

Joseph Smith: It's July 17, 2017. We're at the Beaufort lab preparing to do an interview with Herb Prythrech. The interviewer will be Dr. Don Hoss, former director at the lab. Also present, myself, Joe Smith, and Dr. Doug Vaughan. We'll proceed with the interview and turn it over to Don.

Don Hoss: As Joe said, we're going to interview Herb Prythrech, who I've known since 1958 when I came to the lab. I don't remember exactly what you were doing then, Herb, whether you were temporary or –

Herb Prythrech: Right out of college and not yet in the Army.

DH: Okay. We can go into the Army too a little later. Herb is a retired NOAA employee, but he's the son of former director Dr. Herbert Prythrech, who was director from 1933 to 1949. Herb was born at Beaufort and spent his childhood up until the teenage years living with his family in the director's house here on Pivers Island. From my conversations over the last few decades, he's got a wealth of information on early days on the island and not necessarily all biological but interesting events and hurricanes and people who came to the island, and so my first question, Herb, is what do you remember about the very first early days living in a biological station, if you will?

HP: The first things that I can really recall are, in those days, we had people that were working with the WPA, the Works Progress Administration, and the NYA, National Youth Administration. The WPA guys were building sidewalks and doing outside major heavy construction work, and the NYA people were usually artists, mostly artists, painting fish models, one of whom was a lady named (Leanna Sater?) from Atlantic, who could actually paint a fish model that looked like actual natural coloration of the fish. When I was out and about wandering around on the island, which I did a lot of, they tied a rope around my waist with net corks on it to keep me afloat because they couldn't keep me off the beach, so I learned to swim at a pretty early age. About four years old, I could swim. Watching the WPA guys doing their work, I learned a lot of choice four-letter words that I soon learned not to try them out at home.

DH: Are any of those fish that were painted the ones that are over at the Maritime Museum now or?

HP: Some of them are, yes. I just heard where some more might be in a residence in Beaufort that I haven't tried to verify that, but I found out where the house is.

DH: Yeah. We should try to look into that. As a kid, I know your sister was also on the island with you. Did you have a lot of interactions with the town, or was it mostly on your own?

HP: My mother ran herself to death, going back and forth to town to pick up friends to bring over here for interaction with both my sister and myself. My sister was born in 1938, and I was born in '36, so she being two years younger, but we had to import friends to play with over here. When they couldn't be here all the time, you'd think up things to do on your own. I thought up a lot of stuff on my own to pass the time. I was born in '36, so by 1942, things were really getting hot offshore here with the submarine warfare going on. From our upstairs back bedroom, which

looked south out over the bar, you could see all kinds of activity off out in the Beaufort Inlet. At night, sometimes, you could see fire reflected off clouds that were ships burning way offshore. I remember seeing at least a couple of ships that had been torpedoed and run up onto the shallow water between Shackleford Banks and Cape Lookout. They would sit there and burn for weeks before the flammable stuff was burned up. Then they were hauled away somewhere to be repaired, I guess. Once, there was a half of a tanker, the stern half of a tanker, that had been blown in two, was towed into the port terminal, and it stayed there about a week or so, and it, I understand, was taken to Portsmouth or somewhere up there to be – whatever they did with it. The war was going full blast, and the air was full of airplanes at all times. They were coming and going, and we didn't know what was going on because the policy was to not panic the public, keep things quiet. We had blackout practice. Car headlights were even painted over with flat black, except for a little peephole-type opening down in the bottom, so they could see the street, I guess.

DH: Yes, I don't think a lot of people realize that that occurred along our coast.

HP: Many people never knew about that. Yes.

DH: At that time, I was in the middle of Missouri, and we still did the blackout thing. Not only that, but the old console radios had a very small dial, the ones that sat on the floor. We stuffed cotton in it, inside the house. That's how paranoid – my dad was an air-raid warden, so he was really into that.

HP: You had no German submarines near you, did you?

DH: No. No. What was your first job with NOAA – well, what is now NOAA? It was Bureau of Commercial Fisheries.

HP: My first job was working under Dr. [Walter] Chipman, and my supervisor then was John Baptist, who's still alive.

DH: Yeah, we interviewed John a few weeks ago.

