

**ALBERT “CORKY” RICHARDS**  
**Oyster Tong Maker – Apalachicola, FL**

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Date: January 9, 2006  
Location: Mr. Richards’ workshop - Apalachicola, FL  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 57 minutes  
Project: Florida’s Forgotten Coast

**[Begin Corky Richards]**

0:00:00.0

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, January 9<sup>th</sup>, I believe, 2006 in Apalachicola, Florida, on Bluff Road with Mr. Corky Richards. Mr. Richards, would you mind saying your name and your birth date for the record?

0:00:17.7

**Corky Richards:** Corky Richards, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

0:00:23.0

**AE:** Is your given name Corky, or is that a nickname?

0:00:24.6

**CR:** No, that's my nickname. Albert is my real name.

0:00:26.9

**AE:** How did you get the nickname Corky?

0:00:30.6

**CR:** I don't know. My dad gave it to me when I was a tot.

0:00:38.5

**AE:** Are you a native of Apalachicola?

0:00:39.6

**CR:** Yes.

0:00:41.4

**AE:** How far back does your family go?

0:00:43.7

**CR:** Oh, God, I don't know. I know my great-great-grandparents were here. I don't know just right off.

0:01:01.2

**AE:** Can you give me a little idea, before we start talking about these tongs that you make, what it was like growing up in these parts?

0:01:07.7

**CR:** I didn't grow up here. I was raised all over Florida—anywhere from Key West to all up and down the Keys—the Miami area—raised mostly down there. But this was always a hometown to us.

0:01:28.0

**AE:** What did your family do down there?

0:01:29.8

**CR:** My dad was a barber, and my mother was a beautician.

0:01:32.4

**AE:** Really? Okay. So when did you come back to Apalachicola?

0:01:36.3

**CR:** About 1958 and then—then—I was the onliest child. They moved on, and I stayed here. I was tired of moving all over, and I hadn't left since.

0:01:54.1

**AE:** And you were telling me earlier that you oystered and fished and all, and we saw that picture of all that mullet [piled high on a fishing boat]. When did you start working on the bay?

0:01:58.9

**CR:** Back about 1960—fifty-nine—about [nineteen] fifty-nine. And started then, and then I worked the bay oystering and crabbing, some fishing, and I was always good at working wood, and I would do odd jobs in my spare time. And then eventually, it just revolved [sic] into all this.

0:02:33.3

**AE:** So how did you get to working on the bay? Was it something that you just wanted to do or something that everybody else was doing, so you did it?

0:02:37.1

**CR:** It was a necessity. *[Laughs]* To make a living, you know. It was the onliest thing around here at the time. You want [to take] some pictures? Now this would be a good picture here. [My son Rodney Richards] is fixing to mount some heads on the handles [of a set of tongs]. *[Speaking to a woman who just entered the workshop to pick up some tongs]* That's the oyster tongs right there. That's them, Blanche.

0:03:01.1

**AE:** Okay, well I'll pause this, then, and I'll get a couple pictures, if that's okay.

0:03:04.7

**CR:** Sure.

*[Recording is paused for approximately fifteen minutes as the interview takes photographs of Rodney working on the set of tongs.]*

0:03:07.0

*[Recording resumes]*

**AE:** Okay, so we were talking about you working the bay, and then [that] you had a way with wood and got into tong-making. How did that develop?

0:03:16.4

**CR:** I would—when I was oystering, I would make my own tongs and my own handles in my spare time—if it was bad weather or something like that. And—and then it just kind of snowballed from that. Once we used the—our bay used to close June, July, and August—three months out of the year the whole bay would close, and then they'd open everything back up in September. And during that three months, I would fill in with the odd jobs, or I'd crab, or I'd be doing something. And one summer I built—a local marine supply around here—so he wanted me to build him some handles. So I did, and that's what really got it started.

0:04:17.8

**AE:** Was that Wefing's Marine?

0:04:19.2

**CR:** Wefing's, yes. George Wefing. [Wefing's Marine used to be located on Water Street in Apalachicola, but it is now located on Highway 98 in Eastpoint, Florida] I—we all knew each other, and he asked me if I'd build him fifteen pair of [tong] handles. I said sure—which was for the summer, you know, something to do and started—started from there.

0:04:39.5

**AE:** Where were the other oystermen getting their tongs then?

0:04:43.0

**CR:** There were different tong makers in town. But I was the onliest one making tongs that had oystered before and knew how I wanted mine to be, and I just started to do it like I liked them. But everybody else liked them, too. [*Laughs*]

0:05:01.9

**AE:** Can you explain what that is? What you like about a tong?

0:05:04.5

**CR:** The size of the thickness of the handles.

0:05:08.3

**AE:** The thickness of the handle?

0:05:09.8

**CR:** Yeah. Reaching around them and the shape of them, they're real comfortable in your hand. A lot of them would be big and bulky and rough—real rough wood—and I would smooth mine



off real smooth and make them a little bit smaller. Just long as I didn't get them too small where they'd be too limber.

0:05:33.6

**AE:** And the handles are [made with] ash [wood], is that right?

0:05:35.5

**CR:** Ash now. It started off with pine. But you don't get the grade of lumber that—like we used to. So now I went with ash and do a three-part lamination instead of just the solid board. I've gone to laminating everything.

0:06:01.0

**AE:** Uh-hmm, like what you're sitting on?

0:06:02.2

**CR:** Yeah, but this is some handrails for a staircase.

0:06:06.3

**AE:** Okay, okay.

0:06:07.2

**CR:** This—but it's the same thing. It's—we glue [pieces] up like this and then slice them off and come up with that [a single piece].

