

**BAYSHORE CENTER AT BIVALVE**

**DELAWARE BAY MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION**

**DATE:** July 8, 2005

**TIME:** 6:00 pm

**SUBJECT:** MEMORIES OF GROWING UP IN PORT NORRIS

**NARRATOR:** Mr. Lionel Hickman

**LOCATION:** Home of Mr. Hickman

**ATTENDEES:** Mr. Lionel Hickman, Sally Van De Water

**TRANSCRIBED**

**BY:** Pat Moore, Volunteer Delaware Bay Museum

**DATE:** July 15, 2021

**ACCESSION #:** 2005.31

Van de Water 1 ([00:00:02](#)):

Testing. Oh, I think it's working now. Yes, it is. Okay. Excellent. Wow. That was very exciting. Um, this is Sally Van de Water. It is July 8, 2005 Friday evening, about six o'clock. And I'm in the home of Mr. Lionel Hickman, who has been gracious enough to, um, talk about a photo that he saw in one of our exhibits. Mr. Hickman, could I just ask you first to, um, state your full name and where you were born and when you were born, please?

Hickman 2 ([00:00:35](#)):

My full name is Lionel Erskin Hickman. I was born in south Port Norris New Jersey, which is formerly known as Shell Pile. And I was born August 1, 1944, um, at home, uh, with a family doctor who would come out and, uh, do births at home.

Van de Water 1 ([00:00:59](#)):

Excellent. Well, I can, you can keep going, but if you're doing that, um, I have the photo here,. Unfortunately, I don't think we have it . I think what we have is just a photocopy and, um, and this would be information, although I'm really interested. I didn't realize you were from, you were born in Port Norris.

Hickman 2 ([00:01:22](#)):

Yeah. Yes, yes. Actually born and raised there, uh, went to, um, there used to be a little brown school there. It was called brown school. It was a little elementary school that went from kindergarten to the seventh grade. And, uh, it actually, um, the kindergarten school building is now a part of a restaurant that sits on the Maurice river down at Port Norris. You can see it. If you go all the way down at the Port Norris marina, the county wharf. If you look to the left at the county wharf, you will see the kindergarten school house that I went to.

Van de Water 1 ([00:02:01](#)):

Oh, is that the rest of go ahead.

Hickman 2 ([00:02:04](#)):

And I have some, I have some pictures of that, but let me just get them for you.

Van de Water 1 ([00:02:08](#)):

Oh, sure. Of course.

Van de Water 1 ([00:02:09](#)):

Thank you. I apologize.

Van de Water 1 ([00:02:12](#)):

Yes. Was grades two and three Brown school Port Norris

Van de Water 1 ([00:02:16](#)):

Brown school Port Norris New Jersey grades two and three May 12th, 1953 T E. Do you know what the T stands for? Yeah. Okay. That one is 1954. It looks like T E

Hickman 2 ([00:02:33](#)):

T E I don't know, but what we're looking at or we're looking at, um, it's a one room, it's a one room classroom with several grades in it. And, um, that's the way the school was when I went to it. Now, just around from this particular classroom is the, is the kindergarten building, which we were discussing earlier.

Van de Water 1 ([00:03:01](#)):

So how long did you live.... you said you grew up in Port Norris.

Hickman 2 ([00:03:05](#)):

Yes. I grew up in Port Norris.

Van de Water 1 ([00:03:07](#)):

What brought your family to the area?

Hickman 2 ([00:03:09](#)):

Our family came to the area from the Eastern shore of Maryland. My mother is, uh, from St. Michael's near, um, Eastern, Maryland. It's a St. Michael's and Bellville are all in a, in a little cluster of towns there.

And my father is from Crisfield, Maryland. And, um, and what they used to do is they used to follow the oyster season from the Eastern shore of Maryland to, to Southern New Jersey here. And then as the seasons were extended rather than, uh, being migratory, they simply stayed in, in the south Southern New Jersey area. So that's how I got to be. Well, I didn't make the trips, but I was born and raised here in Southern New Jersey, but that's how my parents got here. Okay.

Van de Water 1 ([00:03:59](#)):

And have they retired at the point that you were born, I guess, settled that they'd settled employment?

Hickman 2 ([00:04:05](#)):

They settled in Port Norris. And they worked in the oyster industry. Uh, my father, uh, worked on the oyster boats in his earlier days, um, while they were still under, uh, they weren't under sail at that time, but they were under partial power. They still pull the dredges by hand. And, uh, as he got older, he, he became what is called a skimmer in the oyster house. And the skimmer is the guy who has a big stainless steel ladle. And he floats the oysters in a big, uh, floating tank and skims off any debris or impurities that he might see with the naked eye. My mother was a, a shucker. Uh, she was a, a breaker type shucker, uh, which means she used a cracking iron to break the edge of the oyster and the set into the block, and then, uh, use the knife to finish the opening process. So, uh, that was what they did, uh, uh, until they were probably in their mid forties. And then, uh, my mother got, um, uh, too sickly to work. And my father went to another industry as the oyster industry kind of petered out.

Van de Water 1 ([00:05:25](#)):

What industry did he go into?

Hickman 2 ([00:05:27](#)):

He went to the sand company, sand mining, Jess Mori Sand Company, which is, uh, just the next town north east in Mauricetown.

Van de Water 1 ([00:05:35](#)):

Are your parents still living?

Hickman 2 ([00:05:36](#)):

No, both my parents are gone on now.

Van de Water 1 ([00:05:40](#)):

What memories do you have on about Shell Pile?

