

Interview with Peyton Mason, commercial fisherman

Occupation: Commercial fisherman

Port Community: Deep Creek, Virginia

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

Date and year: January 16, 2019

Location: Newport News, Virginia

Project: The Graying of the Fleet Part II: How and Why Young Fishermen Choose to Fish?

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. It's January 16 in Newport News, Virginia, and I'm with Peyton Mason. Peyton, could you please state your occupation for the audio?

Payton Mason [PM]: I'm Peyton Mason. I'm a self-proclaimed commercial fisherman.

SS: [laughter] Is that a fulltime or a part-time endeavor for you?

PM: I've been a full time fisherman, as in paying all my adult bills, for two years. It's been a hobby and a part-time job since I was in middle school, about thirteen or fourteen.

SS: Where is your homeport?

PM: Currently Deep Creek, Virginia, which is on the James River in the Chesapeake Bay. It is the second most popular oyster port in Virginia. That's primarily the fishery that I participate in.

SS: You say primarily. Do you have other places that you fish out of?

PM: Yes. In Virginia, the way that the oyster program is set up, we open different rotational areas that allow us to harvest when the crop is ready. We move around depending on where the areas are open, but primarily in the James River.

SS: What boat do you have?

PM: I have a thirty-six-foot Chesapeake Bay deadrise, wooden hull, called the Emilie Virginia, that I purchased about six months ago.

SS: Congratulations.

PM: I'm kind of proud of that. She's not much, but she's mine! [laughter]

SS: How old are you?

PM: I'm twenty-three.

SS: My final biographical question is what's your educational background?

PM: I graduated from West Point High School in 2013. I went to Virginia Commonwealth University to study business management degree, and I'm still currently enrolled there. I go to class at night.

SS: You're taking evening classes and working as a waterman during the day?

PM: That's right. I took a break because I was a fulltime student and I wanted to pursue a fishing career, so I left and did it. Now I realize the importance of a degree, so I've been going back for a little while now. But I'm doing it at my leisure. I'm a full time fisherman, part-time student. That works out pretty good for me. Is [the recording] on?

SS: Yes.

PM: My father and my grandfather were kind of watermen. He used to joke that when he was my age, my mama wanted to eat everyday, so he couldn't be a waterman. He had to go get a real job, so there was a little bit of a lapse there. I got my start when I was thirteen or fourteen. Dad and I were at the dock and we saw a boat come in with thirty bushels of crabs, and the captain just looked like a hero. He looked like Hercules on top of his prize. So I figured out right then and there that's what I wanted to do.

SS: Did you know him or was he a stranger?

PM: Just a stranger.

SS: So that vision of that stranger made a lasting impact on you?

PM: Oh, yes! Yes. Yes. That's all I talked about! From there, I started in the summertime. I set my first crab pots after eighth grade summer. I sold to a local campground. It just grew and grew and grew. Eventually, I worked for a couple people to learn the knowledge they had. Didn't really make any money. I'd still probably be working for them today if I could, but they didn't pay me enough. I went to college, and then, like I mentioned to you, I actually left school. I needed some capital to build up my business. My goal was a hundred fifty crab pots. In laymen's terms, that's about six thousand dollars worth of equipment to go blue crabbing. So I went up to New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island to work construction to save up enough to buy that. Then I went to work that spring, crabbing. I didn't really make any money. I found that my start was really a slow start. It was very organic. I didn't have any seed money from parents or anything. I took what I had, and then my first goal was a boat. I got a fiberglass little Privateer. I fixed her up, redid the floor, put a new motor on her,

and then worked her over in the James River for one year, shaft tonging. I found a lot of success shaft tonging. In laymen's terms, we use about sixteen- to fourteen-foot salad tongs that we use to pluck the oysters up off the bottom. I found a lot of success in that, because to me it's the American dream. The harder you work, the more you make. At the end of the day, when you look in the hold of your boat, all that's in there is what you put in there with your own two hands. I found a lot of success in that. By and by, in the summertime, I've worked in a couple of other fisheries, just to kind of broaden my horizon. I've found that I had such a passion for working the water that I wanted to try everything. I was able to make a few scallop trips, which was a really cool experience. I went shrimping down in Pamlico Sound. Fishing here in Chesapeake Bay. We use an old-style haul seine to catch spot and croaker fish. I really enjoyed that, Sarah. We would run the net out at night and then wait to the low tides, so we'd spend the night out on Chesapeake Bay, sleeping in the hold of the boat.

[05:48]

SS: In those cases, you were working as a crew for other people?

PM: Yes, ma'am. If I could break it down, I've been self-employed as a crabber and an oysterman, and I've been a crewman as a shrimper, scalloper, and fisherman, is a fair way to say it.

SS: Some of that was in Pamlico Sound?

PM: Yes, ma'am. I made a shrimp trip down in North Carolina. Funny story about that, since we're talking about that. I was scalloping one day, cutting away. The mate was from North Carolina, and he was like, "Man, if you want something to do, you should go down shrimping. Just go down Friday or Saturday, ask for a job." He says, "Somebody's gotten fired or somebody's quit, so you'll be able to find a job." So that's what I did. I got off the scallop boat, I drove down to Oriental, North Carolina, I got a hotel room, and just hung out and went to the dock the next morning and kept asking. "Hey, can I go with you? Hey, can I go with you?" And somebody finally took me. I would say that was driven out of passion, not out of money. I didn't go down planning to make money. It was just something that I wanted to do.

SS: Why did that particular fishery draw you so much?

PM: Because I hadn't done it before. To this day, I'm personally in a transitional point, where I've tried a lot of stuff but I don't know where I want to make my lasting effect. I don't want to be in the Chesapeake Bay forever, I don't think. The shrimping industry, from what I can see, is very open to newcomers. It's not expensive to buy a boat and to go to work. In Virginia, there are high barriers of entry as far as getting licenses. Most of the licenses are moratorium, so you have to buy somebody out. In North Carolina, it's the same way, but you just have to buy the commercial fishing license, and then you can do anything you want.

