

Narrator: Charles Jones

Date: March 24, 2018

Interviewers: Victoria Barrett and Julia Thomas

Victoria Barrett: Alright so this is Victoria and Julia. We're here with Charles 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 your informed consent and permission to record but if you could please just confirm that out loud.

Charles Jones: Yes, confirmed.

VB: Alright. So I have a couple questions here that I'm just gonna kinda guide through but I really want to encourage you tell me the stories that you think I should know. So if I ask a question and you think of something that's happened or something that you want someone to hear, tell me.

CJ: Okay.

VB: So just to start us off, can you tell me where and when you grew up?

CJ: I grew up right here in Darien GA about two blocks over here behind [inaudible] where y'all eat all the food at. I'm just messing with you, but I grew up right there. At a young age we start heading shrimp at the docks, I forgot what year that was that might've been in '64, '65, somewhere in that neighborhood, and we go to the docks after school and when we go to the dock we might stay down there until 11, 12, 1 o'clock, however long it would take us to head shrimp. We made our money to buy our clothes and everything else we need. Especially my baby sister, she was next to me so I make sure she had her clothes for school and church and everything else. But I grew up here about a couple of blocks over and in the summer months what I usually do is get me a side job on one of the shrimp boats in the summer months so I can make a little bit more money than when I was heading shrimp. And that's what we did when I was at a young age. Then when I became a – I went into the service, went to Vietnam, came back luckily. I went fishing with my father, me a Truck father and we was in Key West, FL. Oh, before I went into the service, excuse me let me back up. I was fishing with my father and I left him in TX and I went in the service to be a diesel mechanic, what they didn't put me in but that's alright, that's fine, I got the benefit of the doubt. Then when I got out of service I went back with my father back in 1971 and I fish with him for a while out of Key West, FL so I decide to buy my own boat, which I did I bought my own boat, my first boat, and I let one of the fishermen that'd been fishing a long time run it for me and at that time I was working for the GA state patrol so I couldn't run it so they had to run it and after several years with the first shrimp boat, course I made good money with it I sent it all over the place, I bought my second boat and I said,

“this time right here I’ma run my own boat” so that’s what I did I run my own boat, I enjoy going fishing, I enjoy catching shrimp, I enjoy trying to beat the other shrimpers that fish around me. And Robert Lee Everson was one of the older fishermen that taught me how to fish around here, and he was, he still is a nice man, and he used to set my doors, where the net hook onto, and his father told me one time when I used to take him to his father house, you know setting the doors on a shrimp boat, you gotta set them just right, he said because if you don’t it’s just like setting - fixing your doors to your house. When they open up in the drag you know you ain’t set them right cause it’s on the bottom so you got to fix it or that door’ll come all the way over. I was taught that back then. And they taught me how to do nets and I didn’t even know how to sew a net until Robert Lee Everson showed me how to sew a net, and how you start off a net and it was a learning process but I used to take my second boat myself, in the summer months, me and two other gentlemen that had a shrimp boat, captain John [inaudible] Skipper, bless the dead, and Russell Rusty Brown, that own Brown Seafood, we all go to Key West every year during the summer months and catch shrimp, and also we go down there after December and stay down there until about March or April, come back work on the boat for a couple weeks and go back fishing again. But fishing, up here you fish in the daytime, and you could fish at nighttime too if there’s shrimp, but you have to fish offshore 3 miles, but down in the Gulf you fish at night because the water so clear you can’t catch shrimp in the daytime unless you get real rough weather and the water get all cloud up and then you can drag in the daytime, but you got to make sure if it’s calm, take up before 6 o’clock in the morning because if not you gonna load up with a whole bunch of teeny silver fish, but it was the nicest [inaudible] down there, and if I have to I’d go again. I enjoyed back then, matter of fact I enjoyed when I was fishing last year, I enjoyed messing with my buddy Reggie Sawyer cause he liked to talk trash to me and I talked trash to him, but he’s a good friend, he’s like a brother to me too. But enjoying catching shrimp and crab, we used to catch crab, but you can’t catch crab no more cause they don’t come up that far. You have to know where you’re fishing at. You got to know where the banks, you got to know when the high tide and low tide cause if you got a boat draw a lot of water you know 6, 8, 9 feet, you got to know when to come out of there, if you don’t you going to stay up there on the bank. And you got to know exactly where the fish at at certain tide and certain stage of wind. That’s the bottom line. That’s good for that point. Okay.

