

Name of person interviewed: James Ulysses Carter [JC]

Place interview took place: Fairfield Inn, Working Waterfront Festival

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Interviewer: Mike Petillo [MP]

Transcriber: Laura Orleans

### **Abstract**

James Ulysses Carter, musician with the Northern Neck Chantey singers and former commercial fishermen describes the relationship of the traditional sea chantey and its integration with the work of fishing. James recalls the time when the fishing was done by hand and the songs coordinated the work.

### **Demographic information**

Sex: Male

Ethnicity: African American

Occupation: Musician, Northern Neck Chantey Singers  
Fisherman (retired)

Age: 82

Born: Northern County, Virginia

### **Key words**

#### Role

Commercial fisherman (captain crew)

#### General Social and Cultural Characteristics

Sources of prestige, rank, status

Ethnic identity

Music

#### Gear and Fishing Technology

Other gear and technology

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MP Alright so today is Saturday, September 24th. We're here at the Working Waterfront Festival in New Bedford, Massachusetts at the Fairfield Inn. We're talking to James Carter from the Northern Neck Chantey Singers and, Mr. Carter why don't you just uh, what's your full name and why don't you give me a little background of when and where

you were born and we'll kind of start with some basic information and then we'll kind of take it from there.

JC I am James U. Carter. I was born in Northern County Virginia, January the 31st 19 and 31.

MP And um tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in.

JC Well at the time that I was, I grew up there, the industry in that area was shucking oysters, trap fishing and from in the summertime they had tomato houses that was for ladies, men worked there too, watering tomatoes and picking tomatoes, stuff like that until fishing season went out and then people went on the menhaden boats, a lot of different, in them times then it was when I started fishing. Cause when they were fishing they used to use coal to run the steamers by and then when I was started fishing they used crude oil. That was a big change. They used to fish all day long and roll coal in wheel barrows at night all night to get enough to run em back and forth up and down the beach, get a boat power to run off.

MP So when, what part of the year did the fishing season start?

JC It starts in May, May and fish till October. That was the fishing season. But now they start in May and fish until December or January. That's a big difference.

MP What accounts for that difference nowadays?

JC Maybe because its more fish and you don't have to push that coal, stuff could run by oil and you can it's more favorable to look for and at that time, now you got airplane spotters flying overhead to find the fish and you don't have to ride the mast head (?). That's a big difference.

MP So the technology is much different today and allows for a longer season

JC That's right, that's right.

2:58

MP So when you were growing up. How did, how did you first uh, get exposed to fishing and the fishing industry and how did you first become involved in it an actually working? Tell me about your early days doing fishing work.

JC My early days I got hooked up in fishing, I come to the school I didn't fishing school, I went till the eleventh grade and I got so that my father who had so many children that he couldn't afford to send me to school and he told me go get the work if I wanted to. But he was willing to help me to go to school, but I decided that if I got in the fishing industry, I could help him. So I did. I went off fishing and helped him out due to the fact that I was the second oldest child so I went on fishing and I, so I kept on fishing. There

wasn't a whole lot of money that I made then, but it was better than what I could experience going to school when he wasn't able to send me.

MP So would you say that it was your choice to do fishing?

JC It was my choice to do fishing then, from the tomato fields, cutting turnip greens and picking tomatoes I decided that I would fish. It was, it was harder work, but the money was more greater.

MP And when you were first fishing, was it a full or part time job? How did they structure the hours when you were first learning how to do it? Did you have to apprentice so to speak or was it, did you get hired right away by someone or was it, how was the actual employment structured?

JC Well, it was a trial. I went on there, if I could do the work, then I would get the job. If I couldn't, I had to go. So I worked hard and I got the job. So that's what that led up to and I fished for upwards 40 years, but not on the same boat. I gradually went on different boats, higher boats, faster boats. Experience will lead you to getting your best. I started out in the blood pile and worked, that's pulling the net, before the power block come and I worked on up to a dry boatsmans job where I went to the loft to the captain defined me (?) and I stayed in that for a long while and then I got mates job where I had a crew, hired a crew, you know helped hire the crew and worked with the crew showing them what to do. I had. In our world, I had graduated, worked up. Then I worked on that till I got captain of my own boat, so I went on through the field. I learned what the experience payed off. So I went on to the top.

6:00

MP So the first boat that you worked on in the early years doing the net pull, tell me about that first, the first early years

JC First early years, it was a slow boat, but it was a good captain. He caught fish, cuz the speed we had and you know to get to and from and we worked on up to a different boat, higher boat, faster boat, different companies and we were sort of experienced. Graduation experience in fishing. That's what it is, a graduation experience in fishing. You start from the bottom until you reach the top. Experience will pay off.

