

JULIE MCCLELLAN
Low Country Seafood – McClellanville, SC

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Interviewer: Sara Wood
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Lowcountry Maritime

00:00:00

Sara Wood: I'm just going to introduce us for the tape Julie and then I'll ask you a couple questions. So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. And it's September 14, 2014. We're down here in McClellanville, South Carolina at Graham's Restaurant and – TW Graham I think and I'm talking with Ms. Julie McClellan and for the record Julie, will you just say hello and introduce yourself for the tape?

00:00:23

Julie McClellan: Hi, I'm Julie McClellan. I—I work on the water oystering and clamming, and we raise our own mariculture clams here in McClellanville. And I'm fifty years old. [*Laughs*]

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Sara Wood: And how did you get started? Did you grow up around here?

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Julie McClellan: Yes, ma'am. I grew up around here. I started out when I was a young child. My stepfather owned leases here and I would go out and go scratching clams with him during the weekend or whenever. And I've done other things. I've built houses. I've ran my own deer processing place. And but I've always worked on the water. But we've started raising baby clams, mariculture clams probably last seven years. But I've worked from Little River all the way to the Ashepoo on clam dredges. I've done a lot of things. [*Laughs*]

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Sara Wood: What—what's your stepfather and your mother's name?

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Julie McClellan: My stepfather's name was Ellis Dawsey He's some of the old Dawseys that lived around here. My mother is a—an original McClellan. Her name is Mary Lou McClellan and she still lives here in the village and with all—a lot of my family live around here, too. But my stepfather he's passed away probably about eight years ago.

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Sara Wood: I wanted to ask you yesterday and I didn't get a chance to. Your last name is McClellan and we're in McClellanville. So I wanted to know if there are ties there?

00:02:04

Julie McClellan: Uh-hm. Well like I said, my mother was a McClellan, original McClellan and she married my father which was Richard Billington. And so I married a McClellan so my name was changed to McClellan, but I'm closer kin to all the McClellan(s) in—in the village, yes ma'am.

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Sara Wood: And can you talk a little bit about what it was like growing up on the water here for you?

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Julie McClellan: Oh my—I think it's a wonderful place for children and stuff. I mean I've had, you know, as a child we've played in the creeks. We swam up and down. We played in the mud. We rode our horses in the water and swam with them. Working on the water as a child, you

know I always had you know I made good money scratching clams. And so you know I bought things like antique furniture and stuff. I'm really into antiques. So I bought a lot of that when I was young and just really taught me a lot about the water, fishing. Me and my children are usually in all the fishing tournaments. I can throw a ten and twelve-foot cast net. I can drive a boat and I'm—it's just—it's been a really nice place to—to grow up and learn, you know, everything around here.

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Sara Wood: Do you have any—do you have any memories or stories that you would want to share about going out with your stepfather and what he taught you or any kind of advice he gave you when y'all went out to the water?

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Julie McClellan: Well my stepfather was a very quiet man. He was actually a big lawyer in Charleston at one time. And he just got tired of that life and so he moved to McClellanville and that's when he met my mother and married. And you know a lot of days it would just be me and him. We'd go out in these old wooden batteaus with like sixes on the back and take us thirty or forty minutes to get there and a lot of times they were leaky and you were constantly baling or you know—but we'd go out and you know we'd get our little buckets and our rakes and get out on the banks at low tide and scratch clams and it was kind of like I had to keep up with him. Every time he would go to the boat with a bucket I had to make sure I was very close behind him.

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And he—you know you never knew when you went out, you know, if the days were bad and windy we had one day where the boat got away. And it was kind of cold in the winter and I had to swim after it. And we had one time we got broke down out there and my mom and a doctor friend of ours from around here had to bring their pontoon boat and look for us and it was just because my father—my stepfather had lit a cigarette and they saw—happened to see the match that saved us that night. **[Laughs]** But there's many, many stories. I mean it's—of course I've got brothers and sisters that have all gone out and worked too with us, but I've always been the one that stuck it out and I guess been the hardest working one.

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Sara Wood: How many brothers and sisters?

