

Narrator: Jonathan Bennett

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Interviewers: Victoria Barrett and Julia Thomas

Victoria Barrett: This is Victoria Barrett and I'm a student at Georgia Southern and I'm here with Jonathan Bennett conducting an oral history interview as part of the Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia Project. I've already received informed consent and permission to record from Jonathan, but if you don't mind just repeating for the recorder that you've consented to be recorded.

Jonathan Bennett: Yes I have consented.

VB: Alright, thank you. I have some questions here that's just gonna guide us but I really want to encourage you to tell the stories you want people to hear, what you think is most interesting. Cause sometimes what we think is interesting is not the real story. So to start us off can you tell me where and when you grew up.

JB: I grew up in Brantley County in Waynesville GA and I've lived there ever since I was born and still do.

VB: Did you grow up around fishing?

JB: Yes ma'am I was born into it, ever since I was about 3 years old I've been on a boat.

VB: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

JB: Like what about it?

VB: About growing up on a boat, who got you into it

JB: It was a rough life. My papa, he's always owned his own boats and it was just kind of a thing that he wanted me to do and I just kinda grew up at it and that's been my whole life. I run a boat now and I'm only 20 years old. He's got his own boat and it's just – I'm fifth generation.

VB: So how did you go from growing up on a boat to owning your own by 20?

JB: It was kind of like a – it wasn't really a choice. It was more of like opportunity. He raised me to do it and he just sent me off on it. He needed the money you know so he put me on another boat, just more shrimp.

VB: So whenever you go out what does your daily routine look like, from whenever you get up to whenever you go to bed at night, what do you usually do?

JB: You wake up, I get my crew up, check my engine, make sure I got all my oil, check my fuel, pull anchor and we start dragging. You drag all day long until it gets dark, sometimes you don't quit dragging, sometimes you drag for 3 or 4 days straight. That's pretty much what your routine is all day long, same thing over and over and over. Unless something tears up.

VB: What happens when something tears up?

JB: You gotta fix it. Sometimes it's not the funnest. It could be [inaudible] or something wrong with your actual motor, your wheels, anything. Catch a hang, destroy your nets your whole day is over, your whole trip's over.

VB: Couple people we talked to today have talked about fixing their own nets, do you know how to do that?

JB: Yes ma'am.

VB: Did your grandpa teach you?

JB: Yes ma'am.

JT: Who else in your family is involved in shrimping?

JB: All of my mama and my papa's side, several uncles, Benny Mac, my uncle Frank, Captain Thurman, I've probably got about 10, but mostly just my papa and them, like the ones closest around here but I got everybody on this side of the family shrimpers.

JT: What was that like, having so many people in your family involved in that?

JB: I reckon it was kinda cool, that's kinda why I made it my life choice. I was actually not gonna be a shrimper I was gonna go into the Marine Corps but I just chose this instead of it. It was a little bit easier.

JT: Were there any other motivations for choosing this instead of the Marine Corps?

JB: The money. I get to be my own boss and who don't enjoy getting to watch the sunset over the water every day?

VB: So you said that growing up on a boat was kinda rough, do you have any stories about that?

JB: It's just, it's really really hard labor. Everything is heavy, nothing is light and you don't get to quit, there's no breaks cause you gotta get it done, the more shrimp you catch the more work you do. And me always being the youngest I worked with older fellas it was like yeah you're the youngest you gotta do it, so that was kinda me.

VB: You're younger than most of the people we've talked to today so have you seen any changes in the industry since you've grown up in it, have you seen any positive or negative changes?

JB: Really haven't seen too many positive changes, the only thing I've really seen is negative changes, whether shutting more stuff down or limiting us on more and more stuff every single day, especially the way they got us shut down right now. Kinda hurts us when we ain't gone shrimping in months, so that kinda sucks. Can't make no money, can't pay your bills. I'm not really as old as the rest of them so I couldn't really tell you too much I just kinda roll with it.

VB: So no positives or anything you can think of? Just all negative?

JB: Not really.

VB: Even if it is mostly negative changes, what's the most rewarding part of your career?

JB: I mean, I guess being my own boss, getting to do what I want. I get to go shrimping when I want and I got a little boy so anytime I want to spend time with him I can come home get him, do what I wanna do. I ain't got nobody telling me what to do, and like I said it's good money. It's not too bad when you're actually able to fish.

