RB: [inaudible] Profitable is patience. At my point in life, I've tried to find as much of that as I can muster up sometimes. Yeah, it is a profitable business. It's going to take money to make money, but that's the bottom line of our entire society. It's going to take money to make money. One, you're going to have to acquire permits for grounds which can be a smooth process or a lengthy process, depending on the neighbors to the property that you're trying to acquire to use yourself. Obviously, you're going to have to have boats, and it's going to take several boats. It's going to take enough boats to be able to bring your products in and out, a couple of spares, obviously spare motors because that's always your bigger enemy. The boat lasts a lot longer than a motor will. It's like the post and the post hole. The post hole is going to be there forever, and the post is going to be gone. So it's absolutely sure that the seafood industry has figured out a

way to come back from what it lost. Seafood is always going to be consumed by somebody. But the most important factor to remember in this is how much more is man going to pollute our waters to the point that seafood won't grow, not because it doesn't want to grow but because man prevented it from growing.

PE: So based on that, what would you say – you're talking about pollution of the water. What do you think is the most significant source of pollution? Without naming names or just –

RB: Well, I couldn't begin to tell you the names. It's probably the giant corporations that have ties to a small, little piece of the waterfront from all the way in Annapolis to the tip end of the opening of the bay where the bridge is. Each thing has a contributing factor. It could be a farmer. It could be the household that doesn't have a good sewage system that leeches detergents and other factors into the groundwater that travels to and from aquifers going everywhere. It's said by most who know [that] the aquifer of the Eastern Shore is basically going all the way underneath the Chesapeake Bay from the mountains. We're just lucky enough to grab hold to another side of it. I have noticed in my years of building that water on the bay side is not, in most respects, as good – and I know people are going to argue with this – as the water on the seaside is. But it must be a contributing factor to those last few miles that aquifer flows under our land and our feet to get to the last little bit of clearing it up, maybe. A great example and people will probably not like me saying this [is] the Church Neck Vaucluse Shores community; I built a couple of homes there, and I've worked there. The water quality in that area is not good. It's not what moving five miles to the east has to offer for fresh water, good water. I built a home over there, and it was a brick-veneered home. We ran water all the time. We were right on the creek shore over there too. By the time we were finished building that house, I could not distinguish any difference in the water from the first day the well was drilled until the last day we left the house to turn it over to the homeowner. The water – it's just the way it is. It has a bit of a smell, and it has a little bit of a taste.

PE: When I was a kid, my grandparents, where I grew up, in Hunting Creek, we had the old pump that you had to prime, and it ran through – we only had a sink, and it ran through, and it ran into a ditch outside of the house, which ran through the big ditch out by the road. So you're saying that stuff doesn't help a whole lot, either? [laughter]

RB: No. I wouldn't think it would. Any amount of chemical, foreign substance, the bottom line is, let's face it, man is guilty of more things than he'll ever want to admit. It takes a big man to admit the wrongs that have happened along the way. And the farming industry – I'm absolutely sure they didn't mean to do all of the harm that they've done over the years. But through the process of education, people have realized that, well, for instance, DDT was a bad one. It was killing all mother nature's products like nothing ever seen before. The birdlife, wildlife, everything was becoming affected by it. The grass and the water was becoming affected by it. It did so much damage before anybody realized what it was doing that some of those things have taken this long to even be slightly reversed. Without the newfound interest in the oyster, which obviously – its technical term is a bivalve, and a bivalve would be no different than the valves in your automobile. They're breathing in the noxious gas and oil combinations, and they're spewing out the byproduct of that moment of combustion. So the same way with the oyster; the oyster pulls in the byproduct, everything bad, cleans it up the best it can, and spits it back out. So each

little cycle that it manages to do cleans just another little micron of water. With millions of them out there, millions and millions of microns get cleaned. That's what's going to make a difference. It has to make a difference.

PE: So you're saying we've turned the corner, and things are getting better somewhat?

RB: Well, I don't know what corner that might be. [laughter] That corner might be as big as Daytona's racetrack, or it might be as tight as Martinville's little paperclip turn; it's hard to say what would be. I know that man has consciously realized it's time. We can't mess around much longer. We have to go back in the right direction.