HP: And that was my first job. And it was the dream of all jobs. We would catch fish, and I think we mostly worked with croaker to take samples from different parts of the fish. They would expose them to radiation at different times and different intensities to see what the uptake results were. Part of the job that anybody would hunger for was getting paid to go out and go fishing and bring the fish back here alive to be worked on at the lab. One thing that I've noticed in this kind of work is early low-level jobs don't pay much, but they're the best jobs. If you do well and succeed, you move up, and you move in, and you sit down, and you're shuffling paper. The pay is better, but the job's far worse.

DH: Far worse. Yes, I can vouch for that. I know, eventually, as I remember it, which is not a good source to come to for memory, but as I remember it, you eventually got into fishery statistics. And did you work for Mr. [Charles] Stewart here at the lab?

HP: Charlie Stewart was already here. He was the North Carolina supervisor for the statistics branch, and he knew me, he knew my family, and he recommended me to the district supervisor, who was George Snow, who was stationed in New Orleans. He was instrumental in helping me get started with the branch of statistics, so I started out with working for them right after I got out of the Army, and they sent me to Port Isabel, Texas, where I needed to learn to speak enough Spanish to interview shrimp boat operators. This was actually – Port Isabel was actually right where the river comes out from Brownsville, the Rio Grande, where the Rio Grande comes out from Brownsville. There's a place called the Turning Basin, where the shrimp boats could get turned around and go back down to go offshore. Several of the seafood processors were there that we would go examine their records and interview them for what they were catching, where, and which gear they used, what the locations they were fishing on, because all this stuff was graded on maps with numbers to indicate where, for example, the shrimp each had – each species of shrimp had a code number – white shrimp, brown shrimp – and so if someone came along that needed to know how many pounds of brown shrimp were taken at Campeche Bay, Campeche Bay would have a code number, so you could – this is before computers. Everything was done by hand, you know? They'd punch in the code number for Campeche Bay and crank it with a lever, I guess, to come up with, here are the numbers for that location – either that or it was done by hand. I was there a year, and they promised that they'd bring me back up to the East Coast as soon as possible, so I was given the job to relocate to Brunswick, Georgia, in 1963. And I was moved up there, where I worked for three and a half years there. In Brunswick, I was responsible for the State of Georgia landings of all species of everything, all catch, catches by all different types of gear, the locations as to where catch was coming from and value of the catch, ex-vessel value, which was the price paid to the boat. Then once a year, I'd have to interview the seafood processors to get their production of what they had packaged and put up. For example, SeaPak, how many pounds of different things they had processed and put on the market. That required a weekly and a monthly report and an annual report, which all my reports are somewhere in the abyss of records. After that time, there was an opportunity to transfer to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and move all the way up to a GS-9, so I applied for that job and got it. They transferred me to Ann Arbor, Michigan. I thought it was a good idea to get some freshwater fishery background, which I did up there for a couple of years. Being from the South, I really wasn't all that happy with those long, endless, cold winters that started at about Halloween and didn't end until about Easter or later. So at one point in time, the South Carolina agent was going to retire. Melvin (Lowe?) was going to retire from Charleston. The fellow in Brunswick was going to move up here, Ken Harris. So I applied for a new position, which they combined South Carolina and Georgia offices into one office in Savannah. Well, that kept me pretty busy running back and forth in two states. Pretty soon, South Carolina initiated a program, where they hired a biologist named Dale (Tealing?), a Charleston native and a natural. He could go into the seafood dealerships. And I took him around and introduced him to everyone. He fitted right in. He may still be with them there. I'm not sure. So I was there working out of Savannah for ten years. Then about that time, Paul (Hooker?) took over as chief of statistics for the region. He initiated a program for the establishment of a survey statistician position, so I went back to school in an all-Black school – almost all Black – I was there – and took statistics courses and math courses that I had not picked up in undergraduate school. I got enough qualification for the position of survey statistician. An opening came up at Southeast Fisheries Center in Miami. And Ed Burgess was the regional supervisor at that time. He offered me a job to go to Miami and take over that position, which I did. I was there eighteen years in Miami. I retired from

Miami in September, October of 1994. At that time, they were beginning to offer buyouts, and I thought, “Well, I’m ready to go. If it’s time to go, I’m ready to do it. If I can get a buyout, I’m going to go,” which I did. I applied for it that morning. It came back on the afternoon fax. I was ready to go. I told them there that I was going to move back to America. Miami was a really unusual place to work. Literally, you had to really be careful not to go in certain places. There were places there where the police wouldn’t even go. As for myself and my family, we all managed to survive without any loss of blood for all those years in Miami. My wife got a super job with AT&T. She was an international account executive for AT&T, so she was able to move her job back up here to North Carolina when we came back, so we moved back up here. We were very active sailors at the time. Moved to Oriental, where it’s a sailing town, and we were sailing actively up there until we both began to age out of it, so I guess that pretty much puts it together in a bottle. [laughter]