MP Would you say it was uh, you said it was a slow boat?

JC It was a slow boat yes

MP Well what, tell me for people that don't know, what size boat was it? Was it a small slow boat, or how are boats, what's the technology involved in a boat being slow or fast?

JC Well you don't have the horsepower by being slower, you don't have the hoerspover. See you had graduated then from the coal to the oil, crude oil and you had engines, like Fairbanks, Morse and Atlas and stuff like that. So that, the size of the boat went by the

speed of the boat, the horsepower. So she wouldn't carry many fish either. When I say that the capacity for carrying fish was smaller than some of the other boats because she was smaller and slower. When you go to carry more fish, then you'll get more horsepower. That's the way that works. And them days, they had them little hundred and twenty five foot, now they got anywhere from a hundred and seventy five to three hundred feet boats fishing today, horsepower, fast boats.

MP Was this inshore or offshore?

JC Well in them days and times people fished inshore. But today, you gotta go four or five miles off shore. Three miles is limit, the closest you can come in because of so many people have, well lots of retirees have moved in and retirees got their money and they get what they want and you've gotta be a certain distance offshore now to catch fish so that the foam from the fish pumping of the fish won't go ashore in the swimming areas and stuff like that. So they make you go offshore to fish. And they have some kind of solution that you pump overboard now to kill the foam from the pump offs. But you now that, when you got money, you got everything.

9:00

MP What was the weather like during those times of year and how did the weather affect how you fished and where you fished in this part of the country that you were working in?

JC Ok in the summertime, you know you have moderate winds, most of the time you could fish, depends on what direction its coming from. Now if the wind was offshore, to blowing inshore, then that was a day that you couldn't fish, the sea would be rough and would blow ashore and you couldn't fish in that area. But when the wind was blowing from off land, that would blow you off, you could fish most anywhere because the wind would be carried off shore. So the times in the summertime, the winds are much lighter than they are in the wintertime. So that's where it varies, times of fishing and distance of fishing offshore. And of course you know the weather gets colder. When they leave off the North Beach, Jersey Beach you go south to North Carolina where the weather is warmer and that's where the fishermen start getting cool in the fall of the year, they fish will move south so you follow the fish south and that's what makes you fish up until late

MP So did you have any close calls with really bad weather? Any experiences that you can recall where the weather was you know dangerous and you encountered some really you know challenging situations?

JC Well some boats, I was fishing at some time, and some boats got lost, but it didn't bother me because the captain that I had he paid attention to the weather. When it was bad weather, he respected that. Good weather he fished. But a lot of them don't pay much attention to the weather. If you are behind you try to catch up and you fish in all kinds of weather that's when you get into the storms and stuff like that. I never had a close call.

MP That's good. So in elevating yourself through the ranks of fisherman and working your way up from the early years when you were learning the trade, let's talk about the aspect of race and you know that time how did that, can you tell me experiences looking through the lens of race relations in America at that time, different relationships that that played

12:05

JC Well relationship has always it's better now, but it has always been, but you have a respect for that, and you have to work and you have to work much harder and you work your way up and when you work your way up, you work through that race experience. When you are trying to do something and trying to help the men to reach the top, he respect that race barrier is no problem. But when you're behind, you want the best. I never did have a problem with race barrier because I know what it was like in Virginia. In Virginia it always has been a race barrier until now, it is still a race barrier, but it's not as bad. But when you've had that experience, you respect that. You respect that and you know what you had to go through. So you try to stay away from that. I have never had any problems of dealing with it. But it has been all around me and it still is. But I have a respect for that. Yeah.

MP So obviously out there in the halls you have some companions of yours that also have a simliar background in fishing as you and obviously you share a musical heritage where there is a musical aspect to the work and that accompanies the work that you do. Can you talk a little bit about the musical tradition that you partake in and give us a little background on the singing and vocalizations that you learned and how that came into play while you learned the trade of fishing?

JC Well the music part, that tradition come up from fish being hard and heavy. Hard to move. So when everything is done together, it makes work so much easier. So that's when we go the song going, Help Me to Raise Em. That's our theme song and our working condition. And that puts everybody on pulling according to pull on when you got music with it it keeps everybody in accord of pulling together. Together this will move anything. But you got to be together to make everything smooth. So that's where we got this chantey group now it tells you how and when to pull. When one does lead it, he'll lead it and you'll fall in by him and that will make your work so much easier and everybody's pulling as one.