SS: It's really multipurpose.

PM: Exactly. It's really exciting. There really aren't a whole lot of limits to it. Of course, Mother Nature has her limits, but like I mentioned with the American dream, something that

drives me is being able to work harder than anybody else. That's something that really gets me going. To speak on that, what really drives me—I'm really jumping all around here—when I was in college, I had to do an interview with an entrepreneur. I said, "Hmm, this is a great opportunity for me to meet somebody in the fishing industry that I otherwise wouldn't get a chance to meet with." So I wrote down a list of people. There were two that I thought of, Sarah. One was a guy that owns a fishing fleet of scallop boats. He's a fisherman. The other was a retail store owner. He owns a couple of processing facilities for oysters and crabs. I decided, "Well, I'll interview both, and whichever one's better, I'll write the paper on them." That was a great way for me to get some insight from people in my industry that have been very successful. Each of them gave me a word of advice that's really stuck with me. One is, "Don't let anybody work harder than you." Two is, "Relationships are everything in our industry." I found that to be true, because the oyster, crab, fish, salmon that you catch today doesn't matter tomorrow. The only thing that matters is your reputation, how you help people and how they help you, because in the fishing industry, nothing's easy. You're going to need somebody to help you along eventually. Those two words have really stuck with me. I would say they're probably the principles of my fishing mentality.

SS: Do you have a story that illustrates that?

PM: Oh sure. Oh my Gosh, absolutely. Like I said, my first boat was a teeny boat that I went shaft tonging, and I had one crewmember. I caught the oysters. He sorted through them. Well, we were working right off here in the James River one day, and it was pretty nasty. I'd say two- or three-foot waves. Twenty or thirty mile an hour, which is a lot in a twenty-foot boat. Well, there were big boats all around me going away, coming back to the creek. My mate looked at me, and he said, "They're going in. Why can't we?" I said, "God darn it, Harry Junior wouldn't go in. Neither are we!" Harry Junior was the most badass son of a gun that ever fished in the James River. They say Hell couldn't hold him back. So I said, "Darn, if he won't go in, neither am I!" That sort of mentality. We always say here, "You go and let the wind blow you back." Always go to work. Even if you don't think you can go, at least come down here and go to work. Was that a good enough story?

SS: Yeah. That was a good story! [laughter] Ok, so back up a little. Tell me about the scalloping.

[10:44]

PM: Bill Mullis, the guy I was telling you about that I interviewed, he owns a few scallop boats. I met with him. We talked. We chatted. He was really impressed. He followed me on Facebook. He really knew what was going on. He was like, "If you want to, here's the captain's number. Go pursue it." He didn't get me a job on a scallop boat. He just gave me a connection with a captain. I got myself a job. I went and talked to him. I said, "Hey look, I've never been before. I don't care how much money I make. I just want to go. I just want to go." He said, "Alright, we'll take you." I went, and I got some experience. It was pretty good. The hardest part for me was being left-handed. Everybody else on the boat was right-handed, but I was a leftie. I've made a few trips. I made one trip on Easter. A few months went by. I went back oystering. I'd actually set some crab pots, and Sarah, I was catching the heck out of crabs. I mean, I was having big weeks. The scallop boat captain said, "Hey, somebody get hurt. We got a spot open. Do you want to go?" I said, "Yeah, I'll go." So I went and made two trips. We went out for a month, and that was pretty cool. I still had a hard

time getting my numbers up, because I'm still kind of slow. But I made a connection. We have private oyster leases in the James River, and I work somebody's private oyster lease, and he's really impressed with how productive and how hard I work. I worked it every day, sunup to sundown. He's a scallop boat captain, so I'm supposed to go with him, and I've been talking to some left-handed cutters. I'm going to give it another shot.

SS: Where were you going?

PM: We left out of little boat harbor here in Newport News, and we worked—I couldn't tell you the areas, I sure don't remember—I know we worked a couple of different areas. Nantucket Lightship on my second round of trips, and we also worked close to the Canadian line.

SS: Oh, way up there?

PM: Yeah. Oh, and man, New Bedford, Massachusetts! Have you been there?

SS: Yeah, I live near there.

PM: That's a great place! That was a good time. It was a good experience. It was really cool. The best thing I've got to say about scallop boats is I was really impressed with the crew that I worked with. They were very encouraging. They didn't try to beat you down, and I really enjoyed that.

SS: Who were the rest of the crew? Were they also local, from around here?

PM: No. That particular captain was very successful, and he had a following of crew that he took with him wherever he went. Do you want their names, addresses?

SS: [laughter] No, no.

PM: They were all Carolina boys. It was three Carolina boys and four Hispanics, and then I made the fourth gringo. So, four whites and four Mexicans.

SS: That's a big crew.

PM: Yeah, I was the extra man on the closed area trips. Are you familiar with closed areas?

SS: No, you should explain it.

PM: I should? Ok, this is a great segue. The scallop fishery has an awesome fisheries management program. They have the entire Atlantic Ocean segmented out, and they say, "Ok, this area, you're going to go and fish it. When it gets down, we'll stop you. Everybody has a certain amount of trips. Gosh, I forgot where I was going with this. Oh, anyway, the scallops have closed areas and open areas. Closed areas, you're allowed to go to that area and catch 18,000 pounds, not a pound more. And open area trips, it's a different area, but you can go and you've got a certain amount of days. So you've got twenty-four days at sea that you can fish whenever you want. They kind of spread it up. Because the open area trips is more derby style, you're allowed to have less crewmembers. You're allowed to have seven

crewmembers as opposed to eight in closed area trips. Because closed area trips, you've already got a certain amount of time, the only way you can come ahead there is you just get a little faster. Everybody's got the same amount of pounds, because you're only allowed the 18,000 pounds, but you're allowed to get them a little faster with an extra crewmember. It's almost an apprenticeship program, a way for you to get experience on a scallop boat without having to be in that derby mentality.