DH: Your dad was a famous scientist and had some interesting projects during those years. There was a lot more, I believe, freedom to do interesting things. And it was still that way when I got here. But that’s kind of tapered off now. But I know your dad – I can’t really say created, but the oyster house has always been an interesting item for the Beaufort Lab. Do you remember –

HP: You mean the oyster farm in North River?

DH: Farm, yeah.

HP: Yeah. Yeah, I remember that. It’s still there.

DH: Yeah, the house is there. Yeah. But do you remember anything about what it did or what was the –

DHP: My father was hoping to establish Pacific coast, maybe from Japan, oysters over here on the East Coast. He had crates and crates of live ones shipped over here. They arrived alive. So there is a canal beside the road going down to the structure, the building, and the oyster farm is what we called it. They set up racks to hold the oysters because the ones that were shipped were small. They set up racks to put them in. They would be able to live, hopefully, and grow larger. Blue crabs could not be kept out of there, and blue crabs were eating them. As fast as they could get them, the blue crabs were eating them up. Another thing that the oyster farm had also, out in North River, where the water was, in that area, like probably waist deep, there were oyster beds that I never did understand who owned them or who had leases on them or what, but they were – I thought I was told that they belonged to the government, so my father hired a watchman to keep watch on the oyster beds. Well, he proceeded to watch them and make sure that all his relatives got to clean out all the oysters they wanted to, and that was the end of that.

DH: [laughter] Another association with your name, at least when I came here, is, as you come on to Pivers Island, to the right is what we called Prythrech’s pond. Do you have any – and that had experiments done in it, I know. But do you remember, was that oysters as well?

HP: Yeah, it was. Back very early on, there was no sand out there. My dad hired – apparently, the experiments had finished because there were mudflats, and there was a little narrow roadway where a truck or a vehicle could go out and all the way around to the highway and back. There were two tidewater bridges where the waters could flush in and out from the big – from the pond out to the sound. My father hired a dredge boat operator named Sam (Morgan?), who came and set up just to the west of the Pivers Island bridge and pumped spoilage onto the peninsula out there, which is there now. In the meantime, my father had bought that land from the government, and he owned it then, so then he was going to have it filled and then maybe build on it. There was also a small piece of land on the east side of the Pivers Island road that he owned, which is now a marina. We never did do anything with the larger piece of property. When I was in college, if I was between quarters or during the summer and had nothing else to do, I would go over to Atlantic Beach and dig up cedar trees and bring them back over and plant them out there on the main part of that peninsula. Some of them had grown quite large and spread quite a bit, but there was nothing out there before then, before 1955. There was nothing growing out there but – nothing.

DH: I think one of our employees, Gene Huntsman, used that as a source of Christmas trees at one point.

HP: Gene would have done that.

DH: Yeah, he did do it. I can vouch for that. When I came, there was still – you could see some of the wood that had been used, I guess, to control water. Like you said, there maybe was a water gate in it at some time or –

HP: It was just a passage.

DH: Passage?

HP: Just a passage where the water could go through. And I don't think it was even screened off.

DH: Well, I know there was some rotting wood –

HP: There were little bridges, little bridges no wider than this – maybe not as wide as this room and then, left to right, just wide enough for one vehicle to get across. And they were soon rotting away.

DH: Do you know anything about Sam Morgan, the guy you mentioned?

HP: He operated a dredge, a big dredge moving around here and worked around here for years before and after my father ever hired him. I don't know anything about him personally.

DH: My source of information would be Henry Old (sp?), which was the gossip capital on the causeway. It was bar –

HP: A sunset bar, yeah.

DH: Yeah. One day, I was in there, and you could hear this bang, bang, bang coming across the marsh. It wasn't duck season –

HP: Pile driver?

DH: No, Henry –

HP: Shooting?

DH: – Sam came in. He had a brace of ducks with him. And somebody said, well, don't you know there's no season? He said I would shoot a duck off Eisenhower's head. Eisenhower was president at the time. [laughter] So that was changing times at that point. How about turtle rearing? The rearing of turtles – was any of that going on?

