

Name of Narrator: Johnny Bennett (JB SR)

Interviewer: Kimberly Singley (KS) and Yhambria Simmons (YS), with the permission of Johnny Bennett and for the research project “Boat Stories”

Primary Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, Georgia Southern University.

Transcriber: Kimberly Singley

Others present: No other people were present.

Date of Interview: November 12, 2021

Place: The UGA Marine Extension in Brunswick, Georgia

Duration of the interview: Twenty-seven minutes and fifty-nine seconds (27:59)

Repository for the recording: The audio recording will be uploaded to the website, Voices from the Fisheries (<https://voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/>)

Context for the Interview: Student interviewers sit down with Mr. Johnny Bennett as he outlines his history of the commercial fishing industry in Georgia.

General Description of Contents: Johnny Bennett discusses his family’s involvement in the commercial fishing industry in Georgia. He discusses the changes he has experienced over the years and paints a picture of what the future may hold for shrimpers in Georgia.

KS: Oh, thank you for coming in. This is an interview with, your name please sir, with Mr. Johnny Bennett on November 12 of 2021. The interview is being conducted in Brunswick, Georgia. It is part of the research project and interview collection titled Boat Stories and the interviewers are myself, Kim Singly and Yhambria Simmons. We know we already have your signed informed consent but we just need a verbal confirmation please.

0:45

JB SR: Yeah.

KS: Thank you. Alrighty, so how did you start fishing and why?

JB SR: Well, when I started, mama told us we was all two weeks old when we first went on a boat. That just generations, our family yeah, and I done tried everything and I don't like it. I like shrimp, fishing cause ain't nobody but you, if you're the boss man or you're doing ain't no bunch of people on the boat. It used to be fun but it ain't no more. It ain't nothing like it used to be.

KS: And why is that?

JB SR: Cause they closed all the sounds. Bryan and them don't like it. He's always grumble trying to say to put me on the Hercules, what caused it. That ain't what caused it, they closed the sound and that ain't why there's that many shrimp. When the boat sunk out herem I know y'all know that when that ship sunk and they built bird island there ain't near the shrimp they used to be. Whatever that bird island done, it killed the shrimp. It don't make sense, but it did. Used to drag St. Simons island and the snag hole that what we call them on St. Simons side of Jekyll, there be 25 to 50 boats in them two little spots. You lucky if you see 25 boats now. They used to sell 1800 licenses here in state of Georgia. Now they sell 180. Bryan don't agree with us. When the sound was open, that's when they sold all the license. Since they closed them there ain't near as many boats, walk up and down to the dock and look for yourself. It used to be I don't know how many fish houses there ain't but one left. And this is the most money we got out of shrimp this year we have in years. I don't know why but aint no shrimp out there now cause I made a four hour drag. Monday, Tuesday, weighed 100 something pounds and 100 something pounds and you supposed to be getting 10 or 15 baskets, ain't nothing. It's a big difference from what it used to be. And you got all of these out of states boats. I think that's one thing too. You got them big ol steel hulls come over here from 90 to 110 foot. They don't never shut them off; they drag

24 hours a day. So same thing like a chicken house. You go in and kill all the babies what you gonna have next year?

YS: Nothing.

JB SR: Huh, you ain't gonna have nothin. They was gonna try. I don't know if they're gonna do it. But they's gonna try to close it for 12 miles offshore where them boats won't drag 24 hours a day. I know the game warden tries to help us but they can't check all boats. We got to a limit size on the nets. And big steel hulls come over here. They drag 70 -80, 68, 95 foot nets. They don't ever check them what they do to local boats. So them big ol steel hulls, they up there stealing shrimp the whole time. And they..they just ain't got enough people to take care of it in my opinion.

4:16

KS: So I guess the next question would be, tell us about your current or most recent fishing vessel?

JB SR: Huh?

KS: Tell us about your current or most recent boat. And then the name.

JB SR: Oh the Dora F and the Flying Cloud.

KS: Has it always been named that?

JB SR: No, just the Dora F has. It been here since we first bought it when I was 16 years old, Ed Wallace did. And I've been working on it for many years. My daughter now, I raised her and her brother on that boat. She was 16 months old. He was six months old. Their mama left us and I raised them on that boat till they had to go to school. Now he didn't like it. She did.