[15:02]

SS: Ok, interesting. Gives you time to learn.

PM: Exactly. And it doesn't hurt anybody.

SS: Right, doesn't cost anybody.

PM: That's right.

SS: So, you were going to segue to something?

PM: Oh, I was going to segue to fisheries management. In Virginia, our fisheries management group is called the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, or VMRC for short. They've tried to model our oyster fishery after the scallop fishery. It was a good idea, but where they went wrong is the Chesapeake Bay is much smaller than the Atlantic Ocean. In the Atlantic Ocean, they can dictate when it's time. This isn't going where I wanted it to. Can I scratch it and start over?

SS: Yeah, scratch it.

PM: Ok [laughter]. I guess I don't have much to say on fisheries management. I'm making all this up as I go along. It's so weird to tell a story about your life. I've never done this before.

SS: You're doing a great job!

PM: I appreciate that. Do you have anything?

SS: Well, I know that in scalloping, people can make a lot of money, but you've chosen primarily to focus on running your own business with oystering and crabbing. Am I hearing that right?

PM: To a point. That's where I'm at right now. But I have aspirations of going in the ocean.

SS: Do you?

PM: Yes, ma'am. I don't want to be in the Chesapeake Bay forever. I would say my end goals, actually two or three years from now, would actually be owning a groundfish boat for flounder or shrimping. Owning a larger boat. Because in the Chesapeake Bay, I think it would be hard to become a billionaire in the Chesapeake Bay.

SS: That's your goal?

PM: Yeah, a multimillionaire. I'd like to be very successful. Scalloping is very hard for a young person to get into as a boat owner, because the boats are valued so high. A scallop boat plus permit is between six and seven million right now, and it's very hard to purchase one. But I'm sure I could probably find a groundfishing boat around here in Virginia for between four hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand [dollars]. I could probably get a good start. What I plan on pursuing this summer is scalloping, and if that doesn't work, I'll go shrimping and groundfishing.

SS: Is summer a slow time for you?

PM: That's when the oyster season is out. Oystering for us is a seven- or eight-month season, and that works out great for me, because I'm able to make a good chunk of income to hold me over for a few months, which has allowed me to be creative in the other few months between, like I said, going scalloping, crabbing, shrimping, fishing. The past two summers, I've tried everything that I want to do. Now I'm going to try to make my stab. It's about time for me to settle down into a fishery. I think I'm going to pursue offshore pretty hard.

SS: You've given this a lot of thought? Calculated the different options?

PM: Oh my God, Sarah. This chews at my brain all day long and all night long. I live this stuff up. I told you I left school to come do this. I was sitting in school, looking at boats on Facebook and drawing boats and stuff like that. "This is not the place for me!"

SS: Was that a hard decision to make, even though you knew what your heart felt?

[18:35]

PM: No. It was tough for my parents to accept.

SS: How'd that go?

PM: They didn't really accept it until I bought the deadrise, my bigger boat, which is my most recent purchase, about six or eight months ago. I got her and they really saw that I was a hundred percent invested. Any boat, big or small, is a big deal. That boat was a huge stepping stone for me personally, because a lot of the guys who own boats around here like that, they're not my age.

SS: Tell me about the process of finding and purchasing that boat.

PM: Oh my goodness! Well, I'm probably more proud of her than anything else in this entire world. Chesapeake Bay deadrise is indicative to Virginia and Maryland. There's only about a thousand to fifteen hundred of these boats around, and probably less than half of that are in good-working, decent shape, I would say. I'm sure you've noticed through this interview that I'm highly passionate about this industry. I spent my weekends, my Saturdays, driving around taking pictures of boats. That's what we would do on rainy, snowy day is drive around and take pictures of boats. I was really familiar with all the boats. I would say seventy percent of the deadrises in Virginia, I could take you to and tell you the builder and owner and all that good stuff. I was working out in the James River in my little boat, and I had two people with me. We were trying to catch as many oysters as we could and we were running

out of space. We were jamming. We were killing it. But there were guys working around me saying, "Boy, you need to get a bigger boat." I said, "Maybe I should, one day." But I wasn't ready for that commitment. I got a nice little nest egg saved up, and I got into a segment of the oyster fishery we call seed oysters, which are baby oysters the size of your thumb. We catch those with tongs and they plant them on other areas of Chesapeake Bay, where they don't have natural oysters like we do, kind of like a farmer plants his field, same thing with a waterman.

SS: Is that run by the watermen or is that a government-sponsored restoration project?

PM: Private. Private and public, actually. Maryland has purchased some of our seed, but the majority of the seed that I've sold goes to a private buyer who's planting his own ground, which is really cool, because to me, it speaks wonders to the success of the oyster industry. We're getting a good price. He knows the product is going to last, so he's willing to invest money into the oyster industry. I think it's a barometer of success, in my perspective. But, back to my point about seeding. There's no limit to how many oysters you can catch. The only limit we're bound by is you have to start oystering at sunrise and be finished by two o'clock. So basically, it's a derby to catch as many as you can, as fast as you can. I found with my little boat, twenty feet, she would hold about seventy bushels. I would load her in two or three hours and I'd come back to the dock, shovel them out really fast, and then go make another trip, to try to get as many oysters as I can. I was catching about a hundred thirty, hundred forty. I said, "You know, if I bought a bigger boat, I could stay out here all day long. A couple seasons went by, and I got some money saved up. I was looking around for a boat, and a friend of mine said, "You know, if I ever wanted to sell my boat, I think I'd want you to have it." By and by, I kind of kept that in the back of my mind. What drew me to this boat was I knew she was well taken care of. The guy before me took great care of her. Also, she was small enough for me to handle by myself. I like to work by myself. So one day, I was down here by myself in the James River, and he texted me and said, "Hey, come up here and look at the boat." So I went up, by and by, and ended up buying her and brought her down here. It took me about a month to get it to where I wanted it. I worked in the fishery, worked oystering. Man, that was an experience, Sarah. I worked her one day, and the next day, the clutch blew a spring pack. I spend three or four days with a chain jost, jacking the engine up, changing the packs out. That was a great experience.