PE: As a kid, I remember my parents and all my older relatives didn't think twice about throwing their garbage out the window.

RB: No, they didn't.

PE: It was just what you do. They were good people, but that's what you did.

RB: Well, there are a couple of good things to be said about what they did. Certainly not the pollution factor, but there's a wealth of old bottles underneath our grounds all around here. You just have to look in the right places, figure out where the old homestead used as their main garbage place, and you go do a little bit of digging, a little bit of careful probing; you might come up with the next bottle that's worth two or three thousand dollars because the bottles of that period of time are extremely valuable and collectible today by many people, just as those oyster cans are.

PE: Just as the oyster cans.

RB: Just as those oyster cans are.

PE: It's funny. I remember in our smokehouse, tons and tons of oyster cans full of nails.

RB: Yes.

PE: That's all they were used for.

RB: That's all they were used for. It was a great thing because no one viewed them as a collectible. They viewed him as a utilitarian item. "I've got a can. I've got something I can put in it. And that's what I use it for. I ate what came out of the can, the nice, salty oyster. Now I'm going to keep it using."

PE: People reused a lot of stuff.

RB: Yes, they did. I guess part of our pollution factor for sure is based on that ever-popular product, plastic.

PE: Right.

RB: Right down to the microphone I'm talking on right now, plastic has – you can't go out on the water, even today with all the efforts, and not see a plastic bottle floating. God forbid you see a six-pack holder floating because you really need to grab those and destroy them. I recently saw a picture of a turtle that got it wrapped around its shell, and it grew with that restricting its growth, and the turtle looks like an hourglass. It's got two basic halves to its shell, and it's in the length of its body because it got tied up in a plastic drink holder.

PE: Not good.

RB: No, not good. Not good at all. So, man, he's got to learn.

PE: Well, hopefully, we're moving in that direction.

RB: Yeah. Well, there's so many subjects that man has managed to mess up. He certainly, without a doubt, messed up the American Indian. There is no way to – no one can take that one back no matter how much they learn about the subject. No one can take that back. No one can take back slavery. No one will ever take it back.

PE: But you can move forward.

RB: You can move forward.

PE: Do the right thing.

RB: And you have to be willing to get along with everybody.

PE: Watermen are not notoriously known for getting along with people or each other very well.

RB: No. Well, the Eastern Shore was saddled with a stigma of the local folks starting to label the new folks as come-heres. I always try to look at that in a different light that maybe an infusement of new blood and new thoughts and new genes to add to the families that had already been here for all these generations would help restructure some of that. Obviously, there are places that can't make that big an impact, but overall, up and down the length of the Eastern Shore, I think that's played into some of the new greatness of youth that we have and the smart minds that we have that some of those have been a combination of an Eastern Shore family and an out-of-town family that have pulled together and somehow started a great new generation of Eastern Shoremen.

PE: So you don't view the come-heres as a lot of people I've talked to do, in such a negative light?

RB: Well, no, I don't. I really don't. I've always tried to enjoy and grasp new people. I have some great, great friends who are in that category of what somebody would say is a come-here, and to me, they're just a friend, nothing more, nothing less. Nothing more, nothing less. I'd have

to say that this helicopter is pretty entertaining too. It's probably (ruling?) our background here a little bit.

PE: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

RB: No, nothing more than just to say that if man's going to make it, man's got to be the one that makes it. I'm not leaving women out because mankind is woman and mankind. So I believe that women have more than proved their moxie to the world; they have. They're on the battlefield. They're in the kitchen. They're out in the corporate business. So women will never be able to say they haven't come a long way. I guess if you want to put things that I was talking about earlier about the American Indian and the element of slavery and the gross neglect for letting women be themselves, which should have been done many years ago, so now you have those factors have all changed, and it makes the face of the planet a little bit better. It really does.

PE: I agree. Well, this is Paul Ewell, concluding an interview with Mr. Roy Oliver Ballard.

RB: That's correct.

PE: We certainly appreciate it. Thank you very much.

RB: You're welcome.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/20/2022