HP: Oh, yeah, quite a bit. There were terrapin breeding pens.

DH: Terrapins, I should have said.

HP: Terrapin breeding pens down the highway, the little road that went down to the Duke lab, there were three separate ponds or pens that were fed by water from the ocean. There were two that were behind the aquarium building.

DH: They're still there now.

HP: Are they still there?

DH: I think.

HP: They were fed ground-up menhaden, the terrapins were. I was told that they raised about 18,000 terrapin per year to take up to Maryland to help repopulate the waters up there.

DH: The radiobiology lab was moved into the old terrapin-rearing building.

HP: Really? I didn't know that.

DH: Yes, the wooden building there.

HP: Because when I was working for Dr. Chipman, the old radio lab was right – well, it was where the old aquarium had been.

DH: Well, that was also where they had, at some time, reared turtles.

HP: Yes, it was. When the young terrapins were newly hatched out of their eggs, and they were about the size of a quarter, they were brought into the terrapin house, we called it, the terrapin

house. And there were tanks in there that were set on an angle. I think they were all made out of cedar. They were set on an angle so that there could be some water down to the lower end, and the terrapins could get up to the dry end when they wanted to be dry. They had flanges across the top so that they couldn't climb up and get out because they'd pile up in a corner and come right over the top if you didn't do that. You had to put a – they were having problems with the skin on the little baby terrapins, so my dad cut up copper screen wire into four-by-four-inch squares and put a piece in each tank, and that stopped the infection, so they went – the little turtles went from that size to an intermediate size. I don't know what happened to them then. Maybe they took them back to Maryland then.

DH: That was all over with when I came because Chipman was already [inaudible], but there were still the pens on the road to Duke.

HP: Well, see, the lab was shut down in '49, and all that stopped. By then, they had stopped.

DH: By shut down, was it shut down absolutely, or was there a caretaker – or I mean there must have been a caretaker?

HP: There must have been someone watching the place. Everybody I can think that would have known anything is dead. Don Guthrie wasn't here yet. Vance Fulford was here and had been here, and he was gone. I don't know anybody that would have known about the interim period like that.

DH: Yes. Well, you guys break in with any questions.

Douglas Vaughan: How long was the lab shut down?

HP: Well, it was shut down in '49, and that was the year we moved to town, and I have no idea when it started – well, wait a minute. I started working for Dr. Chipman probably about summer of '53.

DH: Yes, that'd be about right.

DV: For about three, four years.

HP: So he was already here. And John Baptist was here, and Jack Price and Joe Higham Ted Rice hadn't quite gotten here yet, so they must have come here probably about '52 or '53, thereabouts.

DH: Chipman was – the radiobiology investigation was a special thing out of the shellfish thing in Washington, but it was here. But (Jerry Talbert?) was appointed the next director, I believe – no, somebody else. Anyway, when I got here, (Jerry?) was, and Chipman and (Jerry?) couldn't get along too good, because Chipman was independent, in his mind. And (Jerry?) wanted to make him [kowitz] to whatever he wanted. But I think the really funny thing is that Chipman got here before (Jerry?) and had moved into the director's house, so (Jerry?) –

HP: Yeah, Chipman was in the director's house?

DH: Yes. He stayed in it. And Jerry, who was technically director of the whole Beaufort Laboratory, had to find other housing.

HP: Jerry took over the old mess hall.

DH: He did. Yeah, I know.

HP: Yeah, it was the mess hall, that building.

DH: And then, though, that was moved or torn down, and he went into the little apartment – these two rooms on the island, which are still here, I believe. He had a new director's house built.

HP: Really?

DH: That's what that brick house is over there.

HP: A lot of those years when that stuff was going on, I was away from here, living away from here.

DH: I was essentially a kid really then, but I thought it was all amazing. [laughter] That was so amazing; it actually cost (Jerry?) his job because he wasn't supposed to do that.

HP: Really? It cost him his job, really?

DH: He got transferred back to the West Coast.

HP: Well, wasn't he from there?

DH: Yeah. It's like throw me in the briar patch.

HP: Yeah, right, one of those deals.

DH: Yeah. There's a whole building out there full of ex-directors up in Seattle, I think. When I went out there one time, I saw Ken Henry was there. They're all in there punching numbers. [laughter]

HP: We had one in Miami, a center director named Barry, Dick Barry.