Hickman 2 ([00:05:48](#)):

Well, we could call it Shell Pile cause that's dear to me, uh, the biggest memory I have of it is the name itself. Shell Pile got its name, from the huge piles of shells that came from the shucked oysters conveyors would carry them out and just pile them up. And probably some of my earliest memories is, um, playing, um, up and down those huge Hills of shells. Uh, they were like many mountains to us and we would climb up them and, uh, make little nests in them and run down them and, and all those kinds of things. So that's some of my earliest memories of, uh, of, uh, uh, being in South Port Norris. And another thing that we did a lot of was swim, uh, because the Maurice river was there. So everybody was excellent

swimmers that lived, uh, around that time. And we also played on the salt marshes there. Uh, yeah. Uh, one of the big pass times was, uh, jumping the big lead ditches that the salt marsh, uh, farmers, uh, would use almost as, um, uh, plots of salt marshes to, to break up, uh, their different, uh, salt marsh areas. And they would run big lead ditches through that would flood them for certain times and then dry them off for other times.

Van de Water 1 ([00:07:18](#)):

Did you ever work in the industries down there as you, as you came up and, um, you know, summer jobs or anything?

Hickman 2 ([00:07:26](#)):

Uh, I worked in one of the shucking houses, uh, not actually in the opening of the oysters, but I worked, um, uh, after the oysters were packed,. In my teen years, I worked a few, just a few summers, um, loading trucks, but by that time, the industry was on the wane. And so, uh, the actual heart of the work, uh, regimen, I never got to be a part of. Yeah,

Van de Water 1 ([00:07:55](#)):

I am so excited to be talking to you .

Hickman 2 ([00:07:57](#)):

But another one of the early memories that I have is when you would go into the shucking houses, there would be, um, the stacato type noise of, uh, of the breaking and the opening of the oysters. And most of the shuckers had a rhythm. So it was, uh, it was not only, uh, a, um, a, um, a host of different sounds but motion as well. Uh, it was so interesting to, to see them actually work and, uh, and get into a rhythm of, of opening the oyster.

Van de Water 1 ([00:08:36](#)):

We have, um, we have a Bayday /festival each year and we have a shucking contest as part of that Saturday evening. And we only get, we had four competitors this year, but it is incredible. Just the rhythm that everybody develops in the sound of just the four of them was really, I can only imagine a room full of them. Must've been quite a sight.

Hickman 2 ([00:08:54](#)):

It was quite a sight to behold. And of course in those days that I'm talking about most of the, um, the way that the money was made was by the gallons. And they would sort, uh, the oyster as they shucked them into, I think it was four different pots, four grades of oysters. And I think that must have been large, medium and something, and then small, um, and, um, they would be paid by the gallon. And so those who were really, um, uh, fast, uh, made very good money, shucking oysters. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:09:43](#)):

Um, how do you get back to Port Norris often then?

Hickman 2 ([00:09:49](#)):

Yes. My daughter still lives there. Uh, I still have a brother that lives there and other family members that still live in and, uh, they don't live in Shell Pile because Shell Pile is gone. Now, it does not, um, the,

the, uh, workers quarters and the stores and businesses that were once there are all gone now, except for those that are right on the river, which are, I think are just a few smaller shucking houses now. And, uh, and that's basically it, but yes, I still have family in the area. I go probably, excuse me, probably weekly there to, uh, to see family and friends.

Van de Water 1 ([00:10:29](#)):

Oh, great. Excellent. When did you leave?

Hickman 2 ([00:10:36](#)):

I guess when you, well, when I got out of high school, uh, which was in 1963, graduated Millville Senior High School because the school system's in Port Norris and Commercial Township only go to eighth grade and then ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th is in the Millville school system, uh, high school. And so I graduated in 1963, uh, went to trade school, Salem county Technical Institute, um, and became a machinist, went to Air Work Corporation, which is out at the Millville Municipal Airport, which is now owned by the DRB., Delaware River Bay Authority. Um, and I worked my apprenticeship there in the engineering department of the, of the Air Work Corporation.

Van de Water 1 ([00:11:26](#)):

Okay. I guess, go ahead and tell me about this photo.

Hickman 2 ([00:11:30](#)):

The people that I see in this photo is the gentleman who's in the very forefront with the cap on is John Waters is his name. That's my grandfather. He's from Crisfield, Maryland, actually.

Van de Water 1 ([00:11:47](#)):

Interesting. You said this gentleman right here,

Hickman 2 ([00:11:50](#)):

That's John Waters. Yeah. Standing to his left, which would be our right. Looking at the, um, picture, which is a gentlemen in kind of the, uh, more regular type cap, is a, is a fellow by the name of, um, we always knew him as Buster Walker is his name Bus Walker. We always called him, but I don't know his real first name. And that's another interesting little tip. Everyone had nicknames. So we, as children growing up knew most of the people by their nicknames, more so than their, their actual names. Uh, so, uh, it's interesting to see that most of them, um, were, um, were called by nicknames. There is, um, there is one other fellow who is in here who is a cook, who I can just barely see standing all the way to the back.

Hickman 2 ([00:12:57](#)):

Uh he's he's there it is. Oh yeah.

Hickman 2 ([00:13:02](#)):

And I think that's, his name is George Washington. And he would often work as a cook, uh, aboard, uh, the, the boats.. They're the three that jump out at me and, uh, and really seemed to come to life. And, uh, if some of the, uh, other family members were here, they may be able to identify some of the other ones, but they're the ones that, that I know right away.