VB: Are you teaching him to fish too?

JB: I really don't want him to be a shrimper cause I want him to have something a little bit easier life, because, I couldn't really explain to you how hard it is until you actually have to get out there and live through it, and the dangers of it. It gets rough and just anything, shackles could break, just a split second you could die and every day you leave the dock you might not come home so I don't really want him on there too much like that but I mean I have took him when he was real little but I don't think I want him for a life career with that.

JT: Can you describe some of the dangers you mentioned, go a little bit more in depth with that?

JB: Rough weather, you could get caught in storms and I've had tote blocks break on me and cables break and everything. Salt water eats metal up really bad and if you don't check everything all the time anything could happen. You could lose your boat, something could break and get you, a lot of things. If I was on a boat I could kinda show you and point at which stuff's more a little bit easier.

VB: What do you think is important for people who don't live on the coast to know about coastal Georgia, about the heritage and the history?

JB: A lot of people think that all we're doing is hurting everything and to be honest with you if they would just come out here and check and see that we're not really hurting everything, we're actually kinda helping stuff in my opinion, keeping the bottom clean. I wish they would open the sounds up so we could get in there and clean up a little bit but I don't really know what they think and how my opinion is so I guess I'd have to get there opinion first to let them know what I would like them to know.

VB: Where do you think that the fishing industry is going?

JB: Honestly in my opinion the way they're growing shrimp in ponds I think shrimpers are getting less and less and less for a reason and it's not really like we're gonna be here forever in my opinion.

VB: What kind of changes do you think could happen now, in the next 5 years or so that people on the ground could change that would make this industry last?

JB: Quit buying imported shrimp from other countries and get them out of, let them catch them out of fresh boats instead of growing in ponds. In a pond the water's all stagnant and bacteria you know, it doesn't have fresh flowing water and you're eating that so it kinda, yes, that could help us out a lot. Imported stuff hurts us.

JT: You mentioned selling shrimp fresh off the boat, can you kinda describe your experiences with that?

JB: What do you mean? Selling them to different people or just to the market in general?

JT: Yeah, just your process of selling the shrimp when you bring it in, so maybe who you sell it to, or why you sell it to that person?

JB: We sell it to friends in small amounts and stuff like that, we just take them and put them in coolers and take them to them like that, but when we take them to the market we normally have

huge amounts at a time and what we do is we shove them up in barrels and we got a crane that picks them up and puts them in a vat and it actually has a conveyer belt that runs them to the scales and they ice them down and put them in the freezer and everything. It's a pretty cool little process.

JT: Have you ever partaken in that process, or just witnessed it from selling?

JB: I've taken it many a times. I've actually had to catch my shrimp, unload my own shrimp, ice my own shrimp down because the market be out of help, so, don't get paid any extra for it.

VB: Has that changed from whenever you started, like the whole people not having help?

JB: It's changed a lot, like when I was younger we used to have to take ice in barrels and hundreds of barrels at a time and put ice on your boat. Now they actually have big blower machines you can put on there instead, you ain't got to have several people drag barrels and fuel it's a lot easier to get in cause you got hoses that run all the way down the dock and everything now it's a lot nicer than what it was when I was little. It's way nicer.

JT: How do you think the new technology that you just mentioned might be shaping or changing the industry in other ways?

JB: Honestly it's sweet, like we have Apple computers on the boat that gives you wind plot and sea map and all that stuff and honestly I love it cause you can go anywhere you want to in the world with it even if you've never been there, you just kinda ride out and type any location and go with it. I love the newer technology. Sometimes it hurts us, but so far on the shrimp boat ain't nothing really hurt us yet.

JT: Have you ever used that technology to go somewhere new?

JB: Yes ma'am, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, I've never really been there until this year as of being a captain myself, ever since I've been little we always just stayed in Georgia. My father didn't like to venture out and as I've gotten older I like to adventure and I go different places.

VB: Your grandfather mentioned that your mom was no longer in this business but that you were planning on staying in it. Where do you see your future in fishing going?

JB: As long as I can make a dollar with it and they're not gonna make it harder and harder and harder every year I'm gonna stick with it. My momma probably would've stuck with it but she just kind didn't like the dangers with it too much.

VB: Alright, I think that was all the questions we had.