15:07

MP So there's actually a integration between the work and the song. The song is a way as you say to make the work easier, the laws of physics dictate that if you all are pulling in the same direction at the same time in a coordinated aspect it'll be easier. If you guys are all working in different directions, you haul will be harder. So the song coordinates the work.

JC That's right.

MP Ok, ok. That's very, that's a key part of it. Ok so when you were first learning how to fish, was the singing element one of the first lessons that you learned? You just picked it up while you were working with others?

JC I picked it up while we was working with others. It was old experience and I was a new kid on the block so I learned to coordinate what they were doing and make my work that much easier. And up to today, our work is easier because we work together.

MP Can you tell me a little bit about the pulling up aspect of it. I mean how big of a net are we talking about and how much, how many pounds in a, let's say an average pull up, how many pounds of fish is that and how many people are working on pulling up, at any given time, all that fish?

JC When I first started out fishing, there was anywhere from 26 to 29 anyway, men working in the boat. Now since they have gotten the power block and we do everything different, they only have eleven, eight-eleven heads working in the first place. That's how much they they have gone now from the old time to the new time. Fishing is much easier, much, much easier now than it was when I started fishing.

MP What year, or what time did that change, did that technology, you say it's called a power block?

JC Yeah the power block.

MP When did that come into play?

JC That came into play in the 60s, in the 60s. The last of the 50s or the 60s. The power block. They would start cutting off men after they found out the power block would work. We said no it won't work. He said, it got to work. So it did. He had a lot of money tied up in that power block and keep changing and changing till he got it working. Now it's a perfect ideal thing.

MP So when a power block came into play, were you still in the introductory levels of the fishing industry? Or what position were you by that point?

18:00

JC I was in dry boat. Go out and find the fish, go off in that little boat and find the fish, spot the fish and then would come set around, maybe where I pointed the fish out. We didn't have no planes then, so you had to find them yourself. You went by the ripples or the color or working on the water, then you knew they were fish, well not knew that but the fish and seagulls, and different boats working, a lot of times you found fish by the seagulls and stuff purging in them (?) That's where they feed to. And uh, we caught a lot of fish that way, but now the technology of planes see, it makes everything more easier, faster too see. That block lay there winding you had to pull it by hand, it's a whole lot faster and then that eased eased that power. So power block is a great thing to come along, it did shorten the men, but it was a great experience for

MP So when did you cease to be on the dry part of things and when did you move up, what was the next level that you kind of moved up in the ranks?

JC I moved from the dry boat to the mate. That was helping to hire then men and instructing the men what to do and how to do it and everything like it was when I was coming up. I was experineced and I would show them, that was my job to show them and help find the fish, that was my mate experience.

MP When did you um, what were some of the other people that you worked with? Can you recall any interesting personalities, any captains that were good to work with or did you, anybody that was really you know, like any boss or whatever, someone that you really wanted to you know

JC Well they all can get like that sometimes, but I have learned to overlook that, long as they paid me some money and I did my work, I did have to worry about that. But you know you can find some nasty ones and some good ones. But the most I worked with was good. They were good captains.

MP So you actually became a captain yourself.

JC I did

MP When did you become a captain?

JC In 1963 and that was the year there was no fish and what fish it was, they were so close in shore that I couldn't even get to em with the boat, but I had been in so long they were gave me a chance. That where they was mostly. But I enjoyed the experience, I didn't make much money, but I enjoyed the experience and the crew I had, they stuck with me to the end. So that was a great experience of learning.

21:09

MP Where any of your singer compatriots part of your crew?

JC No.

MP Ok.

JC Nope. I was, I was but 25 or 35 years old now maybe so that's the definite age barrier now.

MP So you were, sorry, how old were you when you became a captain?

JC About 26, 27, 28 years old.

MP Ok. And then, how long did you fish, how long did you work on a boat after that and how long were you a captain for?

JC I was captain just for two years and then I went back mate. And in 1989 I retired. And I did retire. I was tired before then, but I retired in 89.

MP In terms of looking back on the industry as you had experience with it, can you identify any time that you thought were the best years, the golden years of the industry in terms of working, or maybe the technology had enabled the most, or the least amount of work and you were making perhaps the most amount of money compared to what you ever made? Were there any terms golden years that you can remember?