Hickman 2 (00:13:40):

No, I don't. And I was even trying to see where on the river it might have been because sometimes I could, I could always tell where, uh, certain boats would, would, uh, would lay on the river, but I, I can't really tell. And it's hard to say, because from year to year, they would get berths on different boats. So one season they may work for one boat. Another season, they might work on another boat for, uh, uh, with another group of men. So it was all a matter of time and circumstance and, and which boats they got on. Sometimes the cooks would stay with the same boat, oddly enough. Um, but usually the crews, uh, would change.. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 (00:14:28):

Um, did your grandfather live most of the time in Shell Pile as well? Or did he go back and forth?

Hickman 2 (00:14:34):

No, he lived, uh, once they made the transition to come here and stay, they, they remained, uh, uh, residents of, uh, of New Jersey. And so, um, uh, of course there were probably yearly trips that we would go back home, make back home. Um, but other than that, that most of the time was spent here. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 (00:14:55):

So you grew up, um, really close to your grandma?

Hickman 2 (00:14:58):

Yes. At one point in our lives, uh, we even had great grandparents who were still alive, great grandparents, grandparents. And of course my mother and father, um, probably that ended in the early fifties where we still had, uh, grandparents and mothers and fathers that were alive. So there was a period in my life where three generations were still alive at one time. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 (00:15:27):

Was Mr. Walker, your, um, Mr. Waters, excuse me, your mother's family?

Hickman 2 (00:15:32):

He is my mother's stepfather actually, but he's the only grandfather that I know. I do know my natural grandfather, but John Waters was the, was the grandfather that I grew up in knew to be my grandfather.

Van de Water 1 (00:15:47):

What do you remember about him?

Hickman 2 (00:15:48):

Well, he, first of all, he could not read or write. Um, so he was illiterate from that standpoint, but he was a very good carpenter. Uh, he built his own house, um, uh, which I helped him with. Uh, we tore down chicken coops because the chicken, this used to be, um, besides an oyster industry, the chicken industry was very large here. And then it moved to the Delmarva, Peninsula and Delaware and down that way. So a lot of the chicken farms, which were little chicken coops behind family houses, uh, became useless other than for the lumber that was in them. So they would often be torn down and the lumber used to, um, construct housing.

Hickman 2 (00:16:37):

So I, I helped my grandfather tear down several chicken coops from which we built his first house. Yeah. So even though he couldn't read or write, he, um, he, he had an eye for doing things architecturally and, uh, was able to build a, um, a two bedroom rancher, uh, uh, by himself and with my help. No, no, not this one. This was, this was the, he built it in Port Norris. It's still there. It's on Draxton. Well, James Moore road, it's called down now. And that's where my family house is on James Moore road as well. Yeah. If you turn onto James Moore road off of North Avenue, it would be my brother, Greg Hickman has that big, uh, Cape Cod that sits right on the corner there. And then if you go down James Moore road, the first house on the left would be the family house that we grew up in. Yeah. Uh, not now, it isn't because it's own once, once my parents died, um, the property was sold and now it's owned by, um, others, other people own it.

Van de Water 1 (00:17:57):

Yeah. What, um, going back to this picture and your grandfather, what roles do you think he might've had on onboard ships?

Hickman 2 (00:18:02):

My grandfather, um, probably did, uh, he was probably a deck hand on, uh, one of the ships, um, or on one of the oysterr boats. And, uh, I know that that was, um, the last years of his working on the water, especially that was what he was, he was, uh, he was a typical deck hand, which of course consisted of, of pulling the drugs and pulling the dredges in and, um, uh, doing what they call culling the oysters, which is, uh, separating the oysters from the shells and then stacking them, or either putting them in, in, um, baskets, uh, wire baskets for unloading. Once they got either back into dock or they would sell, if they were out an extended period of time, they would sell to what was called a by boat that would actually come to their boat still in the, in the Maurice River coves and by the oysters. And then they would continue to work the oyster beds, um, and not, and not come into dock. Right.

Van de Water 1 (00:19:13):

How old you think he might've been in the earth?

Hickman 2 (00:19:15):

He was probably in his late thirties, early forties at that time. Yeah. He worked in the oyster industry until they, the oysters petered out, which was probably I'm thinking in the early sixties is when the industry really just could not support itself.

Van de Water 1 (00:19:48):

In the late fifties. And then also is it still went on for a couple of years.

Hickman 2 (00:19:52):

It went on for a while. They still continued to try to plant seed oysters, which generated some work. Uh, they still, um, imported oysters, I think from the Chesapeake bay in Maryland and from some Northern sections, I think Connecticut, Rhode Island up that way that they would, um, bring in shuck out in the, in the houses here because the, uh, the oyster houses were still set up and we're still a going concern. And then after that, he worked in the clam industry because most of the, uh, oyster houses converted over to clam houses, which were, I think they're called quahogs, which are, which are, uh, were surf clams,

which were, um, uh, bought in and, uh, processed, uh, in the old oyster houses after the oyster industry died. So he, he basically worked in the shellfish industry, all of his life.

Van de Water 1 ([00:21:00](#)):

Um, how long, how old was he when he passed? And, um, when, when did he pass?

Hickman 2 ([00:21:06](#)):

He passed? About six years ago. And he was in his eighties. Yeah, he was in his eighties. My grandmother passed a five-year five or six years prior to that. Um, uh, and she worked in the oyster industry also as a, as a shucker. Um, but, uh, my grandfather, John Waters, he, he worked, he retired from Snow Foods Company in Cape May. And that was the last industry he worked in and they were processors of, uh, shellfish and clams. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:21:49](#)):

It has been neat hearing about your personal story and you were, um, you were just graduating high school, which you did Millville, and I think the phone rang and you mentioned the engineering.