VB: So what’s different about fishing during the day and fishing at night? What changes?

CJ: Well, the shrimp. Shrimp, if it’s real cold, oh that’s, let’s start off with the first shrimp we normally catch in April. That’s the rose shrimp and you could catch them in the daytime and then you got to keep trying at night because sometimes they’ll move at night and most time when you catching rose shrimp you got to, when you start you got to catch them when the tide coming up, some reason I don’t know but that’s how it is, and then sometimes it change and you catch them on high water when tide coming in, but then on the rose shrimp they sometimes when you got a lot of boats trashing the air and the mud, the water gets so muddy shrimp can’t see, so you end

up catching shrimp but you see them at nighttime and you catching the rose shrimp. And the legs of a shrimp, if that leg turn red, they running, they going somewhere, they not staying there because they getting beat up by nets and shrimp. Back a few years ago they made us put turtle excluder device on a net that to save the turtle from getting drowned or anything, and they made us put fish, something to do with fish, and the fish get in the net and it got a hole about that big around and the fish come out the back, so what you trying to do is preserve the fish and everything else at the same time, the only thing you like to catch is the shrimp. That's the difference in catching shrimp. Most times you catch most fish at nighttime than you do in the daytime. And it's all dependent on the wind, the weather, all that dependent on fishing. Okay.

VB: How old were you when you bought your first boat?

CJ: Back in '79, I been in the 30's and I walk over here to the bank across the road. I said I need some money, I need to buy a shrimp boat. My shrimp boat was \$90,000 and they told me come on here and sign the bottom of the line, which I did, I paid them all that money back, and then when I wanted another shrimp boat, I forgot how old I was then, I had a gentleman by the name of Mr. [inaudible] Higgins, back then, my brother used to work for him. I was working for the state patrol at this time and I took a couple of weeks of annual leave off and I was working with a man named [inaudible] and Mr. Cornell Hawkins, they call him cheetah, he died, but anyway I was over on the island and he called me, in this house, he say, Charles, you want me to give you \$150,000 to buy you another boat? I said no sir Mr. Higgins I'll be alright, so he got on the phone and call his son Mike down in Ft. Myers and he said, if Charles come down there and want a boat, give it to him. But that's how nice you have some people in the community. And he had a dock down in Ft. Myers for many years and [inaudible] from 14 to 20-something shrimp boats down there. When I went down there I went through the lock, they call it the lock, on my boat, and was trying to get to his dock and I couldn't get into that dock for nothing in the world. You be from here to here, maybe 20 feet, so I told my daddy I said look here, go back over to the [Guff/Gulf?] dock and let me see how to get to the dock. Well, I didn't know it was a bike there in front of the dock so the man told me and said you got to line this up, line this post up and line the other post up and you get to the dock. I went back round and I told my father. He said okay. Lord have mercy, we got in straight to the dock and the wind was blowing so we had to stay the dock a little longer and my father work on the net, make sure they was right. We left out and went out to the beach, they call it Ft. Myers Beach so we stayed there for a day. So we left out of there, went fishing, fished 3 nights, and we had 28 boxes of shrimp for 3 nights and all of them was 10, 15, them big 'ol shrimp, jumbo shrimp. And me and another young man by the name of Punch, he was on the boat with us. We made good money doing that, course I made money up here. I had my son and another young man named Elton Reed on the boat with me and when the sound opened up, I had those guys out fishing with me and we caught about 50 boxes of shrimp and then I went back down that way and had my cousin [inaudible] boat with me. We had about 50 basket or something when we first dragged, we ain't drag but an hour. When you out there