0:06:15.8

**AE:** Well, do you have an idea of about when it changed from pine to ash?

0:06:20.8

**CR:** Yeah, about ten or twelve years ago. It was—the pine was getting flimsy and just—just couldn't get the grades and—.

0:06:47.3

**AE:** Was it local pine that you were getting?

0:06:49.0

**CR:** No, it was southern yellow pine, but—.

0:06:54.4

**AE:** And then the ash, where does it come from now?

0:06:56.0

**CR:** It's—it's local. It's grown in the—this area but then they—it's a northern—on the Eastern Coast. The belt runs along in there but it—I don't know—really know where it comes from. All I know is when I look at the lumber it's—it's a pretty good fit for handles. Or it can be local, or it can be shipped in from the northern states. So other than that, I don't know. **[Laughs]**

0:07:40.6

**AE:** Well you have—this is an impressive shop you have here now. Where were you—what kind of conditions were you working in when you started making handles for Wefing[‘s Marine]?

0:07:47.3

**CR:** Just had a little small shed in my backyard. I lived in Eastpoint, and it was a little sixteen by twenty-four foot shed. And then in 1975 I opened up a shop in Apalachicola right on Water Street and—the place they call the Tin Shed [which is now a retail store selling nautical

antiques]. I was there for about twenty-four years. And then I built this building here, and we moved out here.

0:08:22.1

**AE:** When was that that you moved out here?

0:08:26.1

**CR:** That was—when was that? Ninety-seven? 1997 we moved out here—nine years, a little over nine years now.

0:08:37.5

**AE:** When you established the place on Water Street, was it just tongs [that you were making], or were you doing other carpentry?

0:08:43.6

**CR:** Anything out of wood. We'd get making cabinets—oyster tongs, mostly, back in those days and we—I'd fill in with whatever else that came along. But then oyster tongs was priority.

0:09:01.6

**AE:** Did y'all—when you started that shop, were y'all making the rakes [or metal heads] for the tongs also?

0:09:06.4

**CR:** Yes, yes, yeah. Yeah, we made the whole nine yards. We built new ones and then repaired the old ones whenever they came in.

0:09:18.2

**AE:** About how long does an oysterman use a set of tongs?

0:09:19.8

**CR:** It varies from the individual. Some of them can get four and five years out of a pair, and then some of them, they don't last that long. So it just varies.

0:09:34.6

**AE:** And how much did a set of tongs cost when you got started? Do you remember?

0:09:38.6

**CR:** Fifteen dollars.

0:09:40.8

**AE:** Fifteen dollars?

0:09:41.1

**CR:** For one—for a pair of handles. Now a pair of handles is 125 dollars.

0:09:47.2

**AE:** A little bit of a change, I would say.

0:09:49.5

**CR:** Little bit of a change. Gas was less than thirty-cents a gallon. [*Laughs*]

0:09:54.7

**AE:** So how much would a whole set cost, if you were welding the rake for it, too?

0:09:56.6

**CR:** Back—back then—back when I started, thirty dollars. Now a whole set will cost you 250 dollars and up.

0:10:09.3

**AE:** Hmm.

0:10:09.4

**CR:** Big difference.

0:10:09.9

**AE:** I'd say.

0:10:11.6

**CR:** Big difference. [*Laughs*]

0:10:12.2

**AE:** Well, can you talk about how you make a set of tongs? Like what the steps are and the length and—?

0:10:17.3

**CR:** Well—

0:10:17.9

**AE:** —and the number of points on the rake?

0:10:20.5

**CR:** The—the handles would just start off by milling the lumber out and laminating them and gluing them together. And then re-saw them and start the millwork after that. The heads are all done right here in the—that little bench there [that Rodney is working on right now]. Watch your eyes on that arc. My son does all the welding now. I don't weld anymore. And—and I build the handles.

0:10:52.5

**AE:** And Rod is your son's name?



0:10:53.8

**CR:** Rodney.

0:10:55.9

**AE:** Rodney. How long has he been working for you?

0:10:56.7

**CR:** All his life.

0:11:00.0

**AE:** Is he your only [child] or you got—do you have more kids?

0:11:03.2

**CR:** No. I have four—had four. I got three. He was with me since he was in ninth [grade] because he always liked shop building—hanging around with me. And he's been—he's been welding since he was thirteen years old—twelve, thirteen—and or—or building—or building, actually building out of wood earlier than that. But he picked up on the welding and—on his own just watching me do something, and then he'd copy it. And now [**Laughs**] I just help him.

0:11:44.0

**AE:** Well, and so you were saying—I've heard that [tongs] are generally twelve-feet in the length, but the woman that came to pick up that set earlier, you said something about—.

0:11:51.1

**CR:** Yeah, they—they vary anywhere from eight-foot to sixteen-feet. Mostly, I build ten-foot, twelve-foot, and fourteen-feet, but I don't—very seldom ever build any sixteens.

0:12:09.6

**AE:** Now you said something about the time of year; people right now are just using twelve-footers.

0:12:12.9

**CR:** Summertime, the tides are higher; wintertime, such as it is now, the water is lower, and you got lower tides, and they work a shallower part of the bay. In the summertime, they work the deeper part in the high water.

0:12:27.9

**AE:** So would oystermen generally have a few sets of tongs for the length for the different seasons?

0:12:33.2

**CR:** Some of them—a lot of oystermen do. Some of them don't. It just—they'll just stick with one size, and if it's too deep, he just won't go. And then it depends—

0:12:43.8

**AE:** And what about—what about the heads of the—the tongs?

0:12:48.9

**CR:** They vary from what we call a fourteen-tooth up to a twenty-four-teeth. A fourteen-tooth is twenty-nine inches and twenty-four teeth would be forty, forty-nine inches. It's the difference in the length of the heads.