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Julie McClellan: But nothing about working on the water is easy. **[Laughs]** I have—I have two stepsisters, Sara and Paige and I have a half-brother Selwyn and I have a little—I have a younger brother named Ritchie and then I have a younger sister who had polio at birth do we had to take care of her on braces all her life. So that was a big thing. My father left us when we were real young, so I was kind of like I had to grow up real quick and take care of all my brothers and sisters. And then my youngest brother, Peter, got killed in a boating accident and actually yesterday it's been almost thirty years. **[Emotional]** Sorry. *[Interviewer puts the microphone down for a little bit with Ms. McClellan tells the story of her brother. This part of the conversation is recorded, but it's difficult to hear because it is off-mic.]*

00:06:33

Sara Wood: How old was he?

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Julie McClellan: He was sixteen. But I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that.

00:06:40

Sara Wood: No, no, no. We can just take a break for a second here.

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Julie McClellan: Anyway he—him and his girlfriend were out riding in their little boat and she was driving and tried to take a wave and a shrimp boat came by and she took it straight on and threw him out of the boat and she fell down and the boat automatically went in circles and hit him and killed him. It's—it's been tough, you know, you have to be very careful when you're out there on the water. I'm sorry.

00:07:15

Sara Wood: No, no. Don't be—please don't be sorry. Are you the oldest?

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Julie McClellan: Yep.

00:07:23

Sara Wood: You're the oldest.

00:07:24

Julie McClellan: I'm the oldest of all of them. My mother still lives right here in Silver Hill and my grandparents owned a plantation, and so we grew up on the plantation which is right on the water. And she has—my grandparents had seven children, so they divided the whole plantation up into individual lots so a lot of my aunts and uncles all live still right there on the plantation.

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Sara Wood: And it's called Silver Hill?

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Julie McClellan: Silver Hill Plantation and it's—it's like if you're going out South Pinckney you turn right where the Baptist Church is at and it takes you to where the school is at and then the cemetery and all of Kit Hall Road, all of that was the plantation where we used to grow up and live. And we farmed and raised our own cows and pigs and milked cows before I went to school and—. But—

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Sara Wood: Can I ask you a question? What is it—can you describe what scratching clams is for people who don't work on the water?

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Julie McClellan: Well scratching clams you go out right before low tide and there's what they call—well the area where we work was called White Banks and Oyster House and at low tide, the banks come up out of the water. And they're covered in clams that are buried in the mud and

you look for like little what they call keyhole. They look like a little eight. And you take a rake and a five-gallon bucket and you put on gloves and you walk around and find all the little keyholes or areas that look like they may be clams and you just scratch about two or three inches down. And you scratch up the clams. So you're pretty much like hoeing a garden. You're just hoeing the whole bank up and picking up clams.

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And then you take them back to the boat every time you get a bucket and you rinse them and you put them through a grader and then you can count them at the end of the day.

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Sara Wood: And did y'all eat a lot of clams and oysters growing up since you and your stepdad went out? Did you most go out for yourselves or was it part of a business?

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Julie McClellan: No, ma'am. It was a business. We raised—we brought them into the dock, Carolina Seafood and sold them and of course, we ate—you know had oyster roasts on almost all of the birthdays or holidays or whenever we wanted to and clams too and we'd just bring them in whenever we wanted to and steamed them open at night at the house or—. So we've—I've always eaten plenty of seafood at usually between the deer and seafood you keep your freezers pretty full around here, so you don't have to buy a whole lot of meat. **[Laughs]**

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Sara Wood: It's meat that's really good for you too, all of the seafood and the deer.

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Julie McClellan: Yes, ma'am.

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Sara Wood: Did your mother ever work out on the water?

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Julie McClellan: She—she went out some. She went out and would scratch clams and stuff like that but she didn't work that much out there. She—mostly you know my brothers and sisters and all would go out every once in a while but it was mostly me and Ellis that went out and we'd tong oysters in the creeks and you know you tong up clams and single oysters and stuff like that too, so—.

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Sara Wood: I bet that's very hard to do.

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Julie McClellan: It is. Tonging—well tonging oysters is something I can do for about fifteen minutes. It's definitely a man's job. I mean it's all upper body strength. I always was the one that relieved or culled out all the stuff that he brought in in the tongs, so that's what I did as a child whenever I went out oystering with him.

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Sara Wood: And how—can you explain the process of picking single oysters? Is that—?