SS: Was that stressful or did you just take it in stride?

PM: I wouldn't say stressful, because my strategy, financially, has always been to keep a nest egg. I find working the water is very dangerous, because you have to make money, so that's when you do stupid stuff. When you're at the dock and everybody else is working, of course that eats at you, but it's not like I had bills mounting up or I had a baby at home to feed, or anything like that. That happened on a Monday. I worked the Monday. Tuesday morning, I came down and found out it was messed up. It took me until the next Monday to get it fixed. But at the end of it, that was like climbing a huge mountain. I felt so successful, going through the engine and fixing it. It really made me feel like I knew the boat a whole lot better. I called my dad. He took time off work and came down and helped me do it. We were down here at nine o'clock with headlamps, getting it done. That was a really cool experience, doing it with him. The end of April is our oyster season. I finished that up and then I took the boat home and get some bottom work done. About a third of the bottom, I got that replaced. I put her back in the water and brought her back around for this season, and I've been pretty successful so far.

[24:32]

SS: You work by yourself?

PM: When I seed, I do. In seeding, you do not have to sort the oysters. We call it clean culling and rough culling. Culling is our sorting process. Rough culling, you just dump them in the hold of the boat. If you see something that's not oysters, you pick it out. Clean culling, you clean the oysters up for market, so when I do that, I take an employee—a very carefully selected, top-notch employee.

SS: Who would that be?

PM: Right now, it's a guy named [name withheld from transcript]. He's five foot tall, full of piss and vinegar. You can't hurt him. He's a tough son of a gun.

SS: Is he your age or is he older?

PM: He's a couple of years younger than me. That's a good question. I've had seven employees. We call them cull people, cull personnel. Actually we call them cull boys.

SS: Yeah, because "culler" sounds weird.

PM: Culler. Yeah. But cull boy, that's kind of degrading, so I call them cull man or cull personnel. Culling technician. I've had seven, and all but three of them have been older than me. Four of them have been older than me. Something I am very proud of, Sarah, is that I've worked three different oyster seasons and I've had a different mate for each season. I'm on my third season. My first two mates have seen the success that I've had, and they've actually gone and gotten boats and oyster licenses. I feel like I've kind of expanded the fishery.

SS: That must feel really good.

PM: Yeah, that is really cool. The guy that I've got with me now, I don't think he's going to stay in the fishery, but it's not because of the lack of finances there. He enjoys it, but he doesn't see the long-term future. He doesn't see the long-term payoff like I do.

SS: Why do you think he doesn't see it? What's different for him than for you, that makes him have a different attitude?

[26:25]

PM: I would say he's always been a crewmember instead of being an owner. I don't know about other places, but here in the Chesapeake Bay, for the most part, the captain really makes most of the money, because they take a lot of the risk. We don't really take weeklong trips like they do out in the ocean, so you actually pay your man by the day, between a hundred and two-hundred dollars a day. Of course, the captain, his pay is catch-based, so he sees the ebbs and the flows that make it attractive. But the culling personnel, they make the same no matter what, for the most part.

SS: So that doesn't really build that hunger in them for a good payday?

PM: Yeah, that's right. Of course, they've got drive, but it's not matched. To speak on that, the first time I ever realized, "Wow, I need to get myself in gear and get a boat," I was fifteen or sixteen, and I was crabbing with this guy and he paid me two hundred dollars a week, thirty dollars a day. This boy came by, and he was about three or four years older than me, just out of high school, a little past high school, and he was talking about a crabbing check that he got that had bounced. He said, "You know, I got a check from so-and-so crab house, and it was about a thousand dollars for the week." That really perked me up. I'm like, "That dude's making a thousand dollars a week? Holy crap!" So that really made me realize: if you're going to make any money, you've got to own the boat. So that's kind of what spurred me to jump into it. I hit a roadblock [editor's note: ran out of things to say].

SS: Gosh, there are so many interesting topics that you've covered, and it's a bit of a whirlwind.

PM: Yeah, is there anything I can expand on?

[28:17]

SS: You mentioned that all but three of the culling personnel that you've had have been older than you. What does it feel like to be the boss of people who are older than you, when you're so young?

PM: I've never really felt like I was the boss. I've carefully selected the people who work for me, to where we're more teammates than anything. I respect their opinion. We work together. Like any fishery, we've got to work together. I've got the final say. It never really made me feel uncomfortable, and I don't think they ever really felt like I was their boss. It was more like I might have the final say, but we work things out and accomplish things together, which is kind of cool. I've always tried to encourage the guys I have with me. They're usually pretty bright individuals that haven't gone on their own for some reason. I try to help them overcome that. In the end, I do want to see the fishery expand. Here's a good segue. This whole thing is about graying fishermen, right? Down here in the James River, there are probably fifteen watermen my age. About three of them are boat owners. Between twenty-five and thirty, there might be another ten that are boat owners. The rest are primarily about fifty-plus, boat owners. If I had to put a number on that, I'd say probably another thirty to fifty boats that are owned by people older than fifty. I've really enjoyed the knowledge that the older folks are willing to pass on, because it's like the competition isn't there anymore. They're not worried about you stealing anything from them or taking anything from them. They really want to see you do well. It's amazing how much you learn just sitting around the dock and talking. Fishing can never be just a nine to five job, when you leave the dock you just go home, or when you get on the boat and get off the boat. There's so much networking. There's so much that you learn about what the tide's doing. The guys that are older than me, they've got forty years of experience, plus they've got the forty years of experience of people who taught them, so they know so much. You don't learn it all overnight, but I think that's what makes our fishery special is you have to be passionate about it. You have to spend your weekends learning and talking about it. That's what makes you successful. You don't just pick it up and put it down. It kind of runs through you.