0:13:14.5

**AE:** Is there an average that people—

0:13:15.7

**CR:** You see the difference in the lengths hanging on the wall over there?

0:13:16.8

**AE:** Yes, sir—hanging on the wall. Is there an average size that most of them get?

0:13:21.5

**CR:** About an eighteen-tooth [which is about] about thirty-seven inches.

0:13:26.8

**AE:** Is there—are those regulated at all as to how far the teeth are or—?

0:13:29.9

**CR:** No regulations on the tongs themselves. But that's the onliest thing you can use in our bay is—is oyster tongs. And you can't dredge the [oyster beds] unless you have a private lease, and right now there's not but two leaseholders in—on our bay. And they can—they run dredges—just drag the big baskets behind the boat and—.

0:13:57.1

**AE:** I know one of those is the Ward family [at 13 Mile Oyster Company]. What's the other one?

0:14:00.4

**CR:** Ward. [Grady] Leavins [of Leavins Seafood].

0:14:02.4

**AE:** Leavins. Oh, okay.

0:14:06.2

**CR:** Yeah, Grady Leavins—yeah, he—I believe he's got Kirvin's lease. There were several leases. Now it's—I think it's just two leaseholders now. But my grandson runs the dredge boat for the Wards.

0:14:23.8

**AE:** Oh, really?

0:14:24.9

**CR:** Yeah.

0:14:27.3

**AE:** And he's out of Louisiana, though, isn't he? Did I hear that?

0:14:29.4

**CR:** Yeah, yeah. [*Laughs*].

0:14:31.8

**AE:** [*Laughs*] Everybody knows everybody out here.

0:14:32.9

**CR:** Well no, he was—he was born here, and then moved out there [to Louisiana]. His dad moved out, and he moved out with his dad. But Jonathan, he came back here, so—. But he just—he can run a dredge.

0:14:49.0

**AE:** That's what I hear. Well so tell me about the shop you have here. How did it evolve, and how does it operate?

0:14:56.4

**CR:** Well all the—I was just needing a bigger shop, and this was a good location for me. And getting out of—right on the point of Apalachicola, and so we built this and moved out here.

0:15:13.3

**AE:** Did you leave the—where the Tin Shed is on Water Street because of space or—?

0:15:18.4

**CR:** Because of space and the tourism, you know. [There are] just more and more people every day, and right there where I was at, all the sawdust that I'd make—I knew I was going to have to go. They was going to run me out—or either go on my own so. [*Laughs*] But no, it wasn't—I could still work there except for the traffic. And I'd have to put fences up to keep people out nowadays, you know, to get any work done. But—but since then, you know, I've—like I said, back along in the [nineteen] eighties, oystering started slowing down. We had some bad hurricanes come along in the middle—about [nineteen] eighty-five, somewhere along in there, and it just tore our bay up. And I kept—I was running the shop so I—just started building

cabinets straight out. And—and it went from there. Now I've shipped cabinets and doors and windows—anything out of wood, I've shipped them all over the country. **[Laughs]** So from South Florida up to Massachusetts, Chicago—

0:16:48.2

**AE:** How do people find you?

0:16:49.8

**CR:** Word of mouth. Simply word of mouth. I met an architect out of Washington, and I've done a lot of jobs for him. And then I meet contractors through this architect that wants to—I don't go anywhere. I don't leave Apalachicola. They send me drawings, and I do my shop drawings, and they've sent me field measurements, and we build from there. So but when I met this one architect, he liked my work, and we got along real well, so it just went from there—pretty good sized jobs.

0:17:37.6

**AE:** Are you making fewer tongs now or what is—?

0:17:39.6



**CR:** Very, very few tongs. If it hasn't been for all the old customers, things like that, I would probably quit now. But I've been doing it so long, and I hate to just quit because the oystermen has got to get tongs from somewhere and—and I think it's one other man that—only one other—it's Charles Golden and he builds—also builds oyster tongs. And so between him and I we keep them pretty well supplied. [NOTE: Golden's shop in Eastpoint is now closed, but a man by the name of Lee Monroe is till making some tongs there.]

0:18:17.5

**AE:** But so if y'all weren't doing it, there wouldn't be any tongs, I imagine?

0:18:21.6

**CR:** No. Charles, he's been talking about quitting. If he quits, somebody has got to do it.

0:18:29.2

**AE:** Well what about—since you know that you're obviously so connected to the people who are working on the bay, what about—what about the people who are working on the bay? Are oystermen kind of dwindling too, or what do you think the future of that is?

0:18:39.9

**CR:** There's not near the—as many oystermen as what there used to be. Back in the [nineteen] seventies there—it was real—real strong at that time for the oystermen. I would—had a helper. That's before Rodney started working for me. And me and my helper, we'd stay busy all week long just building and repairing oyster tongs. And then we'd slack up a little bit, and then we'd have some other kind of little wood project to go to. But it was mostly just oyster tong work. We stayed real busy. I—I built tongs for different companies—Jacksonville Fisherman Supply and a couple other places like that and then run—Jacksonville, run the East Coast, Carolinas, and down South Florida, and we'd send them out to Texas and Louisiana—all over.

0:19:53.3

**AE:** So what do you think will happen when your generation is not making them, and Rodney is not making them anymore? Where will they come from?

0:20:00.5

**CR:** This bay is not long for—it's—it's—the seafood is on the way out, I'm afraid. I hate to say it, but it just—the way it's been going, it's—it can't—it won't last forever. There will always be an oysterman, that's—but not like it used to be.