Hickman 2 ([00:22:02](#)):

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I went, I went to trade school, Salem County Technical Institute, which was a very highly rated technical school. Um, during that time, the early, uh, sixties and seventies. And, uh, I went, uh, um, for the machinist course there, which is a two year course. And after completing that, I went to the Air Work Corporation, uh, out at the Millville Municipal Airport. They, they overhauled at that time, they were an overhaul airplane engine shop that overhauled basically piston engine, airplane engines. And I worked in the engineering department there, uh, for three or four years. And after serving my apprenticeship there, they were bought out by the Purex company. So say soap company, they bought an airplane engine overhaul shop, and all of the people with low seniority, which included me was laid off. And so at, at that time, I went to, um, a lumber company in Vineland called Jaffe Lumber.

Hickman 2 ([00:23:10](#)):

And I worked at Jaffe lumber for 11 years. And my current boss used to buy doors and windows from Jaffe lumber company, his estimator, um, uh, was ready to retire. And so he offered me a job and that was with Stanker and Galletto, uh, building contractors. And, um, I've been there for 30 years. So I've had three jobs in my life Airwork corporation. Uh Jaffe lumber and Stanker and Gelatto contractors.

Van de Water 1 ([00:23:45](#)):

What does estimator mean?

Hickman 2 ([00:23:45](#)):

I'm an estimator. Yes. An estimator actually figures the cost of structures.

Van de Water 1 ([00:23:53](#)):

Oh, just like it sounds.

Hickman 2 ([00:23:54](#)):



And so whether that's the plan's inspection, In other words, whether that's something that's drawn by an architect, or whether that's something that, um, we, as a company design and build in-house, which mean we w we would, um, we would take the thoughts and ideas of a customer, um, and put that together with an architect and engineer, and then build what's called a turnkey project, which means that, uh, we would, we would find the land, we would design and build the project, and we would turn the keys over to the owner once it's done. And he gives us a nice check in return for doing it.

Van de Water 1 ([00:24:39](#)):

It's like doing a puzzle, but the other way,

Hickman 2 ([00:24:44](#)):

Yeah, a design bill work is relatively new. Um, it's the work traditionally done is always done through an architect. The end customer would go to an architect who would design his project, and then generally, um, be a means of putting that out for bid where several contractors would bid on that work. And of course the lowest responsible bidder would, would get the project. With design build. Uh, you sort of cut the competition out and you and the owner and the architect and engineers, uh, form a team to bring the project in. So, uh, usually it's done, uh, at a cost plus basis. And, um, even sometimes, uh, if we, um, exceed, uh, the profit margin than we would even give back some to the, to the owners. So it's a nice, it's a nice, uh, way of building a project and not having competition. Right.

Van de Water 1 ([00:25:51](#)):

Do you have any historic restoration work, cause our shipping sheds need it, but we're in the process of restoring those shipping sheds, which I'm sure you're more than familiar with.

Hickman 2 ([00:26:04](#)):

I've probably been on, I have been on those sheds or is it the ones that come right down to the river? Yeah,

Van de Water 1 ([00:26:09](#)):

Yeah. We have, um, I guess of the 32 original ones of the 26 of whatever number there are, I think there were, there are so many, no, I know of the 26 of the 32 remaining ones. We have seven, we have seven of the sheds anyway mentioned, but, um, most of them are still alive and we have seven of them all down to the end, um, down to the south end, except for the very last one is still off marina has that. Right. So that's currently where we have our Delaware bay museum. And, um, we're actually looking to, um, well obviously we wanna expand that museum and, um, bringing new exhibits. And part of my work with oral histories is doing rosters with people like yourself, who are familiar with the area and have family experiences there and to highlight those experiences. And so that's one of our projects when we're, I think it's, it's in the planning process now, and we'd have to go to, um, land review board in the township and get approval for the site plan and everything else. They're like, isn't that alphabets. Cause you know, as rain comes in to seal, I shudder like, oh, when's this restoration.

Hickman 2 ([00:27:24](#)):

You got to get this done. Yeah. Yeah. Hmm. Well, if we can help you anyway, don't hesitate to call. I'll give you my card before you leave, where you leave. Yeah. Yeah. I'm just looking here and I'm trying to see this almost looks like this boat is under sail. It looks like I see a sail reefed in, and if that is the case, this is probably very near the end of the time when sail was used. Although the boat that's sitting in the

background does not appear to have sails, but this one seems to have a sail reef in all the way to the right-hand side of the picture. Um,

Van de Water 1 ([00:28:23](#)):

Now on the back of that photo, you can see there's, um, some writing and that's what we've been given. Also do any of those names familiar to you? And again, how accurate this information is? I don't know. We don't know where we got this photograph. So that's so interesting.

Hickman 2 ([00:28:52](#)):

Well, captain Norman Robbins, I've heard his name over the years. Of course the Robbins family was one of the, um, premier, um, uh, owners of, uh, boats and, and oyster houses. In fact, there was a company called Robbin Brothers, which had an, an oyster house, which was, uh, one of the oyster houses that I remember, uh, Otis Davis standing right of the captain. Yeah. See who I called Bus Walker they're saying that that's Otis Davis. So the captain is this John seated. That's who I take it to be. If I'm reading the back of the photo,

Van de Water 1 ([00:29:59](#)):

Unless it's in, as you look at the photo to the right,

Hickman 2 ([00:30:04](#)):

It could be the other gentlemen and the Otis Davis. I, I do not know that name. There is a Davis family in Port Norris who I know, uh, worked in the oyster industry, but an Otis Davis, I am not, uh, uh, familiar with now the man with the apron was the cook. That's Bus Walker. That's who I'm saying. Okay. So that's exactly right. So he might, he may have been a cook. I never knew what his function on the ship was. So this could have been, it could have been, this looks like too large of a crew for a boat because I'm counting two, four, six, eight, 10, 12, 14, 16 men with the captain. That seems like a very large crew for a boat. So this could have been, um, uh, in the spring of the year because they seem fairly lightly clad. Although some of them have long sleeves and vest in the sweater on, so it could have been in the spring of the year when they were, uh, seeking, uh, work on one of the, on one of the boats.

