

Interview

Interviewee: Robert Waters

Interviewers: Ahmauri Alford and Mpume Hlophe

Duration: 00:24:33

Ahmauri: My name is Ahmauri, and I'm with Mpume, were both students at Georgia Southern University. I'm here with Bobby Waters conducting an oral history interview as part of the project fishing traditions and fishing futures. I've already received informed consent and permission to record from Bobby Waters. But could you please confirm out loud for me that this is still okay?

Waters: Yeah, it's still okay. [laughs]

Ahmauri: Excellent. So my first question for you is, can you tell me where and when you grow up?

Waters: I grew up in St. Mary's, Georgia. And uh...I went to high school there, and I graduated in 1960. And I went to Alabama for a year, but I've always been around fishermen, shrimpers. And then 1962, the government found these big royal red shrimp in the Gulf Stream, 80 miles out in the Atlantic. So I dropped out of college and um...got on a shrimp boat and we went to the Gulf Stream to drag for what they called the royal red shrimp. And uh, back then...if you was in college, and you dropped out, then they would draft you into the army. Well I dropped out, and the lady from the draft board called and told me that they were sticking to draft me. So, I joined the air force, was gone for five years and when I got out, then I came back and went back shrimping...uh, out of St. Mary's and...fished uh, in Texas and then came back and then bought my own boat. But I have been...I grew up as a shrimper. Matter of fact, the first words my grandmother ever heard me say was 'sea boat', and that was a shrimp boat. So that shows you how far back it goes. And back in the early 50's, my daddy was a tool foreman at the [unclear] mill in St. Mary's, but he had bought two shrimp boats and uh...that's where I mainly spent my time was done in...on the waterfront as a shrimper. And um, during high school I would shrimp during the summer months, during shrimping. And uh...it's like the old saying goes... a river right, you always will be as long as you got it in your blood. [laughs] That's an old saying...you just don't get rid of it. And uh, I'll be 76 next week and I um, I'm still shrimping. And um...I also work on a tour boat called the Lady Jane. Uh, it's a scientific [unclear] for state of Georgia, and we have people from all over the United States that go out and we pull one net, one 25 foot net behind the boat, and uh, we show people what each... if crabs or explain what it crabs different kinds of fish, different kind of shrimp and what shrimp at that stage of, and everything. Matter of fact, we had yesterday a tour...they was all off the Atlantic coastline cruise. They start up north and they go to St. Augustine...and it's a two hour tour. And uh, we was telling, we was glad, you know, they made the trip and everything. And one of them I heard them say, said 'this is the best trip that we've had so far' because they go from Charleston, Savannah, Bernardino, uh, St. Augustine. But she said that was the best tour that they had so far. So it's...it's interesting and uh... the people see, especially children because some of the stuff that they'll probably never see again in their lives, what they see back down on that table. And we explain it to them. So it's very educational. And um, but like I say, I've been associated with shrimping ever since the fifties. And back then my dad's boat, we had, we use rope for the bridles, and a cat head to pull the net in with the rope. Then they finally came up and they started making wenchers...that had cable. And uh, back up until 50, about 55, 1955...up until that time, most old boats we're just pulling one net. They had a shorter

outrigger and the cable would go out in and out, outrigger to a towing block. And then when they slow down, they had a chain bolted to the deck and we put that chain around with a hook on the cables. And your cables were straight behind the boat, and you will drag like that. In 1955, they came up with the idea of making longer outriggers, and pulling two nets, one off each side of the outriggers. So, then they got smart later on in time, say, well, we make longer outriggers and put more power into the boat. And it ended up pulling four nets...two off each side of the boat, outrigger. So, it's uh...it's, I've seen it go. **The Georgia coast, it's been a proven fact, have the best tasting shrimp...anywhere.**

[06:20] Oh, a lot of the chefs here in the restaurant specify that they wanted wild caught shrimp, Georgia wild, caught shrimp. And...the help of the marine extension here, help get it established... because 1994, Bill Clinton signed that free trade act. People didn't think much about it. Well, not five years later, the [unclear] states was flooded, but pawn shrimp from all over the world. It drove the domestic price of shrimp down to nothing. We couldn't hold it and make ends meet. Then I was on the, uh, national marine shrimp panel advisory back in the 80s, and I read report after report after report where these pond raised shrimp had too much bacteria. They was using so much sodium bisulfate to kill the bacteria in the shrimp. And a lot of people thought they was allergic to shrimp. But it was [inaudible] because they had gone way over what FDA had recommended to kill the bacteria and these pond raised shrimp. But it's been a proven fact Georgia has the best tasting shrimp. We have...a humongous, we don't have but 100 miles of coastline, Georgia coast, it's not but 100 miles long, but for the entire east coast, we have about a third or two thirds of the best estuaries. We have so much marsh grass and so many...uh, brackish water, which seafood needs to, uh, when they come up in to lay their eggs and all this, that they have to have brackish water. And when I say brackish, part salt part fresh water. And that's why we have such abundance or seafood here in state or Georgia.