0:20:22.5

**AE:** So do you have a sense of, you know, [as] someone who has spent—spent his life hand-making these tools that are used in this industry and that's on its way out during your lifetime, what is—do you have a kind of sense of what that—?

0:20:37.6

**CR:** Well it's been a big change in Franklin County, especially right here in Apalachicola. I—I guess I'd have to say it's a change for the better—not for—not for the seafood worker. But there's—there's more work, construction work and things like that. [*Sighs*] Any—any person coming up now in Franklin County that's their parents was oystermen and their grandparents, the—the younger generation is not following the seafood work now. It's just not out there. They're doing other things.

0:21:37.9

**AE:** But then the bay is holding all these oysters.

0:21:40.1

**CR:** Oh, yeah.

0:21:39.4

**AE:** So who's going to get them?

0:21:42.3

**CR:** Like I say, there will always be an oysterman but not like it was. It's not as—the past ten years it's—ten to fifteen years it's just gone downhill—not—the oyster houses. Look at your oyster dealers, you know. It's not but just a handful of them left. So and now you've got so much pollution—well a red tide, you know [which is a bloom of dinoflagellates that causes reddish discoloration of coastal ocean waters, which is often toxic and fatal to fish] really put a damper on it the last several months. [The bay is] just now getting opened back up, and the whole bay is not open now because of the red tide. And it's down right now because the river is on the rise. And that's all pollution, so—.

0:22:35.0

**AE:** How long do you think it will be closed because of the river rising?

0:22:39.3

**CR:** Until it goes down. A few days. Well, it depends on how much water they've got up the river, but I don't know. I haven't heard. But normally, the rise—it will take a few days for the water to go down and then a couple weeks, maybe.

0:23:00.4

**AE:** Hmm. You've got somebody walking up [to the workshop].

0:23:07.0

**CR:** My grandson.

0:23:08.2

**AE:** Oh, okay.

0:23:08.8

**CR:** One of them—football player. [*Laughs*] [To his grandson] You ain't gone to work yet?

0:23:20.6

**AE:** Can we—can we go back to the tongs again—

0:23:22.2

**CR:** Sure.

0:23:22.6

**AE:** —and talk about like the schedule of making them. Like if you were to—to laminate something and then let it dry and what you go to next and how long that takes.

0:23:32.6

**CR:** You let the glue dry for twenty-four hours, and then you start your millwork after that. We'll set up and try to build seven or eight pair or more at any one time, rather than just by—instead of building one pair at a time. Once we set up, then we try to build as many as we possibly can at the time. And then the welding on the heads, Rodney, like I say, he'll do that and then he'll—once we get started there, he'll build several pair up and then —'til they're gone—and then you start all over again. It's—and we have—we work all that around our other jobs we do—we've got going. And I can't—I couldn't quit on this [railing job] just to set up and start building tongs. But we try to have them on-hand for the oystermen when—whenever they need them, instead of them having to wait. But sometimes we're out, if we can't find the lumbe, and it's getting hard to find now.

0:24:56.5

**AE:** Well, what if somebody brings them in to be repaired? Is that generally a quick turnaround, and they can just not go out [oystering] for a day [if they only have that one set of tongs]?

0:25:00.5

**CR:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, if—if we're here and not out on a job, a lot of times Rodney will jump on them and get them while they wait. But—or they can leave them overnight and have them the next morning for them. He just fixed some up—yeah, I think he got that pair in this morning and just done a little bit of—little bit of welding on them for repair so—.

0:25:29.8

**AE:** Well what do you call—is there a name for those long lines that are part of that cage that are above the teeth?

0:25:35.8

**CR:** Oh yeah, that's the rail.

0:25:38.9

**AE:** Okay.

0:25:43.0

**CR:** These—these smaller rods here?

0:25:43.8

**AE:** Yes, sir.

0:25:44.3

**CR:** That's the brail—brail rods. Teeth and—

0:25:53.3

**AE:** And this is all just designed as a matter of, you know—?

0:25:56.6

**CR:** It's all basically—every—every set of tongs like this is the same spacing, the—about the same shape and all. Our teeth are a little bit different from others but other than that—

0:26:11.8

**AE:** How are they different?



0:26:13.0

**CR:** By being round. Some—a boy over in Eastpoint, he uses a square tooth and sharpens them off to a point, which is basically the same thing. It's just—they do the same job.

0:26:28.7

**AE:** Is it just a matter of liking the way it looks or getting the rod that's shaped like that?

0:26:33.4

**CR:** No, it's just according to what—whoever the build is—whatever he wants to build and whether they work right or not.

0:26:41.5

**AE:** Would you say that would be a signature—like I could go out there on the bay and see these and know they're your tongs?

0:26:46.2

**CR:** Yeah, if you're—if you're on the bay—if you're working on the bay, you can pretty well look at my work and somebody else's work and tell the difference—who's—who's done the

work. Let's see something. [*Looking along the wall of the workshop.*] I don't see anybody else's old handles here. I had at one time—. [*Picks up one of the metal baskets or tong heads that are hanging along the wall.*] Then—see, these teeth are squared?

0:27:37.7

**AE:** Yes, sir.

0:27:39.3

**CR:** Now that particular head there was built by an old-timer here in Apalachicola by the name of Roy Smith. He was—built boats and oyster tongs and shucking machines, where they shucked the oysters. He built the machines and he's actually—Roy Smith was the first one that laminated handles. [*Looking on the wall.*] That looks like one of my old heads there.