[31:19]

SS: When you mentioned those ages, maybe I missed something, but you said there were three under twenty-five, ten boat owners between twenty-five and thirty, and the rest over fifty. Is there a gap in there?

PM: Yeah, there is.

SS: Are there any boat owners between thirty and fifty? Did you skip ahead or is there a missing generation?

PM: I skipped ahead. I guess I should give you a number. Actually, there is kind of an age gap, I would say between thirty and forty.

SS: There is an age gap there?

PM: Yeah. I hope I don't offend anybody if I've forgotten them, but there was a gap probably in the early nineties or late nineties, when things weren't going that well here in the fishery. I think that stunted the growth a little bit. The reason folks my age are getting into it, and I won't deny it, is it's a good way to make a lot of money quickly. That's one of the things that drives me. Do you care if I throw numbers out?

SS: No, go ahead.

PM: An average day for my boat would be about five hundred bucks. After I pay my expenses, probably three-fifty in profit. An average twenty-three-year-old working at a factory somewhere couldn't dream of making something like that. That really drives me. I see it as a bigger picture. Like I mentioned a few minutes ago, I want to build towards doing something else, a bigger boat. I like the oyster industry, but it's kind of a steppingstone for me. I hope I don't offend anybody saying this, but I think in fishing, you kind of have to keep building to keep up with people. You're going to have to get a nicer boat one day. You're going to have to keep going if you want to grow.

SS: What happens if you don't?

PM: The industry will change around you. I'm sure a lot of folks have already touched on [this]. A lot of limits will go down. You have to adapt. That's very cliché to say, but the fisherman that complains about regulations and doesn't adapt is the loser. The ones that take it in the teeth and take it in stride and make the adjustment, figure out how to make money, are the ones who are successful, I think. I'm very optimistic about the fishing industry. I think it's there. If you're willing to put in the effort, I think you can make a good living at it. I think the key is to keep your overhead and your expenses low, so on the days you make a lot of money, you can save it. Fishing, in my mind, is eighty percent mental, twenty percent physical, and ninety percent saving your money, probably.

SS: Does everybody share your optimism?

[34:28]

PM: Probably not. No, probably not. It is stifled sometimes, but I don't let that bother me. I would say a little bit of my optimistic views is probably being naïve. I haven't really

experienced the downfalls. Every fishery now—crab and oystering, primarily—are on catch limits. All the old guys who are fifty-plus, they remember when there weren't any catch limits. They're stuck on those big catches, but what they don't realize is those big catches then were worth less than they are now. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what you catch. What matters is how much money you make. A guy told me one time, "It doesn't matter how much goes through your hands. It's what goes in your pocketbook." You can make a hundred thousand dollars, but if you only keep two thousand, what have you done? I think that's kind of where the older generation has a negative outlook on fisheries management, because they see when it was so good and they took it down to where it is now, but I've only experienced the catch limits that we have. Without getting too political, I think that our fisheries should be managed, but I think it should be managed not for you and for me, but so the resource can be sustainable and can be cultivated to be sustainable. I don't think we should cut out cultivation. It should be managed very carefully and very tightly, but not with the air of conservation, but of cultivation.

SS: What do you mean by cultivation?

[36:14]

PM: Conservation would just be trying to cut everybody out so there are more oysters around. But like a cornfield, an oyster rock is the same way. The more you till it, the more you plant it, the more you work it, the better and better it gets.

SS: More productive?

PM: Sure. Absolutely. I think it's very important to have people working it. But we're on a catch limit now. I can't speak for other fisheries, but for our fisheries, on the financial side, the price per bushel has adjusted to our catch limits, so that we can still make a living. Supply and demand is one of the biggest parts of fisheries management. You don't want too much product on the market, because you won't make any money. It's not even worth going.

SS: What was it that happened in the nineties, when it wasn't so great around here and people weren't getting into it?

PM: I think there was some disease that came around, and the market.

SS: For oysters?

PM: Yeah, for oysters. Probably some pollution. Let's see: disease for oysters, pollution, and overfishing. I do believe there's been some overfishing, which is an unpopular opinion. There definitely has been some overfishing. There'd be boats that come in in the 1890s, when they first started harvesting oysters on a large scale, and they would catch thousands of bushels a week. Now, we catch less than a hundred bushels a week. But it's managed and we're able to make money at it, so that's what's important.

SS: So things got bad in the nineties, and they sort of hit a low and then came back?

PM: Yeah, they have. Anybody's guess is what that's attributed to. A lot of people say things work in cycles. That's a good enough guess for me. As a young fisherman, my perspective on the ebbs and flows of fisheries is to be able to adapt and jump to something else. I'm sure a lot of fishermen around here we call it a "day's work." It's what you want to make in a day, kind of a minimum income requirement. Everybody's is different. When you can't make that minimum income requirement, you go get into something else. A lot of folks say they're too old to get into something else, but I don't know about that. I believe a lot of people are just too stubborn. You have to be positive. You have to have a positive outlook on the industry to be successful, is my take on it.

[39:17]

SS: In terms of your building up to the next step, how long do you think that will take, and what's the progression?