JC Yeah, from '54 to '60. They was the golden years. But they are catching much, much more fish today than they did at the time when I was fishing. They have anywhere from 65 to 75 years of catching now, millions a year. When I was fishing, if you caught 20 million that was a big year, but now they're catching 75, 65, 75 million fish and they call that a bad season. [chuckles]

MP Now do you have any experience in the regulatory side of things in terms of regulations that were imposed or that restricted you or do you have any opinions on regulations and if they've helped or hurt you and looking back at all the years that you fished if you can tell us anything what you've learned about any sort of restrictions or regulations?

JC Well they restriction and the regulations have changed a whole lot, whole lot now in this day and time than it was when I was fishing.

24:00

JC You got bathrooms and everything on the boats now, just the same as living home conditions and when they years when I was fishing, they didn't have a bathroom, they didn't even have a shower on the boat. You used buckets and stuff to wash up in, go over the stern of the ship that was the toilet, so it has changed. They got bathrooms, showers and everything on boats now, televisions and things. You got in the home, you got it on the boat, air conditioning. When I was on there, the master gave you air, the wind, he got the wind blow. Didn't even have electric fans down there before. So it's a big change, master change.

MP When did you leave the fishing industry? When did you retire from actually

JC '89

MP '89

JC 1989



MP Were the singers kind of organized by then? Or when did you organize the kind of group?

JC Well we organized the chantey singing group, when they was doing it, it really was going to come from North Carolina anyway, '86 down there (?), but it much more different, song lyrics than we sing today. And uh, I think I am not sure, but up here I think they start singing chantey in 1965, between '65 and '70. They really got into the chantey, they really, when you are pulling by hand, but you don't even sing chanteys no more on the boats. Now its just they got the power block, so that's a thing of the past. So, but us singing chanteys now, we try to keep the traditions alive. Cause the young people of this day and time they don't heard of no chantey, that's a thing of the past. Time moves on.

MP Do you have any opinions and advice for younger people getting involved in the fishing industry now if you obviously, you've already talked about how you, in terms of knowing the challenges that you're gonna have in terms of race you had accepted those early on, because you grew up and were exposed to them from the day you were born, you knew what it was like

JC Yeah

MP But similarly if anybody else is involved with becoming a fisherman, you know or working in the industry, do you have any advice or guidance you can offer them?

JC My best offer that I have for the young generation coming up now, go to school and get your education, and don't fool with fishing.

27:00

JC That's the advice I can give 'em. Now it's different a person that wants to do something than the one that don't want to do nothing. Fishing is the last thing that I would offer a young person coming up today. If they want to got there and try, let themselves know that there's another experience they can do if they can't find nothing else to do. I have a grandson in college now. Two years ago he went on a fish boat. I didn't want him to go, but he was a young man, he had to try. So he went on it. He liked it, but that fall, I told him, I said, that you gotta go back to school, get your education. Then I said I'll leave it up to you. So he went back to college, he graduated and now he's gone to get his masters, so it didn't bother him none, but he liked fishing. But I didn't want him to get into it. Fishing is a hard thing to get out your blood if you get it in there. But he didn't so he's gone on. I thank God for that.

MP Are there people still singing chantey nowadays on the boats?

JC No, they don't sing chantey no more. They don't have to. That power takes the net, put a hook round that net carry it on up, pull it right on up. All you had to do is put the weight in back, make sure it don't foul up. It's just easy as that.

MP Were you ever involved in the construction of the nets and do you know how to make the nets and how to make those or is that kind of a different trade?

JC That's a different trade, but I know how to stop a hole. If it was tore I could stop the hole, mend it up you know. But you don't always mend it like it was come from the factory, but I could you know. And if you get in a hurry you lace it, you take your net and stretch it out, mesh for mesh, laces up as strong as it was when it come from the factory.

MP And you can do that right on the boat. You can do that right on the boat in the middle of your

JC Yeah

MP Ok. That's amazing. So when you come to a commercial fishing festival like this that kind of seeks to educate others on the traditions that are maybe no longer always present such as chantey singing, or seeks to advocate for you know different to changes either in the regulation side of things or changes to the industry, you know, how do you feel when you come to an event like this? Do you learn a lot from others? Do you interact with people and kind of see the fishing lifestyle that you lived? Do you see it through other people's eyes and you get to exchange stories and interesting historical facts with people?