Hickman 2 ([00:31:18](#)):

So that may have been why that's that many people in one, on one, uh, on one vessel there. Now on the back second mate, next to the cook. Now the second mate next to the cook could have been not necessarily my grandfather, but maybe it's that guy in the back in the, in the cap, which might be more correct because he doesn't look like he's African American, this guy in the cap, which usually the captain and the first mate, we're not, uh, we're not African American they were usually Caucasian [inaudible] and see this picture shows it a little bit better. So I I'm thinking that if he was the first mate it's probably that fella in the cap that's behind. I see. Okay.

Van de Water 1 ([00:32:20](#)):

Would it be unusual for a second mate to be an African American?

Hickman 2 ([00:32:23](#)):

It would be highly unusual at, during this period. Yes, it would have been. And, um, Robin Robbins and I don't know her, uh, yes, that's usually the way it was usually the, the captain and the first mate, um,

were, um, were Caucasian. And then the balance of the crew, um, uh, would have been African American, although some of the, um, some of the, uh, crewmen got to be pretty good seamen themselves, they would actually, uh, run the boat, uh, quite physically while the captain did whatever else he wanted to do. So some of them got to be some pretty good, uh, sea captains themselves. Uh, and of course they knew the bay and the oyster beds as well as the, as the captain and the first mate.

Van de Water 1 ([00:33:21](#)):

Now I have heard, it's something I have to track down, but I have heard of, um, one gentlemen, when African American gentleman who was captain of an oyster schooner.

Hickman 2 ([00:33:33](#)):

Yeah. His name is Upshur Cecil Upshur, is that it?

Van de Water 1 ([00:33:39](#)):

I'm actually completely forgetting it.

Hickman 2 ([00:33:40](#)):

So, Cecil Upshur, he actually was now there was other, there was during my childhood one African American captain, he stayed on Quail Drive in Port Norris. His name was McBride. Uh, he owned his own boat. Oh, wow. He, um, he, uh, he, uh, ran his own business as far as, as the selling and the, um, uh, distribution of oysters. And in fact, I graduated with his son, Ronnie McBride. Um, but, uh, he was one of the only black captains that I ever remember. Uh, Cecil Upshur was the other one who is still alive now, Mr. McBride died. I think he died in, in a, in a, um, in a water related accident, uh, on the Delaware Bay, uh, on one of his boats, uh, Cecil Upshur captained an oyster boat for one of the other, uh, oyster concerns on the river, but he was a black captain and, uh, he is still alive today. And I think he lives right now in one of the high rises here in Millville. Yes. Yeah. Uh, I don't know if he would have a phone. I could probably run down some people that he knows or that know him. Um, and maybe get that information for, you know, yeah. I could do that is

Van de Water 1 ([00:35:15](#)):

One of my big, the big pushes that my director has given me is to really look, especially at the African American contributions to oyster industry. Cause it's been so overlooked, a lot of literature and a lot of well, literature, especially that there is on the oyster industry. Um, so that's one of our big exhibit focuses and we really want to look at the contributions.

Hickman 2 ([00:35:36](#)):

One of the other, going back to one of the other, um, things that I remember, um, about, uh, my parents working in the oyster industry, my father, when he became a skimmer, as I mentioned earlier, one of the things that would be left over in the skimming tanks as the oysters would float would be the, um, uncultured pearls that would come out of the Delaware bay. And there was a time that I had a oyster gallon can full of them, but I, I do not have them now. I think I know where they may be. And if I can, if I can find them, I would be more than happy to donate or contribute some to, to your organization. So these are things that I kept for a long time, but as the industry died out, they kind of got broken up and separated during different family members.

Hickman 2 ([00:36:29](#)):

So I'll have to do a search that way to see if in fact they are still around. But I can remember as a child, we would, we would play with them that we would pour them out on the floor and we would just make different designs with them, but they were all, um, not very good, always irregular and odd shaped, um, pearls from the, from the Delaware Bay oyster. Yeah. Yes, it was. We just thought they were hideous looking like they almost look like little marble stones or something like that. But, uh, there was a time when my mother actually had a piece of jewelry that my father had made for her out of, out of that, which is long since gone. I haven't seen that for years. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:37:20](#)):

Um, did you ever hear of a Port Norris day in Crisfield

Hickman 2 ([00:37:27](#)):

In Crisfield a Port Norris day? No, I have not. Okay.

Van de Water 1 ([00:37:31](#)):

I've heard of it. And I, um, there's a gentleman who, um, is a real, tremendous community scholars name James Lane, and he's very active in researching, um, the Crisfield oystering and well and shellfish industry and especially the, um, the migratory families that went back and forth. And he's done research on, that specifically. He's also did a lot of research in african american (inaudible). I think his parents were either in the oyster industry or something, of the maritime (inaudible) and I'm of course I'm blanking again. But, um, so he's done some research on that and I was wondering if you might have heard of it.