0:28:11.6

**AE:** And so how did you get your hands on this [head]? To repair it or just from this place?

0:28:14.1

**CR:** Just an old—just an old head kicking around, and I just hung it on the wall to remember Roy Smith by. [*Laughs*]

0:28:25.9

**AE:** Has he passed?

0:28:26.9

**CR:** Oh, yeah, he's been passed away for many years now.

0:28:33.3

**AE:** And this—the part that's holding the wood [that connects the ehad to the handles] looks different. Or is that my imagination?

0:28:37.1

**CR:** Yeah—no, this is—this used to be—this was the onliest type of tongs we would make. It's just called a regular—.

0:28:50.5

**AE:** Because it holds the wood better or something? That kind of pie shape?

0:28:55.0

**CR:** No, it was—with that it was just a different—different style. Actually, the basket tongs, I think, originally came from Virginia—the basket tongs like this— and they're—they're called baskets and—.

0:29:16.2

**AE:** And that's just like a sickle shape?

0:29:19.5

**CR:** Yeah.

0:29:22.1

**AE:** Huh. Is this—does this have a name, that one [with the wood going into the center of the basket area]?

0:29:24.3

**CR:** Just—we called them regulars.

0:29:26.5

**AE:** Ragglers?

0:29:28.7

**CR:** Just regular heads.

0:29:28.4

**AE:** Oh, regulars, okay. [*Laughs*]

0:29:29.8

**CR:** Yeah, just a regular head. That was a basket head and a regular head. But it's been years now—those, when I first started building them, that's all we—that's all we knew.

0:29:42.0

**AE:** Huh. How did that change then to the [open] basket heads?

0:29:44.4

**CR:** Well these came in from Virginia and—and everybody started using the Virginia heads and—.

0:29:55.3

**AE:** Are they better or easier to make or is there—?

0:29:57.8

**CR:** They're—they're easier to make. Whenever you're tonging, these—whenever your heads would come together, your oysters would be in here [in the metal basket that is the tong's head]. Well, you'd have this space here [where the wood from the handles extends into the basket] real close where you—you know, you'd have to work your tongs and get them oysters out of the way of that before you could pull them up off the bottom. With these, you see, you just got a big round basket there—no problem [and no obstruction].

0:30:32.6

**AE:** And you'd have more oysters in there.

0:30:33.8

**CR:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, they'll hold more.

0:30:37.3

**AE:** So what year did you—do you think about this [style of tong head] came down here from Virginia?

0:30:40.8

**CR:** Oh, my God, probably in the early [nineteen] seventies—around in there sometime.

0:30:52.3

**AE:** Do you think somebody just brought a set down, and everybody liked the way they worked?

0:30:55.9

**CR:** No, one—at one time there was Virginia—the Potomac River up that way somewhere had a lot of their oysters died out—some kind of disease or something happened, and they were needing seed oysters from Apalachicola to reseed their beds with, and a lot of the Virginia boys came down here to—to work and they brought their style tongs with them, and that's what got started.

0:31:33.8

**AE:** Hmm.

0:31:36.6

**CR:** But every—everybody worked—all the oystermen here would work loading trucks for the seed [oysters], and then they'd take them up there and plant them and restocked their bay.

**[Laughs]**

0:31:53.2

**AE:** Hmm. Did you have some people from Virginia who stayed around these parts once they got here?

0:31:58.2

**CR:** Yeah, there was a few. I don't—I can't recall anybody right off right now, but it was a few I know stuck around, sure was.

0:32:08.3



**AE:** And I'm looking at all these [wood] stains and whatnot here. Do you seal the ash on the handles, or how does that work?

0:32:15.5

**CR:** Do—do what?

0:32:17.4

**AE:** Sealing the handles—.

0:32:19.2

**CR:** Yeah. Yeah, when—when we glue them, that's—we'll lay our boards in here, and then this piece will lay on top of that, and we use all these clamps to put the pressure to them to clamp them down. We just pulled those two pieces out this morning.

0:32:36.0

**AE:** And these ridges on these clamp boards, is that just let the air in for them to dry?

0:32:39.4

**CR:** No, it's to—so you can be sure and get an even amount of pressure. See, all this glue building up here where this—just the board—see that board compresses down and it will compress—it will leave prints in there and it just makes a better clamping system.

0:33:06.0

**AE:** Is there anybody who comes in and asks for something new or different or strange about their tongs that's kind of a custom thing or—?

0:33:13.1

**CR:** No, they all are pretty well the same. Every great once in a while somebody will want something changed, and if it's not—if it's something we can handle, rather than changing up our patterns and whatever, you know, we pretty well accommodate them but nothing—everybody knows they work pretty good. So they don't want to change them. [*Laughs*]

0:33:38.9

**AE:** Uh-hmm. What about like when the—a young kid is coming up and his father is an oysterman, are there ever like little—kind of training tongs that people use or—?

0:33:48.7

**CR:** No.

0:33:49.6

**AE:** Anything like that? You just get to the big ones?

0:33:53.0

**CR:** No, they used to, the young boys when they was out of school, they'd be on the oyster boats with their fathers. And they would take it from there, you know. Just—it wasn't because they wanted to go. Their daddy would say, *Get on the boat; it's time to go.* [**Laughs**] But thank goodness I wasn't—my dad wasn't an oysterman so—.

0:34:22.0

**AE:** So over the years as your shop has grown, have you—do you—or do you still or have you stayed going out working the bay and oystering?

0:34:29.6

**CR:** No, it's been years since I've oystered. I—probably the last time I oystered was back in—in the [nineteen] seventies—middle seventies, somewhere along in there. Yeah, about the middle

seventies. It seemed like it was about [nineteen] seventy-seven because I—I know I had my shop in Eastpoint, and I would go oystering a little bit then to fill in, sure would.