30:11

JC It's a great experience when they come wanting to know something about the fishing industry. Well they gotta whole lot of different industries now. They got things such as pound nets. They got trawling nets that pull the net behind and catches fish. And they got so many experiences of fishing technology so, menhaden industry was the one that I was in. That's the technology that I was in, menhaden, bunkerfishin' they got factories and stuff for that when I was coming along a boy they had in my community they had much as 67 factories. Now they have only one factory that's regional, the rest of them is in Louisiana and places like that, Texas and on down the line. They same company owns them, but they moved them. They retirees got so bad they had to move them, see. They couldn't stand to smell that, you know how fish, when you're cooking fish, but in my community if you don't smell that factory, you're not making any money. That's right. And they make fertilizer to bunker, menhaden fish, we call them bunkers and some call them alewives different things like that. They make so much stuff it's fertilizer, perfume, pearls, lipstick and all that's made from the fish that they catch, the menhaden, bunkerfish. So you see them ladies all dressed up, lips red, smelling good, that's some come from the alewives, the bunkers. Paint made from it. Oh yeah. It's a money fish, oil, manufacture it into oil. Them scales come off and that's where you get your pearls from. Duck and chicken feed, all that manufactured from the menhanden. They grind 'em up and cook 'em. Press the oil from them, make fertizlier, all that stuff from, it's a money fish.

MP And that wasn't always like that when you first started fishing?

JC It always has been a money fish, but they didn't catch as many of them.

MP Is there anything else that you can think of to discuss from all your years fishing and singing, the two are intertwined really, they are kind of part of the same lifestyle. But is there anything else you can talk about either aspect that you thought could be worthwhile to share with the future generations who are gonna be listening to this and perhaps, you know experiencing this festival for years to come?

33:18

JC I wouldn't like that I can tell them the experience that I went through fishing as I had told you before getting them into this fishing operation, I wouldn't like to do that, I'd like, that is something I'd like for them to make up on their own mind on. I wouldn't like to encourage them to it, because I always want to see people do better than I did so if I encourage them getting into fishing, I wouldn't be helping them. I'd be harming them. Cause it's lot of different people now that's got an education.

MP I meant to ask this before. You talked about in North Carolina, they sang a different kind of chantey down there.

JC Yeah.

MP What are the differences and is it a different melody and song structure and different lyrics, both? What are the differences in chantey singing as you've learned it even though it's not terribly far geographically

JC They vary, they vary. The tunes of the songs vary. They're a little different accent from what ours is. Well, when you're out on the water it's nothing but the seagulls and other boats on there, you can sing about anything you want. So it can be very colorful. But when we bring it to the public, we take a lot of color from them. So you've gotta clean them up. You give people what they want, but you have to clean them up, respect your public. They public what keeps you going. So you clean them up.

MP Yeah I can imagine that if you're a bunch of young men out on the sea by yourselves, that you're gonna not only sing about, it's not gonna be G rated all the time

JC That's right

MP Cause you're, you got a lot of time and you're working hard and you gotta keep yourself, how do you say, entertained and you gotta be creative in your language.

JC That's right

MP But is there an example you can give right now, are you able to perhaps just sing a call and response yourself right here? Or do you need, do you need others to be involved. Is there anything you can do right not to demonstrate the kind of singing or chantey singing?

JC Well we got this net we came with us, that first song, our theme song, Help to Raise Em and then as you get your fish in your hold, you want to get some mail from home so I sing a song what Every Mail Day. And then you got somebody sing a song about drinking that wine and I got a Mule on the Mountain, they call him Jerry

36:00

JC and Momma Liza Jane, Hey in the Hold Below. We got a whole lotta songs that's got pretty music that you can really pull by and then our last song that we sing Remember Me, that's beautiful. Each person on our group, leads a song or two songs, two or three songs to keep everything going when everything is in accord. Once your our ? is pretty good

MP Well great, um. Well I am sure we're all looking forward to hearing you on the stages you know performing the musical side of this and talking a lot about the tradition, but I think we have a good idea of the background now as you've kind of outlined the way that the singing and the fishing is part of one another's traditions and talked a little bit about the racial aspect of coming up in that day and age on the Northern Neck. So I think, I think we're good. I think this is a good introduction so I appreciate your time and like I said if there's anything else you can think of, we have you know plenty of time on this recorder we can talk, but if you fee like you've said everything that you want to say, then I think we can wrap this up.

JC Well I am the most experienced one on this group, but we have our spokesman man do that, he talk about fishing, he could give you a whole lot on fishing, but uh, I put a lot of years, but the years has gone by and what I have forgotten to talk about, but you know won't come to you just sitting there talking, but I've given you a good outline I think. I've given you a very good outline.

MP Great, well thank you very much. I'm gonna stop this and um, appreciate your time Mr. Carter.

JC You're very welcome.

38:12

End of interview