

Name of the narrator: Thornell King

Interviewer: Scott Clarke and Angelique Jennings with permission of TK for the research project “Georgia’s Fishing Traditions & Fishing Futures.” Primary investigator: Dr. Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, Georgia Southern University.

Date of interview: March 24, 2018

Place: Darien Telephone Company

Duration of the interview: thirty-five minutes and thirty seconds

Repository for the recording: This recording has been upload to the website, Voices from the Fisheries (www.voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/)

Context for the interview: The narrator signed up to participate to be interviewed by two students from Georgia Southern University

General Description of Contents: The interview begins with a brief history of TK’s childhood and his father’s involvement in selling fish back in the 1950’s and 1960’s. TK then goes on to talk about his brief interest in shrimping and how that interest eventually led him into the world of jellyballing. He describes his time under his mentor, George Tye, and how Tye eventually gifted him his three boats and his jellyballing company. This leads TK into the overall process of jellyballing and how important it is to conserve our oceans in order for the animals to thrive so they can continue fishing them. He then discusses regulations and how he feels they are necessary, similar to a speeding ticket, simply a mechanism to protect the ocean and sea creatures. He then reflects on his career as a “Jellyball King” and owes his success to giving back to the community, whether it’s through jobs or giving free food to those who can’t afford it. This is something he learned from his father, who would often give away some of his products to those in need as well. Later, he expounds on his thoughts regarding fishing in Georgia and believes others should know and care about the fishing communities, as well as taking care of the water as it all eventually goes into the ocean. This then brings him to the topic of the futures of Georgia’s fishing communities, which he believes won’t die, but will need someone to step up and take charge of the industry. He ends with his thoughts on his career and would want to do it again (without buying his first shrimp boat) and hopes more distributors will be available for jellyballing in order for me people to be able to be involved in the industry.

Scott Clarke: My name is Scott Clarke and I am a student at Georgia Southern University I’m here with TK conducting an oral history interview as a part of the project, “Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures: Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia”. I have already received informed consent and permission to record from TK could you please confirm that outloud, if you don’t mind.

TK: Yes, I confirmed the interview.

SC: Thank you,sir. I have some questions to guide us but I really want to encourage you to tell the story wherever you think we should hear. So first question, just a little bit of background. You mind telling where and when you grew up?

TK: I've been a native of Georgia all my life. I grew up in this little small town of Darien, for some fifty-six years now. I've spent my entire life here, gone off to college in Atlanta for four years and the right back here ever since.

SC: Ok, give me an idea about what life was like in your family and the community here?

TK: My dad has been a long resident of McIntosh county he's ninety-five years old and we're very fortunate to have him around. My mom is ninety-two years and she's a former school teacher here, and my dad's a former-I guess he is former policeman as well as he sold fish and shrimp off the back of his truck to send myself and four other sisters and brothers to college just off this fishing industry here in Darien.

SC: Nice. So you grew fishing then?

TK: Somewhat. My dad would go out on the boats, but he really wasn't the fisherman at sea, he would buy, go down to the docks and buy fish. And at that time they didn't have the convenience of blown ice, like we have today. They used to have ice in these big blocks and he would go and buy blocks of ice from the dock and he would put it on his shrimp, fish-mostly fish in these big round foot tubs, what we call foot tubs, is round tubs. **And we would go all over the back roads of the state of Georgia just selling fish, mostly in South Georgia. And they would call him the "Fish Man".**

SC: Ok. What type of fish?

TK: Mostly whittings and flounders. I mean back then in his time, I mean some sixty years ago the big thing was whittings, and even today our big sale in the fish that we sell is between whittings and flounders.

SC: Ok, and how are y'all catching those?

TK: We catch them in the net. Even back in the day it was the same thing; I guess technology changed quite a bit with the nets they use now as opposed to back in the 50s and 60s. But we're still using the same type of nets. Boats have lots more- as you can imagine, have lots more power, they're using more nets now. But, from stories from my dad and talking to other fishermen just the fact that there were so much fish and shrimp back in the day that they would literally have to push some back overboard. They would literally give away fish down at the docks, now the price of fish today compared to back then, 25 cent a pound to even a size-at some places \$3 a pound. Now you know its a big difference, you don't see as many folks giving away as they used to back in the days but I still believe in it, its just how you get your blessings.

SC: Gotcha, so that experience with your father when you were young, did it influence you to get into fishing?

TK: Well it did somewhat. Well actually I bought my first boat in 1996. In 1995, it was the best season ever I said man, I went out with one of my friends shrimping and we were back there for hours and hours picking shrimp up off the back deck. And all of a sudden, I said "Man, I'm gonna buy me a shrimp boat." I said this is the way I'm gonna be rich. I bought that shrimp boat in 1996, and it was the worst year ever. We didn't catch any shrimp I thought I was owning for the whole industry. I held on to that boat for a couple of years and then I said between-it's either gonna be my wife or this boat so I chose to keep my wife and I had to let that boat go.