0:35:01.9

**AE:** Did you ever have anything to do with boat-building or any part of—?

0:35:04.2

**CR:** Yeah, I built a few boats. But that—mostly, it was the oyster tongs and cabinets. It was a lot of boat-builders around at the time, and they could—they could whip a boat out and get it out a lot faster than I could. I was always a little bit more—more of a perfectionist when it come to building a commercial oyster boat and didn't—where it didn't have to be. So I left that end alone.

0:35:40.0

**AE:** What about culling irons and things like that. Is that something somebody would get from you, or is that [something they get] on their own?

0:35:44.5

**CR:** Very seldom, anymore. We used—I used to build them and keep them—some on-hand for the customers, you know, and just give them away. But we never did sell them but—.

0:35:55.7

**AE:** What would you use? Were they just a piece of scrap iron?

0:35:58.8

**CR:** Just a piece of flat—flat iron—flat metal. And then we'd bend the ends on them and whatever they wanted. No big deal to build one of those.

0:36:09.4

**AE:** What about an oyster knife—the old wood-handled ones?

0:36:14.2

**CR:** No, I never did build those. It was two or three old men around that built those. And—but I don't know of anybody now—nowadays that's building oyster knives. They all—well, now they have to be stainless steel, and you have to have a plastic handle or something that—it can't be wooden handles anymore. The same with the shucking houses[. The shucking stalls have] got to be metal or plastic. It's for working around food.

0:36:47.6

**AE:** Well what do you like to do in your off-hours? Or do you have many off-hours? *[Laughs]*

0:36:54.0

**CR:** If I have off-hours, I just like to sit and rest. No, we—I fish a little bit every now and then and—.

0:37:03.1

**AE:** Is there any carpentry work that you do that's like a hobby? Just little things that you make or anything like that?

0:37:09.4

**CR:** No, uh-umm. *[Laughs]* Oh, I love my woodwork. I enjoy it. I couldn't have lasted this long—this many years if I didn't really enjoy what I was doing. I—we're building back here—.

0:37:29.0

**AE:** That railing?

0:37:30.6

**CR:** Huh? That railing—it's—people is wanting a focal point in their house. They live right down here on the river. The house is built, and they've got temporary stairs up but the—they didn't have the handrails and all—just two-by-fours nailed up—or guardrail. And they was wanting a real focal point, and they left it to me to come up with the design, and that's what I came up with. And when I showed them some drawings on it all, they fell in love with it, and that's what they wanted. I'll show you some—come here, I'll show you some details.

0:38:11.0

**AE:** Okay, okay. [Walking across the shop.] I've never seen a man in a woodshop with no shoes on before. *[Laughs]*

0:38:18.9

**CR:** Well, I'll tell you what, you stick around. I go barefooted all day long—sock feet all day long. I wear good shoes but they hurt. [Points to the railing that is in progress.] You see that one in here?

0:38:36.5

**AE:** Oh, yeah. What kind of wood is this?

0:38:38.3

**CR:** Cypress—deadhead cypress.

0:38:44.3

**AE:** Beautiful. It looks like a lot of work.

0:38:47.3

**CR:** That's—this piece is not glued in. This will all go to the job, and they'll assemble it on the job and glue it together.

0:38:58.7

**AE:** What else you got going on back here? Or is this just storage?

0:39:02.7

**CR:** That's all part of a stair-work going on. We just finished a library up at Vero Beach. It was shipped down there, and it was a wall paneling and book shelves and interior doors. We built all that out of deadhead cypress and shipped it down there, and I think that will take me about—take me just about six or seven months to build that.



0:39:33.1

**AE:** Well with all—I mean, you say you ship your cabinetry work and—and stuff like that all over the country, but with what's going on with real estate down here now, are you getting more jobs with the construction or—?

0:39:44.0

**CR:** I—I do some around here, but the—real strictly custom work. But all the—the spec houses and things like that going up, I don't do that much around here. I—I say—that much—I do quite a bit around here when it comes to the real custom work. And that's—that's what—what keeps me busy. But I've built cabinets here in town, and when they want something that another cabinet shop won't produce, they'll come to me. *[Laughs]*

0:40:27.7

**AE:** So you're not retiring any time soon, huh?

0:40:29.8

**CR:** Won't be long, I'm going to quit. I ain't going to quit. I just will slow down and do what I want to. I wouldn't mind doing something like this. A job like—some of them has got a time

schedule to them, have to meet this schedule—no, I don't want no more of that. This—my agreement on this, I'll do it when I feel like doing it. **[Laughs]** You'll get it when I get it finished, or you won't get it at all.

0:41:05.8

**AE:** And so Rodney is here in line to take over the place and—?

0:41:09.8

**CR:** No, he said he don't want it.

0:41:11.7

**AE:** No?

0:41:11.8

**CR:** He said he'll work with me until I—I'd just walk out and give it to him, and he said he didn't want it—too much headache. **[Laughs]** He's laid back. He'll still help do this work the rest of his life. It's all he knows how to do—me and him.

0:41:40.4

**AE:** So tell me about being on that boat and all those mullets that you caught. [To Rodney, who is now sitting next to where the interview is taking place.] Do you fish, too, Rodney?

0:41:43.9

**Rodney Richards:** Not much.

0:41:45.9

**CR:** No, he never did commercial—he oystered. Me and him oystered together a little bit. [To Rodney] Didn't we? [To interviewer] When—we oystered together a little bit, but that was back when they were little old tots, and I was seine fishing. [A seine is a large fishing net that hangs in the water and has weights along the bottom edge.] I fished on that boat back in the early [nineteen] sixties to the mid-sixties, somewhere along in there. And it was a hard, hard job. It was—in the wintertime you'd be jumping overboard, and it was cold. Summertime it wasn't as bad, but then you had the stinging nettles and the mosquitoes and gnats and whatever to fight. [*Laughs*] Sharks. We'd even catch a few sharks every now and then. It was—it was a—it was hard. It was a good life, but it was hard. We didn't make that much money—very little. In fact, to catch a fish on that boat, we probably sheered up—off—about two or three cents a pound for the fish.