DH: Yeah, Dick Barry.

HP: Richard J. "I-was-not-aware-of-that" Barry. He didn't know what was going on. They sent him out to Arizona somewhere, the Arizona menhaden fishery.



DH: As a kid, were you aware of visiting scientists coming and famous people?

HP: Oh, yes.

DH: Did you remember any?

HP: Yeah, Dr. McCutcheon, Frank McCutcheon. He had children that were close to our age, and I think Bruce, his son, went ahead and went on to get a doctor's degree in maybe animal science of some sort. I'm not sure what. His daughter died. Later in life, she died. Did you ever know Dr. McCutcheon?

DH: Yes. I was interested in fish physiology, and –

HP: He was an air bladder specialist.

DH: – and he was down at Duke in the summers, so I went down there to talk to him one time. He scared me to death.

HP: But you got away alive, huh?

DH: Yes. [laughter]

HP: He was a very scary person, even to his family. My father let him stay in the big old building that used to be here. There were dormitory rooms available. Daddy let Dr. McCutcheon stay in a couple of those rooms, he and his family. I don't know if they charged him anything or not. I don't know. It couldn't have been much. Dr. McCutcheon was an extremely thrifty kind of person. We always looked forward to seeing them come because children were a rarity for us to have. Living here on the island, we were very isolated. My mother could only make so many trips to and from town, and same with my sister. We fought World War II out here in the sand dunes behind the residence building. We were glad to see the McCutcheons. Other people that came, there were a number of other people that came. I don't know specifically who.

DH: I know Bruce, the son.

HP: Bruce, yeah.

DH: For quite a long time, he had a place outside of Beaufort. He actually lived there. Now he doesn't. But I did get some information on him.

JS: Herb, could you tell us a little bit about the main building, the old building, the laboratory building? You just touched on it. I've seen pictures out there. It's just fascinating to me.

HP: If you had a picture, I could probably point it out and tell you what different stuff was. Nothing was ever locked up. We'd come over here at night and play haunted house if we had other kids to play with. There was a huge center attic with all kinds of stuff in there. Over the

wings of the building, there were smaller attics that had stuff in there. But I'll never forget, we had visitors from the Marine Corps occasionally. One fellow was named George (Kelley?). He was a Marine. And he asked if we could store his bicycle in the attic. And we did. Years and years went by. We figured he was dead from the war. He showed up one day, took his bike and left, went pedaling off.

DH: [laughter] So you mentioned John Baptist and Jack Price. I know Jack, when he first came to the island, stayed in one of those dorm rooms.

HP: Did he? Yeah.

DH: For quite a while. He was a bachelor, and he would have still been there today had they not torn it down. I never got to see it. They must have torn it down about '55 or something because it wasn't here in '58.

HP: I don't know. Yeah.

DH: I would have liked to –

HP: It was here in '49. I don't know when it was torn down. Our lives just weren't involved with anything over here at that time.

JS: Where did you go to school?

HP: Beaufort High School, grades one through twelve; the building that's now being torn down.

DH: No, it's being rejuvenated, they say.

HP: Repurposed. That's the new word now, repurposed.

JS: Was there a bridge here so you could –?

HP: Yeah, there was.

JP: There was a bridge?

DH: A wooden bridge.

HP: Yeah. You could get on the brick wall underneath the bridge and sit there and listen to the cars go rumbling overhead. It was always a big thrill. [laughter]

DH: Yeah. One-land bridge.

HP: Yeah. That was a major improvement because, prior to that, you had to row a skiff from the main pier here to Captain (Tag Willis'?) dock, straight over there at the end of Front Street.

DV: When did they put in these bridges, do you remember?

HP: As far back as I can recall, so it would have been – I know my dad used to have to park his car in town and use a skiff to go back and forth.

DH: It was over – it's in the book. It's in Doug's book.

DV: In Doug's book, yeah.

DH: Yeah. It was here when I got here. It was a number of years after I got here before they tore it down.

HP: Yeah. And they kept it up, new [inaudible].

DH: It lasted, I think, better than the next bridge. This is the third bridge now.

HP: Really? What's tearing them down, or what's going on?

DH: The second bridge, saltwater got into the rebar and started expanding it.

HP: That'll do it. [laughter]

DH: And so they said – anyway, it's modern life. Let's see. Where am I? Anybody else have any other questions?

JS: You must have been here, Herb, almost in the heyday of the menhaden fishery, back in the '40s.