fishing you got to keep things underneath the cover, so my buddy [inaudible], bless the dead, he called me, he was on the other side over by that big boat, the Amazing Grace, the one that has them big old two engine in it, and he told me something now you better pick up. He said I got 18 basket back there, so I told one of my men I said put the try net down let's see what we catch. And the try net came up and we thought we had conch or mud or something in it, and then it ain't be nothing but shrimp and when we did that I said we got to take up or we gonna bust open the bags. That's when we had the 50-something basket. I wasn't pulling nothing but 2 net during that time. We enjoy ourselves down there, we cook and we eat, we cut the food with everybody. Most time we [inaudible] to each other. You know back then we had television on the boat and you could do anything. Back then I didn't have a computer. You know how we have the computers now? We didn't have no computer back then. Only thing we had was 32 volt and we had a thing to plug in for our TV. We did good back then. We had a fan, we ain't had no central heating yet back then, we had a fan on the boat and open the window up when we had to open the window up. It was hot, but you have to deal with it. Now, my last boat I had before I got this one down here, we had central heated air. I made sure I had me some air and heat on there. Everything was electric on the boat, electric stove, heater, deep freezer, we had everything. Plenty food, so if you had some you would heat up some food. See cause Truck ain't gone cook. Matter of fact one time I went fishing with Truck on his boat and we went conching, you ever heard of that? Well we went conching. We did good conching and I ain't went back no more conching because the market for conching seemed like when you catch a lot of conch at one time they shut it down. And I remember going conching on my boat one time and we went up north, caught a bunch of conchs and then middle of that day about 1 o'clock, the dock owner called us told us they gonna shut it down. I said we just started. We went in and unload and I haven't went back conching since that day. That's a long time ago. I mean a very long time. Because they open it up and they closed down when they want, they said they have enough but I don't know how they have enough cause there wasn't that much conch out there. But that's how they do things. And you know some of the problem with the fishing industry today – when you got 2 or 3 or 4 shrimp buyers, they call each other and set the price. Then when you come in and get ready to unload your shrimp, they got different price for you. You could do good if you could sell your own shrimp for you when you come in cause you'll make more money, but that's how they operate. It's the middleman, they gonna make more money. And then look at your shrimpers though, I don't want these, and you could take the same shrimp cause they're pretty cause you just caught them. You take them to sell to that restaurant or whatever and make a dollar or so more on your shrimp. That way your [inaudible] man will be happy, and I'd be happy too, cause I'd make more money. We had a good season. Normally when you leave from here, fishing on a boat, you know you have a lot more fishermen going to the Gulf. I hear one talking now, I used to port behind him, I used to call him Bigfoot. I caught behind him. He had a shrimp boat called [inaudible] and we all was out there fishing and back then in the Gulf all you see is sky and water and lord that sun will be hot and you don't know how you gonna sleep that day. The only sleep you gonna get is at nighttime when you could sleep good cause you're not gonna sleep during

the day cause it be 90 hundred degrees out there. I don't know how my father could endure it for all those years down there. It was tough during that time. Yes, very tough. And they came up with just a compass on the boat. They didn't have a depth finder to see how much water you in or however, and I watch him cause I wanted to learn. I watch him and you got two rocks and you gotta know how to drive through the two rocks and he was very sharp on that. I learned a whole lot from him. I tried to beat him but I can't beat him at catching shrimp. One day when, course he got sick and he came up here, and we kept him, and I took him fishing with me one day and we made one long path down the bank and come back up and we had one box of shrimp and it didn't take up nothing more than about 15-20 minutes. He was smiling cause he didn't know I could catch them that fast. I enjoy him, for the time I've been around him cause he fished all his life. He fished from Key West to – I remember being in Pascagoula, Mississippi for a month and a half. Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Galveston, Texas, we fished, go in there. But see, we been on a wood hull boat back then, and now they got them steel hull boats, they ain't got to worry about coming in or worry about the roughness or anything else. And then they got freezer on it so they can keep shrimp as long as they wanna keep it. But it was enjoyment during my time of fishing and later on in my lifetime I ran for sheriff up here and I won the election and I stayed in office for 16 years as sheriff but I had a young man running my boat then. He used to catch shrimp. Scotty Boone, he was good at catching shrimp. I still love him to death cause he made me some money and cost me some money but he was alright. What else you get to ask me?

VB: You were talking a minute ago about learning from your father and all the things he taught you. Have you taught anybody else to do this the same way?