[08:25] And um, it, uh, been hard to try to protect. And then pollution has been bad too. I've seen it happen over the years because here on the coast...they are developing so much woodlands on rivers and creeks. And then they're building golf courses all over creation. They use so many chemicals on golf courses, and all of that goes into rivers and comes down in the estuary. I've seen a decline of seafood in Georgia over the years, big time. And a fleet of boats because, at one time the state of Georgia was selling about 1,200 license, Georgia license, to commercial shrimp boats to shrimping in the state of Georgia. Now they are lucky of they sell 200, it might not even be that anymore. Didn't, the fleet has just declined and...they include myself over time. We're getting to be few and far between, and we're getting out of it. And the young generations just don't seem to have an interest in this type of life. And um, but they need to educate people a, it's hard work, but you make money. It's hard work. You earn what you make and uh, it, it's a life on your own.

[10:15] And uh, like I say that when he was talking about King's Bay down there in St. Mary's before it was a sub base. That was the most beautiful place on the east coast. They had a beautiful white beach... [unclear] trees hung over the marsh, Spanish moss hanging out of them. It was just something you don't hardly ever see anymore. And uh, the way King's Bay was located, it was an ideal place for shrimp to spawn out. Back when the sounds was opened back in the fifties, you could drag all in there up until they closed the sounds in 1977, I believe it was. Um, the bottom has crusted over, and they can't prove, where the black gill is coming from. But I've bargain with DNR and I'm telling my sister like a farmer if he doesn't cultivate his ground, he's not gonna grow nothing. The bottom in the sounds that used to be

open, we drug them with chains, you know, pick our chains in front of the net on the bottom when we dragging, and we kept the bottom stirred up so seafood could eat. It's been now, what, since '77, that bottom has crusted over. And um, I would like to see them maybe open the sounds back up, for maybe one or two days a week. Limited nets... instead of it being just the way it is right now. I mean, I don't think it's producing like it should. Because I know the shrimp's not here like they used to be.

[12:22] And um, it's a touch and go situation, but um, I think she wrote down there about Cumberland Island. When I was a kid, my dad was a real close friend with a caretaker, and the Carnegie Castle that was on the south end of Jekyll, uh south end of Cumberland. It was unbelievable, how big that thing was. And at the top it had a watchtower. You could go upstairs up to it. And during World War II, the coast guard used to stay over there and go up in that tower looking for German submarines off the coast of Georgia, during World War II. And in 1958, '58 or '59, they caught some people from Fernandino, uh, shooting deer on, uh, Cumberland Island. So, they retaliated. They went over there and set fire to that Carnegie estate. I was standing on a shrimp dock in St. Mary's and it was about 8 miles straight, to the south end of Cumberland Island. And that fire was so intense that I could see the flames eight, six miles away standing on a dock in St. Mary's seeing the flames come up from that castle. And of course, now, nothing but just ruins right now. But um...oh, I'll tell you, I've had a good life, shrimping. I've always, it's something I've always wanted to do. I feel mighty fortunate to be able to do it because people nowadays, you know, are dissatisfied with what they're doing, but I was fortunate to be able to do what I always wanted to do and that was, to be a shrimper. I've enjoyed it. It's been good.

Mpume: Did you grow up in a shrimping family?

Waters: No, like I say now, my dad had two shrimp boats back in the early fifties when I was about 10, 11 years old, and I've been associated with uh, in St. Mary's where I grew up, there was two shrimp docks and a paper mill. And uh, of course, I spent all my time at the shrimp docks, and uh, yes it was part of me. But I enjoyed it. And uh, I've seen shrimping...and I've sold a peak of the shrimping, and now I'm seeing it go to rock bottom. I bought my first shrimp boat in 1969. I paid \$15,000 for it. In 1972, the price of shrimp boats were just, went sky rocket. A man offered me \$60,000 for it in 1972, and I paid \$15,000 in 1969. Everybody wanted to get in the shrimping business. And uh, St. Augustine was known for building shrimp boats. There must have been five different boat yards in St. Augustine, and all they ever built was shrimp boats. And the biggest one, the biggest boat yard, they built over 2,000 shrimp boats in their time, and then when nobody wanted them anymore, and then they went out of business. Um, you might say that's St. Augustine was the shrimp boat building capital of the world. But uh, like I say, I still shrimp today on a small boat, a friend of mine, she had a small boat and when I'm not working on the uh, tour boat, then I go out on their little shrimp boat, still go breathing that salt air and seeing the sunrise and sunset. I don't guess I'll ever get over all that, but I've enjoyed it. I'm telling you, it's been a good one.