Hickman 2 ([00:38:09](#)):

I haven't heard of that, but I can check it out because I have links in Crisfield. So I could, I could check that out. I could find out kind of the origin of it and what went on. I haven't gone back, uh, recently, uh, sad to say. Usually the only times we do go back now is maybe, uh, for a funeral for a family member simply because what are existing now are, uh, uh, second and third cousins. Um, and just a few of the real old timers now who are up in years and not in good health. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:38:58](#)):

Can you think of other people that I should track down and talk to you? Um, Mr.Upshur.....,

Hickman 2 ([00:39:04](#)):

Uh, Cecil Upshur of course he he's the one, uh, another man who lives right in Port Norris right today on, uh, Melbourne Lane. It is, which is, uh, Paul Melbourne who had sons who has a son who played professional ball, came up with the Seattle Mariners. Uh, but Paul Melbourne, uh, and in that little enclave that he lives on Melbourne Lane are, other people who worked in the oyster industry. As you turn into Melbourne Lane, he would be the first trailer on the left. And usually you'll find him setting in the door of his trailer, watching what goes on. So if you ever pulled down there, you would say, this is a place cause he's probably setting in the door of his trailer watching. Yeah. So that's the name that I know, um, who, uh, in fact they shucked oysters up until probably five years ago because they would still just bring a few oysters in and they would still have to have people who knew how to shuck them out to do that. So, um,

Van de Water 1 ([00:40:21](#)):

Yeah, I don't think anybody's shucking oysters anymore now.

Hickman 2 ([00:40:25](#)):

Not anymore, no.....

Van de Water 1 ([00:40:25](#)):

Just (Paxman Hillblom ??) does something, but....

Hickman 2 ([00:40:28](#)):

It's probably mechanized or something.

Van de Water 1 ([00:40:30](#)):

Maybe it is. Maybe there's a few,

Van de Water 1 ([00:40:35](#)):

Maybe only check a couple times a week, but not, not very much (inaudible)

Hickman 2 ([00:40:44](#)):

I'm just trying to think of some other names, which will probably come to me after you leave, but I'll write them down and, and, and, and I'll get that kind of information to you. Most of the people that I knew in the industry and especially those in my family, uh, have, uh, passed on now. So they're, they're no longer with us. Um, but there are a, still a few old timers that are around that are still in the Port Norris area. I see them from time to time. Yes.

Van de Water 1 ([00:41:16](#)):

I know the Whittington. Well, the Whitting (inaudible) I know I've met Phil and Donald actually Phil and Donald we're in heavy competition. The second contest I have to tell you that, um, there is a bit, um, it's not a time what's time that they have 25 oysters at, just start with Nick. Well, Phil came in second for speed. And after the count of oysters was taken,, he only had 24. So it was this big, you know, so anyway, it was really, it was actually really quite heartbreaking for him cause he was, you know, upset, but as, as a, as a spectator was quite an interesting thing to watch.

Hickman 2 ([00:41:59](#)):

Now as an interesting point as kind of, as a caveat to that is that most of the fast shuckers that I remember were female, that the women were always faster. The ones that really had the ability to do it, where most of them were faster than, than the men. Why do you think that is? Uh, I think it's a natural thing that women, um, have been blessed with to, to have a faster dexterity, uh, than men. And I think that's probably what plays the part. And I think their concentration is better than a man first place, Verna, I forget her name actually,

Van de Water 1 ([00:42:42](#)):

But I'm running one first place this year, actually in both speed and presentation.

Hickman 2 ([00:42:47](#)):

So that, that doesn't, and, and usually they're just, as you just said, usually their oysters were cleaner and there were less cuts and nicks than a man's oyster.

Van de Water 1 ([00:42:59](#)):

Right. I was amazed when I saw this finished oysters that just, you know, how fast they have gone and yet how unblemished they were, they weren't cut. They weren't even, there were a couple of them, but those are the exceptions. It was really incredible.

Hickman 2 ([00:43:12](#)):

Yeah. The, uh, oyster houses that I remember, of course, Robbin Brothers had an oyster house. Uh, the Garrison family had an oyster house. The name that comes to my mind is Shake Garrison, who was the proprietor of that oyster house. Then there was the largest oyster house that was in South Port Norris was called the big house. And that burnt the original big house burnt, I think around 1958, tremendous fire gutted the building. It was rebuilt. It was still called the big house, but it was nowhere in size. Um, the way that it was. And I can remember part of the concrete slabs, we used to roller skate on them because it was never rebuilt. So it, it, the only concrete that was in Shell Pile was those slabs from those buildings, which we used to roller skate on, uh, afterschool. Uh, and then there was another oyster house that was owned by the Bowden family.

Hickman 2 ([00:44:18](#)):

And that was down in what was called at that time New Bay's. New Bay's was just a little development down on the east side, Southeast side of Shell Pile it's down now where I think, um, Kings, I think the King family has some kind of establishment there, but that was, um, uh, Buddy Bowden had, uh, uh, had an oyster house down there and boats, uh, also, um, Carl, um, can't think of his name right now, but there was another oyster house down there, smaller houses, nothing on the size of Dubois or Robbins or the big house, but smaller kind of, um, uh, competitive type, smaller oyster houses. Um, but they're, they're kind of the houses that I remember that, uh, were in the industry that at that time. Probably in its hay day, I would probably say there was a community of 2,500 people there all African American, uh, there was one, uh, caucasian, the store owned by Ted Reeves, which was a, um, a grocery store.