0:43:03.1

**AE:** And how many pounds was that [that was brought in when that photograph was taken]?

Thousands, you said?

0:43:06.1

**CR:** That was probably a good 30,000 [mullet]. So—went fishing, though, and in the fall of the year, it was the best time of the year for fishing. We would you know—we could make 100 dollars a piece, sometimes more and in the summertime. And in the dead wintertime, such as this time of year, we'd—sometimes where we wouldn't make anything in a week so—.

0:43:33.3

**AE:** And was that your boat?

0:43:35.7

**CR:** No, no. No, that was owned by the Kirvins, and the name of the boat was the *Four Kids*. George Kirvin was the owner, and he fished all his life. He was raised on the bay, and he was a good fisherman. He knew what he was doing. He'd catch fish but—but we would—we would get on that boat early in the mornings. In the fall we would be out—two and three o'clock in the morning, we'd get up and get on that boat and get everything ready, and it would be way after

dark before we'd get in. Then we ate—we had a cook on there, and we ate real well. They had good food, too. *[Laughs]*

0:44:28.5

**AE:** What kind of stuff would you eat onboard?

0:44:30.0

**CR:** Oh, God, whatever that cook would cook. If you're on the water, you're—you're always—I—all the men tend to be more hungry on the water like that than they are on—at home. And we would have fish and sometimes once a week steak, chicken, pork chops—biscuits [at] every meal.

0:44:56.6

**AE:** And you said that boat had about a twelve-man crew?

0:45:00.0

**CR:** Yeah, up to twelve men—sometimes more and sometimes less.

0:45:05.4

**AE:** And then the seine is the—the name of the kind of style that you would take out?

0:45:10.6

**CR:** The seine was the net itself. You seine the fish, rather than gill net. A gill net gills the fish, and you just get out there in the bay with a circle. You know, circle your net. This, you had to haul the fish up to the beach, you know, to pin them up in the pocket of the seine. It's called a seine net, and it's purse seines and then there's beach seines and all kind of different.

0:45:38.7

**AE:** Purse you said?

0:45:40.8

**CR:** Purse seines. You see, all the big offshore boats, you know, they use a purse seine and the big, big boats and—oh, God, they've got thousands of yards. We had a 1,000-yard net with a 2,500-yard attachable here [points to the photograph] that we could tie onto the end of that one, if we needed more so—.

0:46:11.0

**AE:** Were you always going out for mullet, or was it just catch as catch can?

0:46:13.7

**CR:** Anything that swum. If it was enough of any one thing, we'd catch it. Catfish, they caught a big—half a million pounds of calf-top catfish at one—one strike. And just pulled them up into a little—Nick's Hole over at—on St. George's Island, then cut the mouth of the—going back in there and just cut it off with—in the seine and then hemmed them up in there, and they would go and take them out and a few at the time until they'd go to market and sell them—sold the clunk out of them. Trout—speckled trout in the winter—always caught a few of those. And mullet. Mullet was the main thing, though.

0:47:07.8

**AE:** Are still—are folks still fishing that way, or has that changed?

0:47:10.6

**CR:** No, uh-uh. Oh, my God, they'd put everybody in the jail with them—with a rig like that [that's in the photograph]. **[Laughs]** I think you're allowed to have 500-square feet of webbing now. I believe that's still the law. I don't—I don't keep up with it, but that was—that seine [net] was—fished twelve-feet of water, twepve-feet deep, oh, my God. And some of them—some of the—some of them would fish more than that. I can't figure it out now in my head—1,000

times—times twelve—120,000—120,000-square foot, yeah. No, 1,000-yards—3,000 feet times twelve—36,000-square yards—square feet, versus 500-square feet—something like that. I don't know.

0:48:21.6

**AE:** Big difference anyway, huh?

0:48:22.6

**CR:** There's a big difference. But no, that was—like I say, you know, that—there were other netters, gill netters in those days, but I believe it—it—during my time, that same boat was the only seine here in Franklin County. They had them in Gulf County—had seine boats over there, the Raffields, but I never worked over there.

0:48:53.0

**AE:** Might there be anything that you want people to know about tong making and all of these years of experience you have?

0:49:01.2



**CR:** Just about a thing of the past now. I wish that, you know, if it was—if there was a big future in it, shoot, then—well Rodney could carry it on, and we'd always have someone in training, you know, to pass the skill on [to]. But other than that, there's no future in building oyster tongs for me or him, neither one. We're doing it now mostly out of courtesy because of the past.

0:49:37.2

**AE:** Do you think a time will come, though, when the old-timers kind of fade out and people aren't hand-making tongs anymore, and then people will say, *Hey wait a minute, we let this go*, and there will be a resurgence of people wanting to have them?