PM: Obviously, in theory, you could borrow as much money as you had to lose. So it's more about, for me, my next step is probably owning an offshore trawler, be it a shrimp trawler—probably not a shrimp trawler—but some sort of fifty-plus [ft] steel-hulled trawler. For me, it's getting experience in the fishery and getting experience handling and managing an offshore business, and then probably getting the financing. You can borrow plenty, but it's having that knowledge. The way that I typically approach things is on the smaller, more conservative side—still be optimistic, but approach it small-scale first. In business school, we called it a proof of concept. You did it first, you proved you could make money at it, then you attacked it, full steam ahead. To put things in a spyglass for you, that's what I did with my oystering. I started with my little boat—very little risk, very little expense—and once I saw the success from it, then I attacked it full-steam ahead with the bigger boat. That's been a success, and I've been able to do it without borrowing a penny. Me, personally, I'm risk-averse. I enjoy having low overhead. I'd rather take a little extra time and have low overhead.

SS: Tell me a little bit about how financing works. Where would you—if you wanted to—be able to get a loan for building up your business? How easy is that?

PM: Well, I haven't done a lot of research on it. I guess it was a little curse for me to say that. You could put up your assets, if you've got a house. As far as loans, I guess you have to find somebody who believed in you and get them to back you, somebody who had a good understanding of the business.

SS: An individual investor?

PM: Sure, that's right. I'm sure you could get a bank to back you on a hard asset, like a boat that has value. But for someone to really believe in your vision and your dream, you have to find someone who's been there and done it. To speak to that, Sarah, I think that was a little forward for me to say, "You could get the money." But I would let the money worry you second, because even if you don't own the boat, you could run somebody else's boat until you get the money saved up.

SS: Is that a typical progression for people? The owners of the trawl boats that exist around here, did they start the same way as you?

[42:15]

PM: I don't really know, because a lot of guys now that own scallop boats and trawlers have had them for a long time. The scallop industry went through a massive fisheries management shift in the 1990s. In 1994, it became a closed fishery, and ever since then, the value of scallop boats has consistently gone up from five hundred thousand to now they're in the six or seven million [range]. I can't speak to that, because I don't know anybody less than fifty who's bought a scallop boat.

SS: What about the trawlers? Are there any younger owners of trawlers?

PM: We don't have a lot of trawlers here in Virginia. You can't trawl in Virginia waters, actually. Within the three-mile line it's illegal. But down in North Carolina, when I was shrimping down there, I met a few folks that grew organically and others that had been backed. I think there's great success in growing organically, because it teaches you a lot about the industry. When we first started this interview, I glanced over it: I started on this boat, bought this boat, bought this boat. But in between the fabric of all those three boats, four boats, there were so many lessons learned and so many things that you can't read in a book—life lessons that were taught to me. Like, I remember my very first fiberglass boat. My wooden boat, it was in bad shape, and a guy that owned this boat yard, he was seeing that I was struggling to keep it going. He said, "You buy the boat. You buy the materials. You do the work. But I'm going to show you how." I had to completely gut the inside of it. After crabbing, I would work on it, work on it, work on it. Completely flat broke. I would go crabbing every morning to pay for the stuff. I just learned so much about it. I remember my sweet mama. One Saturday night, I was down working on the boat, fiberglassing something, and she and Daddy had gone out to get something to eat, and they brought me back dinner to the boat, because they knew I hadn't gone anywhere. Stuff like that makes you appreciate what you have, but that's kind of off topic. Yeah, growing organically is really important.

SS: It sounds like you've had some support and some mentorship along the way.

PM: Plenty! Plenty of people have helped me along. None of it has been financial. The only loan I've ever gotten was for an outboard motor, and that was solely to build credit. Nobody's ever given me money, but plenty of guidance and plenty of advice. I've found that with the older fishermen, the older generation, you have to earn that advice. You don't just go up to them and ask them something and they're going to tell you. They have to see and respect you a little bit. Without tooting my own horn, they have to see you work hard. You work hard, and they say, "Ok, I don't mind giving him some knowledge and helping him out." Plenty of mentorship. Oh yeah. Specifically here, there are dozens of oyster rocks for us to work at, but I would say most of them I've learned from other people who have told me about them. You don't just go out and find them.

[45:52]

SS: One thing we haven't talked a lot about is your community and your social networks. Do you want to say anything about where you live and the other people, and who you're connected with?

PM: Sure. I don't really come from a fishing town. My grandfather was an oysterman, but there was a huge gap there. My dad, he oystered when he was my age but then got out of it. But he understands enough about my fishery to help guide me in life choices. Not, "Go here and try this today," but he understands the ebbs and flows of the fishing business and has been able to guide me. I value his opinion a lot. As far as networks, every day is a network. I don't think you would be able to be successful if there weren't other people in the fishery. What you see around is we've got fifty boats here, and I would say I talk to each captain maybe once or twice a month, if not every day. If I don't talk to them every day, then I talk to them once or twice a month. I try to stay very connected. Like I mentioned a little while ago, somebody I respect told me one day that one of the most important things you can have in this business is your relationships. Because one day, somebody could need you or somebody's going to need them, or an opportunity's going to arise. I've had a lot of great relationships and burned a couple bridges, for the right reasons—things happen—but I think it's very important for everybody to work together. For the most part, I think most fishermen do work together, because they realize how hard things are to do on their own. It's important to have the help or to encourage somebody along. I would say that encouragement isn't just given. The community relationships aren't just given. They're definitely earned. Once someone helps you once, they help you twice.

SS: What about the community in general?

PM: What do you mean by that?

[48:17]

SS: Is it supportive? You said it's not a fishing community.

PM: Virginia's not really a fishing state, not like New Bedford is. Even where we're at in Newport News, with fifty boats here, if you go five miles up the road, it's irrelevant. It's just kind of there. The community, they understand fresh seafood and stuff like that. They support that. We're lucky to have not a lot of people trying to put us out of business. That's pretty successful. I would say the community is probably three out of ten involved, but not very involved at all. Let's say the eighty-twenty rule: eighty percent of the people do twenty percent of the work. Twenty percent of the people in the community make up eighty percent of the interest in the fishing industry.