CJ: I taught my son how to do it and my son ended up going working for the dredge company. He been there for 17-18 years, I guess I'm old. Course, he bigger than me, they all bigger than me. He used to make money, and matter of fact I had two younger folks, a younger gentleman on the boat and I was teaching those two about shrimping because right now, they don't learn. You got to have something for them to enjoy theyselves, to bring the young generation into the fishing industry and way they can make money. And with the regulation, we talk about regulation, they got all kind of regulation and then you got to be just right because the coast guard take you to the dock. I tried to teach the younger folks, I tried to talk to the younger folks on doing it and we don't want it to be a lost tradition, you know, we want someone to step up behind us and that was a good thing for them and that's what I told some of the other fishermen. Find you some younger guys cause we started young, and see if they want the opportunity to do this. Because if they could make money up here, they could make money up there. But the only bad thing about it is you away from your family, going from here to here, but if you working on a boat that come into the dock every day, you'll be fine. Because you gotta get up early in the morning and go back again, but the younger generation, I don't think they see it like we do, like we did in the past. It was tough during the times we did it, the time we started. And I'm going to continue to talk to some of these younger folks. That's the only way they gone learn. You got to teach them. But

when you tell people the same thing over and over and over, cause you do the same thing over and over, if they can't catch on then you gotta pull them. But other than that it's fine.

VB: You were also talking about the technology. You said that boats didn't used to have central heating and air. How has the technology changed, is it all positive changes, is it all improved?

CJ: All positive, all improved. You have, back in them days they didn't have no radar. If it got foggy, you couldn't see. You have radar, you got your sonar equipment, you got your depth recorders, you got your computers, and with your computers you have your chart and stuff on it and where you drag at, and you have all your [inaudible] on there so you don't run over [inaudible] with your net and stuff and it has changed, just like technology change, it's changed too. You have everything, all you got to do is if you walk – [primary recorder died] oh, you done mess up there.

[Change batteries in the primary recorder]

VB: So we were talking about technology and the positives that have changed. What have been some negatives that you've seen?

CJ: Too much regulation, that's the number one item. Too much regulation. And back in the older days, when we grew up, they didn't have all these regulations. You could go fishing when you get ready. Just like now you can't fish now because they gotta close down 25 miles. Well, how you know what a shrimp gonna do? Or a fish gone do? So you know, the shrimping season will close down by itself and open up by itself. And if you offshore fishing you not bothering with anything cause the shrimp gone be inshore in the sound and in the rivers, so you're really not messing with anything. That's the negative part of it, you got too much government regulation which a lot of folks in those positions don't know what they doing. That's the number one thing. And if you get the right person in these places, course my brother'll tell you the same thing, I think he checked them shrimps too and stuff and you know when shrimp are out there and how big they is, but right now see the negative thing, you have to leave from here and go down to south of Fernadina, Mayport, or St. Augustine all the way up and down to fish because they didn't close they season down there because they have deeper water. Up here we have shallow water, but when you're off shore you got 30-40 feet or whatever you can fish in so you're not hurting anything. And that's the negative part.

JT: What do you see with the future of shrimping and fishing?

CJ: The future, especially younger folks, once you get the younger folks in it, I think that they will thrive and I think that they will go out there and go to work and make money or make funds for themselves or they family, whoever. But the future is good if you limit some of these

regulations. See at one time when we fished, we didn't have turtle excluder devices. Well, one of the guys that live here, the one who build those things. A lot of folks thought that we was killing turtles, but we wasn't. If we catch a turtle, and that turtle is not breathing we turn him over and beat on him til he get life, you know wake up, and once he wake up for a little while we push him back overboard and same way with sharks. Sharks is very dangerous and if you go to the beaches they get bitten, people get bitten by sharks but it's so many sharks and when you fishing out there now and the water temperature gets so hot, well you might don't have no net when you get up because the fish get in your net and the sharks eat them up, eat your net up trying to get the fishes and whatever shrimp you catch in your bag. We put all kinda shark gears and stuff on board and design stuff so we wouldn't have to repair all our nets all the time but every time you come back to the docks you have to repair nets and sometimes that cost. But in the future I think it'll be fine in the future as long as we don't put too much regulations on the shrimp fishing.

VB: Alright, well, thank you so much.