Hickman 2 ([00:45:49](#)):

It had, uh, it had virtually everything in it. We used to just love to go there. And, uh, of course, uh, what we would call uptown, which is center city, Port Norris now, uh, there was of course a movie theater. It was called the Colonial Theater. Um, there were two, um, dry goods stores there. One was called Kellbergs (sp??) . They were actually department stores. You could buy clothing and one was Kellbergs and the other one was Godown Less, Godown's store, uh, Izzy, Goldblatt owned another, um, grocery store and ice house, in Port Norris at that time. And, uh, there was a Davis furniture store across the street from him. There was a black smith shop owned by the Pearson family also there that did, um, uh, smithing work for the, uh, industry as well as for other things, uh, several gas stations.

Hickman 2 ([00:46:54](#)):

There was a car dealership at one time, a Chevrolet car dealership owned by the Grace family in Port Norris. So in South Port Norris and Shell Pile probably was a community of 2,500 people, but, um, the whole town of Port Norris, oh, maybe 25, 30,000 people. In it's hay day. Yeah. Uh, there was a racetrack there, sulky racetrack in Port Norris at one time, um, which later they turned into a little league ball field, but we would go to the sulky races. Uh, there was also a, uh, a train station in Port Norris that

actually ran, uh, from, um, Port Elizabeth, uh, down the river to, um, through Port Norris. I think there was a spur that went on across to, I think finally over to Maurice River where there was actually another oyster house, which I'm not familiar with. Although I know that many of the people in Shell Pile worked in that oyster house across the river. And I think it was a Pennsylvania Seashore Lines was the rail line at that time. Uh, but it had a station house and we would often ride the train rails from Port Norris to Port Elizabeth and back. And of course that was without paying a fee, cause we would steal rides on it, which is not a safe thing to do.

Hickman 2 ([00:48:35](#)):

And our parents didn't know we were doing that. That was one of the dangerous things. The other dangerous things that we used to do was right on the river. And the river used to be linked by what were called floats. They were, they were actually huge wooden poles that had boardings across them, uh, that were used to float the oysters oftentimes. And what we would do is, um, some of them were so close that you could jump from float to float and go almost the whole length of that river from Bivalve all the way up to where Matts Landing is. Now, you could just about run that whole distance from float to float. And sometimes the distances were so wide until if you missed the jumps, you would end up under a float. And I can remember during my lifetime, um, several young men dying. They would, uh, either hit their heads or get caught in the tide and get under the floats and whoever they were with the group of kids were probably so frightened that they just didn't tell anybody.

Hickman 2 ([00:49:44](#)):

And so usually it was too late when they were found, but I can remember two incidences of that, uh, from float jumping is what we used to call it, um, which was kind of a dangerous practice to do. But yeah, it's dangerous. The dangerous part was not so much that you couldn't make the jump, but oftentimes those floats would go, would go underwater at high tide. So they always had a slick Moss on them and you just couldn't get your footing to make the jump. So oftentimes if you slipped just a little bit, that was enough to not make the jump complete. So, uh, but so they, they were some of the things that kids did. Uh, and of course, as I said, swimming was what we did most. Um, we would dive off of the pilings that the boats were tied up too. Sometimes if we could get up on the mass of the boats, we would dive. The other things is that most of the oysters had, uh, covered docks. And we would get on top of the roughs of the cupboard docks and run and make a dive into the river, hoping to clear the dock, which again was not a safe thing to do

Van de Water 1 ([00:50:56](#)):

What tied it was and how deep did the realm.

Hickman 2 ([00:51:03](#)):

They probably didn't know we were ever doing those things, but most of us, um, got through it safe and sound. Yes. Yes, absolutely. Okay. So that's kind of what I remember right now and

Van de Water 1 ([00:51:22](#)):

Well, I thank you so much for your time. This is great. I know as soon as I step out of your door, I will think of 5,000 more questions. So I'll have to get that list together and come back some time with

Van de Water 1 ([00:51:36](#)):

You and what I'll do, what I've done. And I have it at work is I've sketched an actual layout of the buildings and the little streets that were in Shell Pile. So, um, and I keep adding to it as, as I remember little things, I have the names of people who lived in the buildings that I remember. So I'll share that with you as well. Yeah. Wow. Glad to do that

Van de Water 1 ([00:52:11](#)):

Millville that it's in the basement of the post office that day. I can't believe this. This is amazing.

Hickman 2 ([00:52:15](#)):

Well, anytime I see anything with a schooner or a sloop or a boat or water, or, or posts with a Sea gull setting on top of it, or even a, what we would call a marsh cigar, which is one of the marsh reeds that grow up that I have to, I have to stop and yeah. Oh, I'm sorry. So I'll be in touch and as things now that you've kind of regenerated my thinking about all of this I'll, I'll write down and, and share as many names and places and things as I can with you. That'd be more than happy. Okay.

Van de Water 1 ([00:53:06](#)):

Thank you very much. I like that. This is a better quality one. I'd like to give you that to have. Um, and then, uh,

Hickman 2 ([00:53:22](#)):

My mother in law is here now. She, she has Alzheimer's in fact, she's in the back room, but as is the case, many times her, she worked in the oyster industry. She was one of the fast ones, asked the women. And, uh, in fact, uh, one of the men who is that one of the men who touted themselves as being the fastest, she ran him off of her shucking box because she had, she always shocked him that day. And that was kind of a, uh, like a badge of honor because she gained notoriety for doing that. And, uh, I'll share this with her. She may even recognize some of the people in here that I, that I don't know. That's my mother-in-law, that's my wife's mother. Yes. Ardell Tarleton, T a R L T O N. Ardell Tarleton. Yeah. Now she's from the, um, she's from, uh, Northumberland County in Virginia. So she's a Virginia girl. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:54:31](#)):

That's not on the northern neck.