HP: Oh, absolutely.

JS: They must have been cooking [inaudible] fairly well back then.

HP: Oh, absolutely. There were five fish factories right around here, including one in Morehead and four here in Beaufort, I guess it was. Quinn and Harvey Smith right there together – Quinn's was going down in decline. Harvey Smith. Then going down Front Street, there was International Products or –

DH: Standard, was it Standard?

DV: Standard, probably.

JS: It would have been Beaufort Fisheries, Standard Products, but it could have been IPC before that, yes.

HP: And there was one at Morehead, right where the community college is now.

DV: One on an island out here or was that –

HP: That was gone before I can remember. That was the Phillips Island, Phillips factory there. Yes, that was gone before I can recall. It's brick – parts of it are still there.

DH: Did you ever go through any of the plants when they were operating?

HP: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they'd let you go onboard the boat while they were waiting to be unloaded, and they'd let you go on board the boat and break open the fish and take roe, get roe.

DV: In the fall.

HP: We used to do that. After coming back – after college, I went to work with Fred June here, for Fred June, and that was in the menhaden program. So I got to go to work in Reedville, Virginia, Amagansett, Long Island.

DV: Port Monmouth?

HP: Mostly, other people were doing Port Monmouth and Fernandina, although I did go to Fernandina.

DH: When we went in the Army together, who were you working for? You must have been here.

HP: I was here, working out of here, but I was stationed in Amagansett, Long Island, working as a field agent for Fred June. I had been going through the laborious process of getting a job application through with the feds, and I was beginning to get offers to go. So here came a special delivery notice from the post office, so I thought, "Ah, that's that job. That's that job I've been waiting for." So I go charging down to the post office. They handed me a letter that said US Army on it. That's not the one I'm looking for. [laughter] Around that time, Joe Higham came up. He was the field supervisor and said he knew what had happened, that my mother was friends of the lady, (Ruby Holland?), who was running the draft board here at that time. She saw me on the street right after I graduated East Carolina and called me aside and said, "Come here and let me talk to you. You understand my position. I can't tell you anything. I'm not going to tell you anything. But if you have any plans for the Navy or the Coast Guard or the Air Force, don't waste a minute." So I said, "Not to worry; I've already joined the Army Reserve." I'd just joined the 824. The very next week, in the mail, comes my draft notice, so they had me ready to go.

DH: And we have parallel stories on that. I got mine about a month after I joined the Reserves. But more interestingly is, within a year, we were called to active duty. [laughter]

HP: Yeah. Yeah, really. I figured this is a dangerous unit to be in because there aren't very many LST [Landing Ship, Tank] companies. I've got to do something about changing my assignment. But before I could move on it [inaudible].

DH: What they told me was they'll never be called up again because they were called up for Korea. That didn't work. It didn't work that they were called up for Berlin because they were also called up for the first Iraq war.

HP: I got out. When we all got out, I took a job immediately in Port Isabel, Texas. I went straight down there from here. I changed my assignment from here in Morehead to the Reserve unit in Brownsville, Texas, which was advanced infantry recon company, all little bitty Mexicans, and here I am head and shoulders above the rest of them. I'm the only one in the whole company that couldn't speak Spanish. I thought, "Holy shit." Then the Cuban [Missile] Crisis started. And I thought, "Here we go again."

DH: Yeah, we were spared. Any other questions, or would you like to add anything, Herb? You had an interesting career, I think.

HP: It's been different. [laughter]

JS: One thing, I didn't know of this connection, but you mentioned Dale (Tealing?). I worked for him for a year in Charleston. I was in Charleston for four years. But he was the head of the statistics office for the state –

HP: Yeah, I can see why he was. Yes.

JS: – and also licensing. I worked for him doing what you did, collecting the commercial statistics for the State of South Carolina.

HP: He was a good fellow, a native, and could talk to the people appropriately. There were some of the places that I went where the previous person had been from, I believe, Antioch College was what I heard the most of, people that didn't really relate to the people they had to interact with.

DH: That's where my wife went to school.

HP: Really?

DH: That's why she got here. No, they wouldn't relate at all.

HP: Yes. And I know that Jim Guthrie, who was here working for Fred June – I think he was sent to Port Monmouth to take over for somebody that they literally kicked off of the boat up there, this college student who had have gone and gotten in the first mate's bunk with his boots and weather gear on and everything on the boat. They were already talking treason to those fishermen anyway, with the way their outlooks were.