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Julie McClellan: Um, well when you're tonging you—they bring up whatever the tong has—dump on the boat on the cull table they call it. [*Faint sound of music in the background.*] It's a big flat board on the boat that you dump everything in and you pick out the single oysters. Some of them need a little bit of culling on them to get off the stuff, but we work clam dredges and a lot of these small, deep-water creeks and stuff that have loads of clams and singles and a lot of times we'll pick up baskets of beautiful I mean five, six-inch, I mean single oysters. And we'll sell those, too but most of what I do is clusters. I mean me and my business partner, Ervin Ashley we've been working together for many years on the clam dredges and stuff but we just started a business partnership together and we've been working probably about six years together and we started raising our own baby clams and stuff. And we oyster during the oyster season which is coming up very soon. I'm not really excited about it but it's a lot of hard work. You wear hip boots and you get over at low tide when the oysters are starting to show and you have lots and lots of baskets and one culling iron and a pair of gloves. And you get over and you pick up the pretty oysters and cull them down and fill one basket at a time. And we usually take two boats out when we go and usually average between the two of us probably fifty-five to seventy bushels a day, so—.

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Sara Wood: And then what is the name of the business that you and Ervin have?

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Julie McClellan: Lowcountry Seafood.

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Sara Wood: And what was the name of your stepfather's business?

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Julie McClellan: I don't believe he had a name for it, uh-uh. I mean he pretty much harvested off of his lease White Banks and Oyster House and his lease and just brought them straight into Carolina Seafood to sell.

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Sara Wood: And Julie I have just a couple more questions for you. Are you good with that?

00:14:03

Julie McClellan: Yeah.

00:14:03

Sara Wood: Okay, just a couple. I wanted to know how you decided to—or when you started doing this, I mean did you—when you were—when you were younger growing up and working with your stepfather did you think that this is something that you wanted to do as—as your work as you got older or did you go off and do something and then did you find your way back to this? I'm just curious how—

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Julie McClellan: Well I don't think as a child it was something I thought I would—would do forever. And like I said, I started out when I was very young going out on the boats and working

with my stepfather. And then I married at seventeen and my husband built houses so I went to work, and I built a lot of houses with him. And all my nephews and uncles and all built houses and my brothers, both of my brothers Selwyn and Richie both build houses to this day. So I done a lot of construction and even doing things like that I've always gone back to working on the water. Whenever I'd have a free day or a weekend I would go back out on the water. But I would say in the last twenty five years I've been pretty much on the water working.

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Sara Wood: And what brought you there permanently like more of—to spend all your time out on the water working?

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Julie McClellan: [*Faint sound of music in the background*] Well I started my—me and my husband before we split up we built our own deer processing place and that was to try to I guess kind of get off the water a little bit 'cause it was hard work. But you know starting the business and then we ran it for about five and a half years but my husband unfortunately was more of a talker than a worker. So I had two young children, Joshua and Rachel and I wasn't able to take them to school. I was able to walk from my house to my business seven o'clock in the morning, one o'clock and two o'clock at night. And I was in there twenty-four-seven. I had to stay there skinning and gutting in the morning. I had to cut deer meat up all day long. I had to take deer in at night. And it just got to be way too much after about five and a half years trying to keep up that kind of a—. So I gave it up, the whole business, house and everything and I went back to work on the water being a single mother, and—and to make the money that I needed to—to be

able to raise my children and keep them in private schools and stuff like that I had to stay on the water 'cause I can make good money at it.

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I'm—I'm fairly good at what I do. I can keep up with most all the men in McClellanville far as oystering, far as clamming. I'm pretty much the same too. Some of them I can out-work, so you know I do make good money. Some days if I wanted to I can only four days a week and make over \$1,000. So you know it was something that I couldn't give up. I never went to college being that I got married early. I graduated and then I went working full-time.

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Sara Wood: What was the name of the deer processing plant business?

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Julie McClellan: Coastal Deer Processing Place. And it's right there on [Highway] 17. It's like a little seafood market now that we actually sell to a guy that's running it now. We bring him in probably close to about 7,000 to 8,000 baby clams a week and he distributes throughout all of Mount Pleasant restaurants and stuff, so most all our clams go to all the restaurants in Charleston and Mount Pleasant.