Hickman 2 ([00:54:33](#)):

I think it is near the, yeah, I think it is near the, near the Northern

Van de Water 1 ([00:54:37](#)):

No, strong maritime tradition their traditions have been through (inaudible)

Hickman 2 ([00:54:44](#)):

And her husband, Fred Tarleton, he was a cook. He was probably noted as one of the best cooks in, in the Maurice River fleet. In fact, for even years after that, uh, he would cook for gunning clubs because many of the, many of the men knew his ability, his cooking ability. He just died recently. So, he started an industry. He was the first one who did eeling, he caught eels in the Maurice River. He designed his own pots and his own floats. And for years he had, he had the market cornered, but of course that



doesn't stay secret for long. So, um, but, uh, he was called the eel man. So in fact, he used to have his truck when that was on the side of his truck. But, uh, again, making, uh, making a living from the waters, Maurice River waters. Yeah, no, it's not hard work, very laborious work. Um, sunup to sundown, literally. Um, I had a lot of, um, family members who did tonging, uh, with their Garveys and, uh, of course they would, their catches, they would come in and sell to the oyster houses along the river. And most of the time it'd be six, eight... I believe if they got six or eight bushels a day, that was pretty good tonging. And, uh, so that was kind of, uh, interspersed with, uh, with their working aboard the larger boats as well. Yeah.

Hickman 2 ([00:56:27](#)):

Thank you. No, this is, I was just going to mention another memory that I have of Shell Pile, of course, um, during its hay day with the ability to make so much money, either in the oyster houses or on the oyster boats, because most of the oyster boats were on shares. So whatever the boat would get, the men would get an, a whatever share they worked at with the captain. So there was a lot of money that floated around Shell Pile, not only from the standpoint of what the oyster houses and the boat captains made, but from what the workers made. And so oftentimes, um, on Fridays from Friday till Sunday morning, um, it was like the Barbary coast. I mean, there were speakeasies and drinking matches and fights and card games and gambling, um, uh, pop

Van de Water 1 ([00:57:44](#)):

[inaudible]. Okay.

Hickman 2 ([00:57:46](#)):

So often you'd hear the big story of who made the big monies or who got in a fight over a certain situation. And there were actual actual killings that were, were not, uh, that were not out of the norm to hear that someone died that weekend from, from an altercation or a fight that they were in over a card game or some gambling adventure that they had taken up over that weekend. And then of course, um, Sunday, it was a big, a big drive to get yourself together because they knew the oyster boats would be going out early Monday morning. So, uh, so that was another thing that was always kind of exciting to us. There were a lot of speakeasies, uh, a lot of places that had what we called a Piccolo's, but they were, uh, they were no more than jukeboxes is what they were, what we call them Piccolo's. So there was always music floating through the air, always activity sounds that, uh, were very raucous sounds, uh, that I grew up with that, uh, that I still hear in my head. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([00:58:57](#)):

Did you ever think about going outside of Port Norris or they're making fun or mostly.....

Hickman 2 ([00:59:03](#)):

There was, there was so much activity on that little, probably one square mile that, uh, nobody wanted to leave. There was no reason to leave. They had all the activity. Um, most of the times the police never bothered anybody there. And that was serviced by the state police barracks, which is I think now in Haleyville. Um, but, uh, at that time they were on the outskirts of Port Norris and unless something really, really bad happened, um, they didn't bother anybody, I suppose they were, I don't know if they were being paid off or what, but Port Norris had a sheriff, his name was Riggins. Bill Riggins was the sheriff. And he knew all of these men because his family was in the oyster industry. And oftentimes if

they got into trouble, he was instrumental in getting them out of job or out of jail, so they could get back to their jobs.

Hickman 2 ([01:00:00](#)):

So all of that kind of intriguing stuff went on that politicking went on. So all of that was kind of the flavor of a, kind of a naughty, nice type flavor of, of what I grew up in. Yeah. So, and it was a nice time because even though it was a rough environment, uh, the community did stick together. Everybody knew everyone. Uh, so the community helped raise you as a child and there was respect for the, for the older people. Um, no delinquency, as I recall it ever to during my child years, uh, there were no race problems during my child years at that time, other than, other than what I mentioned on the boats, the captains were the captains and the and the mates were the mates and that line wasn't crossed. But we went to school with Caucasian people, we played together. Um, and that was the way it was from the forties, fifties, and sixties. When I grew up there were never any racial problems, uh, not ever. Um, and, and so it was really kind of a utopian kind of society. I grew up in not to say that everything was was nice, but, um, uh, from that standpoint it really was, it was kind of a melting pot that worked, uh, for the good of, of an industry, which was the oyster. Yeah.

Van de Water 1 ([01:01:31](#)):

Yeah. Any African Americans live up in what I would call center Port Norris?

Hickman 2 ([01:01:35](#)):

Very few, I feel that there were some who lived on, it was a little new development called Quail Drive. And that's where that Mr. McBride, who was a boat captain lived, but, uh, generally, uh, and then there were some who lived on, uh, what's it called? There was another little street on, on North Avenue that there were some Black families, but mostly, uh, the Black state in South Port Norris and the caucasian families lived in central Port Norris where the town of Port Norris. And of course there were some grand houses that were there. Some or some relics of them are still still left, but there were some really incredible buildings there. Some have been torn down, some have burned down, a few of them still exist. Yeah. Yeah. So that's kind of it. Thank you. That's great.