DV: So they could understand Jim Guthrie up in Fort Monmouth? It took me a while to –

HP: Maybe not.

DH: Is he still alive?

HP: One day, Ralph Nelson from Atlantic, Jack (Lewis?) from Atlantic, and I were out fishing for bluefish for Dr. Chipman's lab. As we were coming back in the inlet, I look up, and here's a man coming down in a parachute. We hadn't heard a plane or seen a plane. As it was, we found out later that the ejection sheet had automatically just kicked him out. They never could find the seat. Anyway, Jack said we had a student on board from – I think it was from Antioch on the boat with us. And Jack said something about “when-he bailed-out-on-her.” That fellow said, “What did he say?” I said, “When he bailed out of her.” But in down-east-ese, it’s “when-he bailed-out-on-her.” They truncate and run words. You put two of them together and let them get to jabbering amongst themselves, and it’s hard. You won’t understand them. Jim Guthrie – Jim and I were supposed to go to Florida. Well, we did it – go down there and spend about two weeks seining out creeks, looking for post-larval menhaden. Everything was all planned ahead and everything. I go pick up Jim somewhere on Front Street; I’m supposed to meet him. He says, “I got a little problem.” He says, “I ain’t got but twenty dollars.” I had budgeted enough so that we could very carefully live throughout that period and get that work done and get back up here. We were back up here with empty pockets, literally. He was good in the field. Jim was very lively. He could handle any kind of gear. You could turn him loose out on a mudflat, and he’d be kicking up clams with all fours. [laughter]

DH: Anything else?

HP: If you think of anything else, make a list of what you think of later, and I can always tell you later if it works.

DH: I really appreciate your taking the time. I wish we could have got your sister here as well. Even though she didn’t work for the lab, she had that early experience. But give our best to her.

HP: I sure will. I asked her about the films. Apparently, the movie films just sort of deteriorated.

DH: I bet. Yes.

HP: But there are slides that I think are probably still good. Years ago, she had had a misunderstanding with the museum about slides. They assumed that she was giving them the slides. And not so; she was loaning them to the museum, so she went down there and raised hell at them. They copied them, and she got her slides back, so she’s a little spooked about the slides right now.

DH: Joe is the one in our group who’s really in charge of slides as well as this interview. [laughter]

HP: I’ve got not a bad slide show that I put together from what – my dad took off and arranged to go out on one of the menhaden boats to take pictures. Yes. So we’ve got that. And it’s – I forget how many – maybe a couple of dozen slides of that and –

DH: Well, we're going to reconvene. We'd like to see them, for sure. We're going to reconvene in September, so don't do anything drastic until September. [laughter]

HP: I promise you I won't join the Army again.

Dh: Well, thank you very much, Herb. We appreciate it.

HP: Oh, I'm glad.

JS: Thank you, Herb.

HP: I hope it's been helpful.

[End of Track One.]

JS: We're going to do a supplemental interview with Herb Prythrech. It's July 17, 2017. And Bud Cross has joined us, former director at the lab, and he's got some additional questions for Herb, so we'll continue with the interview, part two.

Ford "Bud" Cross: Well, Herb, we heard that, during the war, there was a scientist that showed up that was actually a German spy, in the old two-story buildings. We never knew if that story was true or not. Since you lived here at the time, it would be good if you could shed some light on that for us.

HP: I very much remember that. His name was Sepreague. No one has ever seemed to be able to find him on any list of suspect types or anything. I'm not sure of the spelling, if it was with the letter S or the letter Z or C – Sepreague, Zepreague. There was the man and his wife, who were adults, and they had a teenage boy that was probably late teenage in age. They were in the dormitory downstairs on the east side. They had a couple of rooms. My dad was beginning to worry about them because of their behavior around, in, and out at night a lot. Then some complaints came from the police in town that the boy had been caught going aboard boats in Beaufort Harbor and opening up sea conches. When the men in black, so to speak, came, I was here that day. They opened up – both those rooms were all opened up, and there was a lot of stuff in there. Me, a curious kid, I really wanted to get in the middle of it and dig through it. I could just visualize all kinds of good stuff. But they kept me way out, way away. But they didn't have yellow tape, but they had men in black types that would keep anybody away, and so I never got near it, but the Sepreagues disappeared the night before. They vanished. And I never heard – never been able to find out what became of them. I wonder if they were really Germans, or maybe they were undercover CIA undercover types. Who knows what they were? I'd sure like to find that out. Doug Wolfe said he never was able to track it down, either.