SS: Those aren't fishermen themselves, they're just people who are interested?

PM: Right. I guess in other areas, Facebook plays a big part. Facebook is a huge networking tool for our fisheries in Virginia. You can see what people caught. You can find out information. It's a great tool. I've thought several times about trying to delete it, but I just can't bring myself to do it because I would miss out on so much information and so many networks and so many contacts that I've only got through Facebook. I just think about how so many good things have come from it.

SS: Is that for all ages, or is that more for younger fishermen?

[50:02]

PM: I don't know. I think, from my perspective and opinion, I would say there are watermen all the way up to sixty-five that are on Facebook. I'm sure the commitment level adjusts. The younger folks spend a lot more time than the older folks. But I would say a lot of watermen keep up with it.

SS: How has that changed things? Facebook has been about a decade or so that everybody's been on it. How have you seen that play out in terms of knitting people together in a new way, and maybe across greater distances? How has that materially changed the way that things happen in the fishing industry around here?

PM: Unfortunately, from my perspective, ten years ago I was thirteen.

SS: That's true! I forgot! As a young fisherman, you wouldn't know the before picture.

PM: Yeah. I remember when MySpace was a thing. I guess that kind of dates me, but I've never really experienced—

SS: —Life before Facebook in the fishing industry. So that was as dumb question.

PM: No, there are no dumb questions. But that definitely helps build relationships, good and bad.

SS: That's an interesting aspect.

[51:25]

SS: You're working on your degree in business?

PM: Yes, ma'am. Business management.

SS: How are you doing at balancing that with fishing?

PM: I've learned to put fishing first. The boat comes before anything. The boat is the most important thing. In a fisherman's life, family first, then the boat, everything else aside. I always put her first, if I've got to skip a day of class to come down and make sure the pumps are working. Her wellbeing comes first, because without her, there is no job. It hasn't been that hard. Mainly, it's a commitment thing—just got to do it and get it over with.

SS: Why do you feel it's so valuable to get that degree?

PM: I feel that getting a degree shows commitment, shows that you've completed something. To be honest with you, when I get it, I'm not going to stop fishing. I just hope it gives me a little bit more credibility, shows that I'm able to start something and finish it. It's really going to mean a lot to me to be able to finish it while funding it through working the water. That'll probably mean more than having the degree. As far as having a degree to fall back on, I don't want to have a degree to fall back on. I guess credibility is it.

SS: Do you think it will make you a better fisherman in some way?

PM: Not a better fisherman. Maybe. I've found that I have had to use some lessons and some things that I've learned, but that's more so on managing crew, managing people and how to treat people and how to conduct business. As far as being able to catch an oyster faster, probably not, but being able to conduct business better, it will help me. Absolutely.

SS: Do you get involved in policy, advocacy, going to meetings, that kind of stuff? Science?

[53:35]

PM: Yes, I do. I'd say I'm active. I'm not extremely active, but I am active. Probably a seven out of ten active.

SS: What kind of stuff do you do?

PM: I go to most meetings that are relevant to me. I speak, I'd say, about two or three times a season to our oyster manager. On a day-to-day basis or a week-to-week basis, I'd say I talk about oyster regulations or get somebody else's perspective, every day or every couple of days.

SS: With other watermen?

PM: Other fishermen, yeah. That's right.

SS: So it's a hot topic of conversation? [laughter]

PM: Oh my God, it is! It has been since it ever started, and I don't think it will ever stop being. It's interesting to hear other people's perspectives, and kind of under the same premise of this project here, kind of take everybody's opinion and kind of use that to foster my own. Take what I like of this one, what I agree with and don't agree with of this one, and kind of muddle together my own opinion. I go to a lot of meetings. I believe that most regulations that are put out, you are able to, not find loopholes, but find a way to be financially successful if you're willing to accept it instead of detesting the regulations. That might be a better way to put it.

SS: Why? Just because you're using more of your brainpower to find solutions?

PM: No, I wouldn't say that, because I'm no better than the other watermen. But working the water is mental. You've got to have the attitude that you're going to be successful. I don't think all the regulations that we deal with are great. I think most of them are for a reason. I think there are some that could be changed. But I think the worst part of fisheries management is when they cut out a fishery or cut out a market segment. That happened to us recently on the James River. A lot of our seed oysters that I told you about are shipped out of state to Maryland, to foster oyster ground up there. And Virginia's recently cut that out, because they want to keep it in Virginia. I think that's going to hurt a lot of people. I don't agree with that. I don't agree with cutting out a market segment.

SS: You think they should have keep sending that seed to Maryland?

PM: There was an argument, "Well, we're not getting any benefit from the seed," but I think there could have been stipulations that had gone with it, like a tax on it, or a stipulation that

a certain percentage of the oysters have to come back to Virginia, something like that. We had another fishery that I'm sure Scott talked about, which was a crab dredge fishery. A little background on that. We pulled two eight-foot dredges behind the boat to catch crabs in the wintertime, when there's no other way of harvesting them. It's too cold to catch them in crab pots. Well, when they cut that out, they cut it out "temporarily"—I use air quotes—"temporarily," it had long-term effects because the processing facilities lost a two- to three-month stream of crab supply. That really shifted the way the crab industry operates, to where now it's not so much based on processing. It's based more on trying to sell direct to the consumer or sell to retail, somebody who's going to take the crab and pick it themselves. Cutting out a market, I think, is very detrimental. If it's at all direly necessary—you have to do it—I think it should be weaned out, or recognized that just taking something away, because it's tough but it's got to be done—well, it's easy for somebody to say it's tough when it doesn't affect them. This market that we've lost in Maryland, I know it will impact me and a few other people. I probably had the opportunity to make another hundred and thirty thousand that we're not going to have now.