0:49:50.3

**CR:** There'll—there'll always be someone that can—that will build them. A lot of the oystermen are—are handy with their hands, and they can build their own tongs. As long as I'm living, you know—or me and Rodney, either one—and there's someone who needs tongs, we can—we can accommodate them some way or another. And then there's—there's others, you know, that can also—that can build tongs. But they've got other ways to make a living. But I've—me and him been doing it so long, it's just kind of second nature to us now to build a good set and—and plus we've got patterns, and the way we set things up, we don't just do one pair at a time. We go with several pair at the time. And then like—like this little bench here, that's just for [making] oyster tongs. That's just for oyster tongs over there. And then milling the handles out, we set different

machines up and do the millwork, and then they'll tear that back down and go onto some other job. But a lot of the boys right now could take just a skill saw—a hand saw—and cut out a pair of handles and just an old hand planer and round them off and go from there. That's all it takes. That's the way I started. I had—had an old skill saw like that right there—

0:51:39.3

**AE:** Yes, sir.

0:51:38.4

**CR:** —and then here's a small plane like this—and just get you a pattern and draw your lines and cut that shape out right there, and then you just get this [planer], and we would start rounding that thing off 'til it felt good and then—

0:52:05.0

**AE:** How long would that take you when you were doing that by hand?

0:52:08.4

**CR:** Oh, we could build a pair in half a day, I imagine, or they'd probably kill a day. But if it was bad weather and I didn't have—couldn't work, I'd get out there in the little old shed about as big as that office [about eight by ten feet] and make me a pair.

0:52:31.2

**AE:** Go to town, huh?

0:52:31.1

**CR:** And make—my brother-in-law, I made him some, and a few of my friends, and we'd get out there and—nothing else to do.

0:52:40.1

**AE:** Does anybody ever give tongs as gifts, or are people on their own for that usually?

0:52:44.6

**CR:** No, because each—each oysterman knows, you know—. I tell you what I did do one—one year. I come up with the idea of just building little miniature tongs, little old oyster tongs about this long [gestures to illustrate about four feet in length].

0:53:02.5

**AE:** Like four feet long or something?

0:53:03.0

**CR:** Three-foot, they were three-foot long, and I told this boy I had working for me—I seen him one evening, and we hadn't been doing too much. I said, *Tell you what, come on in and let's get back to work in the morning.* I said, *We got to build 100 pair of tongs up.* And he said, *What do you mean?* I said, *Yeah, I need 100-pair.*

*[Corky's son Rodney comes out of the office holding one of the miniature sets of tongs to show the interviewer.]*

**CR:** That's a pair [of them].

0:53:27.9

**AE:** Oh, yeah, look at those.

0:53:27.7

**CR:** That was the first—the first pair ever built.

0:53:31.9

**AE:** First pair of little ones or first pair of any?

0:53:32.3

**CR:** The first pair of little ones like this. Oh, my God, I can't even remember the date on them.

*[Looking at the date that is hand-written on the tong handles.]*

0:53:53.0

**AE:** Trying to read that there?

0:53:54.3

**CR:** What does that say?

0:53:56.0

**AE:** Oh, goodness. Oh, it's upside down—nineteen—

0:53:58.9

**CR:** [*Laughs*] Is that what it is?

0:54:00.3

**AE:** Nineteen—something—seven. I can't see what that third number is.

0:54:04.1

**CR:** What's that—what's the date on there?

0:54:05.6

**AE:** Oh, my gosh. Look at those. [*Reacting to some even smaller tongs that Rodney brings out.*]

0:54:09.5

**CR:** What's that date Rodney, [nineteen] eighty-seven?

0:54:13.7

**Rodney:** Well it has to be because it can't be [nineteen] twenty-seven.

0:54:17.1

**AE:** *[Laughs]*

0:54:18.3

**CR:** So eighty—1987, number one. That was the first pair.

0:54:24.3

**AE:** Wow.

0:54:24.9

**CR:** Anyway, he come in the next day, and I showed him what we was going to do, and he said, *Well why not?* And we started—we made 100 pair, and I gave them away, and I tried to sell a few. And somebody come in and asked—you asked a question if there were training tongs. Somebody come in one time and said. *What are you doing that for? What are you building them things for? You can't oyster with them.* I said, *No, sir. The School Board ordered these.* I said **[Laughs]** *They want to teach the kindergarteners how to—how to oyster with them before they get too old.* **[Laughs]** He got a kick out of them. But they were—

0:55:18.0

**AE:** Are they—is the—the head on them, are they painted gold or is that [made of] brass?

0:55:21.7

**CR:** Yeah, we just painted them—gold paint. It's just—just mild steel.

0:55:29.3

**AE:** Hmm, that's great. You think there's still any of those around [that] people hung onto?

0:55:35.3

**CR:** There's—there's still a few kicking around, but they're one aggravating little old things to make. Rodney would rather build a regular sized pair than mess with those little bitty things. Then that other little bitty pair, I had a house boat and had them tied up across the shop there in town. And I had—one of my cousins made me a little old bitty shrimp net, and I had that hanging up in my house boat, and I had that—that little pair of oyster tongs hanging up there with that shrimp net and something else—what else? I forgot. Anyway, just little things like that hanging around in there. They were the cutest tongs.

0:56:23.7



**AE:** Well Rodney, might you have anything to add about tong making or—?

0:56:29.8

**Rodney:** No.

0:56:33.8

**AE:** No? [*Laughs*]

0:56:35.7

**CR:** He—he was the apprentice whenever we participated in the *Farm and Folk Life—Folk Festival*—whatever it was. He was my apprentice, and he had already watched me enough—he never did ask questions too much. He would just watch me, and then he'd go off and duplicate.

0:56:58.0

**AE:** That's a good apprentice to have—see it once and get it done. [*Laughs*]

0:57:02.4

**CR:** He—he never talks too much.

0:57:06.6

**AE:** Well would you have anything to finish on or to add that I haven't asked you?

0:57:10.2

**CR:** Nothing I can think of.

0:57:12.1

**AE:** All right, well I appreciate it.

0:57:15.9

**[End Corky Richards]**