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Sara Wood: I was going to ask you about who you sell to.

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Julie McClellan: Yeah, we—well right now during clamming season it's just mostly Carolina Seafood and then this guy that works out on the highway [17], David Belanger [Clammer Dave]. We—we sell to him, too.

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Sara Wood: Dave's Clams, right?

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Julie McClellan: Uh-hm.

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Sara Wood: I've heard of him.

00:18:45

Julie McClellan: Dave Clammer [Clammer Dave].

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Sara Wood: I wanted to ask you one thing about the mariculture because I've been asking around about that and not too many people do it in South Carolina. So what made you start? What made you decide to start doing mariculture?

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Julie McClellan: Well when I started working with Ervin Ashley—well I worked with Bob Baldwin with Low Country—with Bob Baldwin and we actually spawned and raised baby clams

from seed. And we had upwellers that we grew them in and then we got to a—about the size of a pencil eraser we moved them into what they call—well they're racks that sit down in fourteen, twelve-foot of water and we pull them up with a big barge and winch and boom and we pull them up and we raise them in that 'til they got to about the size of a nickel. And then we moved them into bags and stuff like that and most of the time we sold most of our seed that we grew up.

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And it was very labor-intensive. I mean, a lot of heavy lifting. Each rack held like six trays on it which were four-by-eight and usually when you pulled them up [faint sound of music in the background] they had to be washed because they were like loaded with mud with the seed and they you know could weigh up to 400 pounds. So imagine trying to rinse and then pull one of those trays off onto the barge to finish cleaning it. It was a lot of heavy lifting, so—. We quit that and then me and Ervin Ashley started, and I got my first 100,000 when I put some half of them in the bags and then half into cover screens and which go straight back into the bottom to grow and that's where I started out. And you make good money at it. It's still a lot of labor but you know you're out there in the water and some days we're out in waist-deep, neck-deep water swimming with the sharks and the stingrays and then some days we're out there at flat low tide you know bogging around in the mud and pulling up our cover screens and bags and stuff. A lot of days our bags are—are getting to be about 400 pounds and we have to take a water pump which we tie off and rig up on the bow of our boat to wash all the mud out of them so that we can physically get the bags of clams and put them into the boat.

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So it's a lot of work but there's money to be made in it. And me and Ervin—Ervin Ashley is seventy-one years old and he's definitely one of the hardest working men in McClellanville.

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Sara Wood: I wanted to ask you how you decided to start working with him and how that happened?

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Julie McClellan: Well me and Ervin had worked on—Bob Baldwin, the guy I worked for before had a clam dredge, a big boat and whenever Ervin Ashley needed his lease planted we would always take Bob's boat and we'd go to the Santee River and we'd dredge up all the oysters and clams and stuff and to—to be able to plant the leases for Ervin and Bob so we kind of like in combination would work together to plant both of the leases 'cause Bob has a large lease out here but Ervin and I have lease number 298 which is off of McClellanville and we have a lease 278 which is off of Buck Hall. And it's the largest lease in all of South Carolina, so we have lots and lots of oyster area and many creeks for wild clamming, and we grow our mariculture clams out behind Mill Island right behind the lighthouse and in Muddy Bay.

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So it's—working with Ervin Ashley [sound of the door creaking] just kind of—I don't know, he just knew what type of person I was and he just asked me one day. He wanted to put me on his lease with him and eventually you know whenever he thinks he's going to retire –

which he'll never retire – he's going to go down out there in the creek probably with me
[Laughs] but he wanted you know if you don't have somebody else's name on your lease which has been in his family for years and years, it goes back to the state. So and we have millions of dollars' worth of clams out there. And you wouldn't want that to go to anybody so he wanted to make sure that I was able to take over his lease too. And so that's how we got started working together. And we work every day. We probably work six days a week. Usually Saturday is my only day off. We always have to work Sundays usually for the truck on Monday and so—. But we work well together. He's a really great guy, him and his wife. They live right here in the village. Actually we built their house for them years ago. [Sounds of people coming into the restaurant.] And we work real well together. They both I think his wife would probably adopt me [Laughs] but Ervin says, "No!" But I see them every day you know and it's—Miss Becky which his wife you know is really happy that you know I'm out there with him because you know being on—working on the water can be dangerous too. All kinds of little things can happen so—.