DH: Did he have the name? I wonder if he knew their name?

HP: What I told him.

DH: Oh, you told him?

HP: Yeah. That was the name. I'll never forget the name because my dad was in World War I, almost in World War I. He missed it by just a fraction, so he didn't harbor any kind of sentiment for the Krauts.

FC: What about that – you said there was all kinds of good stuff in the room. Was it contraband they had stolen or was it spy equipment?

HP: I'm talking about suitcases, probably equipment. They didn't go around – I don't think they went around stealing stuff out of stores. How stupid can you be?

FC: It was some kind of equipment, though?

HP: Yes, something like radios or things like that. The last I heard was that they were chased down toward Wilmington, where they disappeared. There was an FBI agent that Daddy used to work with named Gordon Grant then. If anybody had access to his records, maybe he'd have something on it, but I haven't attempted to trace it or anything.

FC: Curious. Go back to that pond out there with all those pilings that are still there around it. Why were those pilings put there? What was kept inside the pond?

HP: Give me a sheet of paper, and I'll show you why they were there.

DH: I got it. In this interlude, Doug is going to sing a little song for us to keep us entertained.

DV: [laughter] You'll have to suggest a sing-song I know at least a couple of words from

FC: What is the song?

DV: I don't know. [laughter] Now, if my brother was here, he would sing various tunes from Broadway. He can sing; I can't.

FC: I can sing you The Old Rugged Cross. [laughter]

DV: Yeah, my brother's actually had voice lessons. He doesn't sing professionally, but he sings in an amateur group.

DH: I ought to shut this off.

HP: Okay, here's the causeway [inaudible].

FC: So the lab's up here, there? Okay

HP: Here's the lab. There was a bridge with an opening to the outer sound here and another one over here. This was just a little narrow road. The piling you would have seen would have been more around there and probably some along the way because there's nothing but sand and mud



out there, so this was just probably not wider than six feet so that a truck could go back and forth and haul stuff out. These were mudflats.

DV: Between the pond and Pivers Island.

HP: Yeah. This is the sound. Mudflats, sound – oh, wow, yeah. There's Sepreague's rooms right there, downstairs. But what we're talking about, this would have been over here in this picture. Terrapin breeding pens. This is the seahorse. And that might be the 33, boathouse. No, no, no, shop, boathouse, powerhouse, which is the only thing left in existence. It's in Beaufort. Mess hall. Where's the water tank? The water tank was beside, between the – beside the powerhouse. The water tank was about here.

DH: There was this water tank that was here when I came.

HP: That's saltwater.

DH: Yeah.

HP: Yeah. That, well, that was for these here and this. What was the date of that picture, '54? This was a pier that we just never used. This was a Coast Guard dock, where they stored gas cylinders for buoys and beacons and such. You use a skiff here to go over and tie up over here at Captain Jack's dock.

DH: Do you remember –? I was told that this part of this pond has some freshwater aquifer water.

HP: It did. Here's an artesian well right here. This was freshwater. These were salt.

DH: They were still using those ponds. Striped bass people used them.

HP: Yeah, really? Our big swimming beach was right over here.

FC: Did the public come over here and use the island much?

HP: Not a whole lot.

FC: Not a whole lot? Okay.

HP: They'd park here and walk over, and the place was open to see fish in the aquarium and museum displays.

DH: I remember some using the beach. But they may have been related to employees too.

HP: This is pretty much what you were asking me.

FC: What was in here?

HP: This is the pond that's there now (inaudible) water. This is water.

FC: But why did you close – why would your dad close that off with those pilings and that? Did he keep something in that pond, like mullet or –?

HP: No, no. It just had natural inflow from out here in the sound, and this one also related to it, and these were mudflats at low tide. At high tide, water could come in through either of these. You could walk through here and keep your feet dry at low tide. This was very marshy. This part of the pond, this side of it, was very marshy. This side was where there was water, but it was very shallow and muddy, so it was nothing we ever used. But this was where Dad had dredge spoilage fill piled up on all this. That's the area that I planted cedar trees in – anyway, ancient history.

DH: Okay, well, thanks again.

JS: Thank you, Herb.

HOSS: For part two. [laughter]

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/7/2022