SC: So you were able to rebound after '96 that rough year?

TK: Right so back in- so from '96, so then back in '98 I'll be danged if I didn't get right back into it. I started doing what they call jellyballs. I met a guy named-well it was-trying to remember exactly what his name was. That first brought jellyballing to McIntosh county. I can think of his name, but anyway he brought jellyballing to McIntosh county and I started going down there working with him and just helping him out and just all of a sudden here I am, the jellyball king, I guess you would say. I've been doing it now for 19 years and it has been a very profitable business for me. Back in the day, nobody ever, even in the 50's and 60's nobody had any idea that jellyballs would be a mainstay or a very; something that you could make a lot of money off.

SC: So not much changed over the years then? You stick with jellyballs since '98?

TK: Yeah since '98- George Tye, was the gentleman from St.Louis, Missouri that brought jellyballing to McIntosh County. And at one point, we were fortunate enough to hire over 150 people in this little small town, processing and separating the jellyballs and that was a godsend for this little small town to- I think the only other industry or business that had more people was the school system and I think the jail may have had more people working for 'em. So it was a blessing, a blessing in disguise for something that fishermen hated-nobody wanted and then all of a sudden in 1998 Mr. Tye comes here and started doing jellyballs. And we were able to provide business, money and jobs for a lot of people here in this town. Here in Glenn County, as well as McIntosh-McIntosh and Liberty county we had people coming here,you know, to work.

SC: So before that gentlemen came to town, no one was targeting jellyballs?

TK: No, nobody else. There was nobody. Even to this day it is a well guarded secret as the way that they process the jellyballs and dry them and put them in alum and the chemicals that they use because at one time they were taking like 30 days to process them and then now they're taking up to three days to get these jellyballs right. So there's-its kind of a guarded secret from them, but its not a very big business that a lot of people have gotten into. Mr. Terry Chung in Darien has maintained his business for quite some time after Mr. Tye got out of it, George Tye got out of it. And we're still able to hire a lot of people in this little small town you to-to work.

SC: What that a goal of his? Was he promoting jellyballs? Was he hoping other people would get interested?

TK: Yes, he came here and he was hoping that- it would really boom and other states would jump on board. But they send the jellyballs to Japan and China so you have to export them and you have to catch them and you have to know how to process them. It's just not a matter of going out there and catching a boat load of jellyballs and then sending them away. I mean you got to have a buyer and they are regulated by commerce and they check and inspect it you know to make sure- this is a food product it has to be healthy and it has to be done in a proper way before we can ship them overseas.

SC: Wow. Well you don't have to give the secrets of course, but I'm interested in the process. A little more about the process of jellyballing.

TK: Well basically what we do is- I have three shrimp boats, two of which I got from Mr. George Tye, that after working for him and he saw that I was a hard working honest guy that he gave me a very very good deal on the boats because he wanted to see me succeed in this business. So, we basically send the boats out, just like shrimping and we drag on top of the water, on bottom of the water and midwater and we just catch the jellyballs. We have to use a four inch net, our nets openings are four inches where in a shrimp net it's probably half-inch but we are regulated by the federal government as well as the states. We can't- of course you don't want to mess with the turtles or any other species we aren't allowed to keep anything other than jellyballs but with a four inch webbing you can imagine nothing is gonna get in, the shrimp won't get in there, you may get one or two but that's after dragging 30 minutes and so we're still preserving the ocean life out there just catching jellyballs. And we fill the hole up- one boat holds, one of mine holds about 150,000 pounds but there are some larger boats that I have been involved with that hold up to 200,000 but you got to remember that shrimp boats weren't made to catch jellyballs, they were made for shrimping so there's a lot of wear and tear on your equipment when you're catching jellyballs as opposed to shrimping and fishing. Of course if you can get 100-200 pounds of shrimp you'd be in the meat then, but fortunately I took what we have been able to deal with.

SC: Gotcha, and then a lot more processing when you get back down to the dock too?

TK: Um yeah, basically, but we got what we call a suction machine it sucks the jellyballs right out like you drinking out of a drinking straw. It sucks it right on out, then we get the weight on it, that's how you get paid. Its only six cent a pound but when you think that usually jellyballing is when the season is over, so we are able to make money when nobody else is. And that is also a plus for the community as well cause you know you got people heading the shrimp and when the season is over they don't have any jobs so that money is an additional job for them during the time when shrimping ends. We used to do the jellyballing from around September to around May at the jellyball season when we catch them.

SC: Ok, much longer than the shrimp season.

TK: Right.