Mpume: How would your average day look like? What would it look like on the shrimp boat?

[17:23] Waters: Well, years ago here... you get two or three, 400 pounds a day, and then it just decline. And uh...

Mpume: In terms of working, you basically said sunrise to sunset, were you usually out by sunrise and be back by sunset?

[17:46] Waters: Oh yeah, yeah. We spent some long days, watching the sun come up and watching it go down in the evening. But uh, I've enjoyed it. Well, I guess that's about it, and I hope I didn't bore you too much.

[18:09] Ahmauri: I do have one question. She wanted you mentioned, um, how your grandmother was the first woman to go to GSU.

[18:17] Waters: I think her name, I finally came to me, which Anne Ramsey, and they have a picture of her in the library at Georgia Southern. She was the first female I think ever go to Georgia Southern. All my people grew up in Bulloch county, which is Statesboro and um, that's where most of my relatives were from, Bulloch County. And uh, but I think she was the first 'cause they have in the library, a big picture of her in the library and uh...my brother graduated from Georgia Southern and uh, some of my cousins, they graduated from Georgia Southern and my brother's grandson. He'll graduate next year from Georgia Southern. So that um, Georgia Southern has been a part of the Waters family except for me. I didn't go to that. Like say I had uh, I went to Alabama for a year and then, went shrimping and then, Uncle Sam knocked on my door and changed my life. Sure did.

Ahmauri: So um, what do you hope to see within the next generation in the commercial fishing industry?

[19:49] Waters: The next generation, if something's not changed already, there won't be one. I don't think there will be commercial shrimping. Um, there's too many regulations being put on fishermen nowadays and um, it's just...my personal opinion, I don't think there'll be a fishing industry in Georgia.

Ahmauri: Is there anything you would want, like someone like us, like a consumer or just uh...future generations in fishing to either, take away or learn as whole or implement?

[20:48] Waters: Not really. I just, I just don't see a future in it. I think I, like I say, I saw the heydays of shrimping in Georgia when it peaked, and then now it's um... it's just, every year there's less and less people that's in it, getting in it. And like say the young generation, I know it's not their cup of tea. Uh, so I, I just don't think there's going to be a future. I hope I'm wrong.

Ahmauri: I guess my last question for you is, what's the most rewarding part of your career?

Waters: The rewarding part?

Ahmauri: The most rewarding part.

[21:47] Waters: Well, I was my own boss and um...I think now that I'm old...I think it was a gain and kept my health, by doing what I wanted to do with a peace of mind. And uh, the people that I've met over the years in the shrimping uh...it's been rewarding for that. I guess that's been about it.

[22:25] Ahmauri: Nice. Yes. Do you have any questions for us at all?

Waters: No, not really.

Ahmauri: All right. Well thank you so much again for coming out and talking with us.

[additional recording]

[22:38] Waters: Oh, right. McIntosh County where Charlie Phillips is on the corner, that canal, it run by there, it was very narrow. But this man back in 1954, had built this 80 something foot shrimp boat...and there wasn't enough water in that little canal to float the boat out, even at high tide. So, they went and bought dynamite, and went out there and dug holes in the mud in, along bank of it, and they blew it up and then it stopped the flow of water. Right where the little canal came out, there was a sharp curve into Sapelo river that went on [inaudible] horribly. So, when they dynamited that canal, then the current started running through there, through that canal. And I was up there the other day looking at it and that's about what it would be on the other side of that wall—

Tookes: What is that about 50 feet maybe?

Waters: ...is washed out and it, they say it's 20 feet of water at low tide now there, and it all came from blowing the dynamite, and the canal there, it changed the current of the water and it started going through there, and over the period of years it just kept getting wider and deeper through there.

Tookes: That's amazing.

Waters: Yeah, so you don't mess with Mother Nature when you try to change the flow of water.