SS: How are you going to adapt to that?

PM: Oh, I'll get involved in another fishery. I'm glad I found out about it now so I'm able to save my cash a little bit differently. Just take it on the chin and get into another fishery. Like I said, I'm going to go offshore this summer. Typically, we would go do that in May, but now I'm just going to go offshore in May, hopefully.

SS: Do you have something lined up?

PM: Light plans, not hard plans. I got a couple leads. But I do have a backup too. My small boat, I've got a small crabbing operation that if somebody else runs it, I get a small percentage of the profit. So that's my backup. We'll just put some more gear out. We'll crab if we need to. That's another thing that's important about working the water: backup plans. Because Plan A, B, C and D, you might not need plan B and C, but you better have one. Who knows? I might come out and go salmon fishing with you. We'll be partners.

SS: That's always a good plan!

[59:41]

PM: Do you have any more questions?

SS: You have shared a lot of words of wisdom that you've picked up along the way. Are there any that we haven't covered? Things that you think it takes to succeed?

PM: Open-mindedness. Hard work is extremely important. Probably this is above all: you can't make excuses, working on the water. An old man told me one time, "When you're self-employed in anything, but when you're working on the water, you've got to go and make money if you at all can. If it's unfit and unsafe, that's one thing. But if you're at all tired today, you've got to go and make money. You've got to make every dollar you can today, because tomorrow's not promised. Tomorrow could be unfit to work or the market could disintegrate on you." It's cliché, but treat every day like it's the last day to work. How about that?

SS: Do you think anybody can do it, or does it take a certain type?

PM: I wouldn't say it takes a certain body type. I would say it takes somebody with a hard mentality. I think passion is extremely important, in anything but especially in this. When things aren't going well, that's what makes you keep from quitting. Have you found that in other folks that you've interviewed, that they have a lot of passion?

SS: Yeah.

PM: Ok. Yeah, I think that's extremely important. I think that's a big difference between older fishermen. A lot of the fishermen around here don't really get excited anymore. Maybe they got excited in their day. That's a big difference. They don't really get excited anymore. I think that's pretty important.

SS: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any closing comments?

[61:42]

PM: I don't think so. Is there anything I skipped? Anything you would like me to expand on?

SS: Maybe just your vision for the future?

PM: My personal [vision] or the fishery?

SS: Well, you've told me a bit about your personal vision. Maybe the fishing community that you're part of here.

PM: I'll do it in three segments: the fishing, the crabbing, and the oystering. Oystering, I see things getting very private. I don't think there'll be a very big public fishery. Not because we don't want it, but I think it's slowly being weaned away from us.

SS: How do you feel about that?

PM: How do I feel about it happening? It saddens me, but I think it's important to be in front of the curve. It's going to happen no matter what. This isn't a twenty-year plan. I would say in maybe fifty years, it might be a very minimal public fishery. That really stinks, but like I said: adapt. Just be ahead of the curve. Crabbing, I think that's gotten pretty sustainable the way it is. I don't think that's going to change much. I'd like to see the regulations get a little laxer so that we could have a full year, so that we could harvest crabs year-round. Fishing is pretty well regulated. In Virginia, you've got to have permits to catch species that are very valuable and are very low in numbers. I would just say I'm optimistic about crabbing and fishing. And oystering, I don't know for certain that it's going to become privatized. I've heard a lot of folks say that and I don't see any evidence of it not becoming privatized. I wouldn't say that keeps me up at night or anything like that. Personally, the reason I want to go in the ocean is because there are limits. It's so much more limiting here in the Chesapeake Bay. The old-timers, the graying fleet, the old salts, the old heads, when they were my age, they didn't have to buy oysters licenses and they didn't have to buy crabbing licenses. It wasn't moratorium. They could just go do it. I think a moratorium, it kind of

weeds out the folks that aren't serious. Like, I bought my oyster license two years ago and I had to pay a sizeable amount for it. I'm ok with a moratorium fishery because it makes it valuable. The scallop fishery is the most valuable fishing industry in North America, but it's very closed through moratorium. I would say I agree with closed fisheries. Just with anything, barriers to entry makes any business successful for those that are involved, and it keeps the product sustainable. One thing I would like to add is I speak a lot about the scallop industry and the oyster industry. The scallop industry is managed so that there will be a scallop product to be produced but also managed so it can be sustainable harvested. It does actually have a sustainability label. It's managed looking ahead ten years. And I feel like our oystering industry is managed just to save the oysters. I don't feel like VMRC really tries to foster a successful fishery five, ten years down the road. I can back that up by saying in the past three years, our catch limits have been reduced from twenty-four bushels, to twenty-four bushels four days a week, then it went to sixteen—you see the downward trend, and no evidence of an upward trend. That's very disappointing. I don't think in Virginia we have a lot of cooperation between oyster fishery managers and oyster harvesters. The general consensus that I've gathered is, "We don't like them. They don't like us." I don't really know if there's a way to change that, but I think that overall is going to have a negative impact on the fishery. Every species is important to the ecosystem to some point, but in the Chesapeake Bay, oysters are filter feeders, so that's really important to the health of the bay, filtering the algae out, so I'm sure that has something to do with why they want to cut the fishery out. But a farm field without a farmer will become a forest after a while, and while forests are helpful too, they're not helpful to the deer that needs to eat the corn or the person who needs to eat the deer. Anything else I left out?

SS: Nothing that I can think of.

PM: I have all these conversations. I could talk about this stuff all day driving home.

SS: If you think of anything else, you can turn on your recorder on your phone and send it to me if you want. Alright, good? All done?

PM: Yeah, that's all I've got to say.

[end of interview]

[67:55]