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Sara Wood: What do you love most about working out there Julie? And I'll let you drink your tea, I'm sorry.

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Julie McClellan: Um, well I've worked—I've worked in the restaurant business when my father got sick. I've worked at the deer processing place, I've built houses. I think being out on the water [Sounds of the door creaking and faint music in the background] you know not dealing with the people, you deal with the weather and the bugs and it's about all you have to—. I mean you got your beautiful sunrises, the sunsets and there's eagles and ospreys, there's—the scenery

out there is you know to me it's worth it. I love the water. I love everything to do with fishing, I love you know the beaches, the lighthouse, just you know everything out there is so relaxing, you know even if you're dead—dead tired. I mean some days me and Ervin can't even remember our name or even count clams we get so tired. But it's like we turn—we are different people when we hit the waterway and we head to work, you know. There's so much different, you never know what you're going to see out there. And we only have to put up with each other, so—and we work well together, so—.

00:26:18

Sara Wood: And I'm wondering, I have one last question for you Julie. You know, you grew up on the water and you work on the water now. How have things changed? How have you seen the industry change or just anything really in terms of the environment? [Sounds of faint music playing in the background of the restaurant.]

00:26:33

Julie McClellan: Well everything around here has changed a lot since I was a child. I mean the industry as far as the shrimpers and stuff it's a lot less shrimpers, there's a lot less people that go out on the water. Unfortunately the people, the young people around here don't—they find—they usually leave town. They go find work somewhere else. And so there's a lot, you know, the environment, the marshes around here, beaches, all the storms that come in, it changes everything out there. I mean I remember as a child we used to swim from my grandmother's house all the way through the village and climb on the shrimp boats and jump over and, you know, swim with our horses and stuff. But now the waters around here in the village creek are,

you know, too polluted. I wouldn't you know and that's just because of all the houses and stuff I think that a lot of septic tanks and a lot more you know—a lot more stuff going into the water.

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But it's—I think a lot of stuff that comes down the Santee River even comes this way and have actually closed down a lot of areas, oyster areas and stuff like that and killed them off. I mean, the oystering around here is not anything like it used to be. I mean they're—the stuff that we grow in our lease, we do a lot of planting to make sure that they grow and come back every year. And it's—it's—it's changing daily. I mean it's—it's right now you—you can ride through the creeks and stuff and we've been having—I think the tides around here are just getting higher and higher. And it—a lot of—you'll see a lot of the marsh and huge clumps of mud falling into the creeks and we're just having higher tides, and it's really affecting everything out there, too. And the beaches, I mean they're being washed. Got a couple of cuts that washed out right in the middle of the beaches and stuff like that and so a lot of sand is coming in, which has affected a lot of people that grow clams out there, too. It's actually come in on one area where we grow behind the lighthouse too, so everything changes. Unfortunately it's not for the—the good. You just have to—but—.

00:29:34

Sara Wood: Okay. Is there anything else you want to add before I turn the tape off Julie?

00:29:39

Julie McClellan: No, I don't think so. I mean it's—it's a wonderful life out there. I like working. It's hard working. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to do it 'cause December

6th I'm going to be fifty-one years old. **[Laughs]** But I will probably go out with Ervin and we'll come back with our four or five little bushels of oysters a day instead of twenty and thirty a day each. **[Laughs]** But I don't think I'll ever quit working out there. I mean something physical will have to stop me.

00:30:21

Sara Wood: And you said December 6th so can you give me your birth date for the record, please Julie?

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Julie McClellan: December 6, 1963.

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Sara Wood: Well I really appreciate you taking the time to do this, this morning.

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Julie McClellan: No problem. I was very glad to get to talk to you. I mean I have people that go out with me all the time, newspaper and people from different schools and they—everybody wants to learn, go out and see what it's like, you know so—. It's nice to be able to take people out and teach them and show them, you know, what we do—do. You know they really don't realize when they pick up a bag of clams to buy at the store what goes into raising and harvesting to get it to market like that, so—.

00:31:12

Sara Wood: Thanks, Julie.

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Julie McClellan: You're welcome.

00:31:14

[End Julie McClellan Interview]