KS: I bet that was hard.

JB SR: He didn't never like it.

5:01

KS: Are you the captain or the striker?

JB SR: Yeah

KS: You're the captain?

JB SR: Captain and the owner.

KS: So what all goes into being a captain and owner of a vessel?

JB SR: Spending a lot of damn money (laughter). Its a whole year ever had in shrimpin. Lets see, I lost my wheel, took five months to get that 'cause of this Corona junk. And the..the outrigger Jonthan's injection pump on the boat went out, now we run the shaft into it, took two months to get on the railway well ya, y'all seen it over there yesterday didn't ya? That's what we're doing over there now.

KS: That's your boat?

JB SR: Yeah that one and the Dora F is the orange and white one. That one.

KS: Those are some nice boats though.

JB SR: I think the.. I think the Dora F is, wait a minute now, either 66 or 67 year old I think. I'm a year older or two year older than the boat.

KS: So can you tell us what kind of boat each one is?

JB SR: Huh?

KS: Can you tell us what kind of boat they are like, are they wood hull or fiberglass?

JB SR: Their woodhull with fiberglass over it.

KS: Um..Is it similar to like all the other boats that are operating in Georgia?

JB SR: No, most of em around here are steel hull now. Ain't but a few of us left with wooden boat and fiberglass over. Lets see, the Bernis is still wood but all the rest of em is got fiberglass over em.

KS:Which is best: the woodhull or the steel?

JB SR: Mmm...I like fiberglass.

KS: Fiberglass?

JB SR: It's maintenance free.

6:53

KS: (laughter) Oh that's nice. What's unique about your boat?

JB SR: Huh?

KS: What's unique about your boat? What is unique about your boat?

JB SR: Unique? There ain't nothin unique about it, it's just a boat to me. (laughter)

KS: Umm..What has this boat been through in the years you've been on it or before your time?

JB SR: What it been through? Lets see I sunk it twice, and the man used to own it uuhhh..RA they sunk it one time. I can tell you that much. I saved it both times. Then George Truck, he fibreglassed it for me, him and his son Bubba Truck and them. That's about it.

7:40

KS: So tell me about the people you work with on your boat. Who do you work with?

JB SR: Oh Hippy, He works with me now that's what we call him Hippy.

KS: Why do you call him that?

JB SR: Used to have long hair and a ol long beard. (laughter)

KS: What's one of the best memories of you on your boat?

JB SR: Huh? The best one I ever had was my daughter and my brother. I never had, she never grew up on, hard work with me, and my brother name..his names George but we call him Hall. He worked with me about I don't know 30 years.

KS: What did he do for you in those 30 years?

JB SR: He was my striker, he was what you call a strike.

KS: Oh what is that?

JB SR: Huh? when that cleaned the deck and stuff

KS: Oh okay.

JB SR: Same thing my daughter was, she was a striker. I let her drive. Sometimes she drove and Jonathan, he drove when he was little. The one ya'll gonna interview next will be Jonathan.

KS: What is the funniest thing that's ever happened on your boat?.

JB SR: Ain't fun, ain't ever had nothing funny on it.

KS: It's all work?

JB SR: No, we used to play on the boat. We all have mayonnaise fight, mustard fights and egg fights, just playing on the boat, squirtin' each other with a water hose, stuff like that. Used to you could jump off the bow of the boat and we had a rope hanging on outrigger, swim and catch it. You can't do it no more. Too many damn sharks. Y'all aint seen nothing there's sharks out there that look like the hair on your head. (laughter) They eat ya head up, nets, all of them. Oh yall have y'all seen it? Sometime it take two or three days to sow up two nets when they bite chunks out of em.

KS: How often does that happen?

JB SR: It's kind of slacking off cause this waters gettin cold when the waters hot that's every day. Some days you gotta take two or three days off just to fix the nets and they say their a shortage of em.

KS: That's a lot of lost time.

JB SR: Huh?

KS: That's a lot of lost time and money huh?

JB SR: Yeah, and that car out there, that car ship. We've been taking it to the lawyers. We got stuff laying on the dock now bumpers, where ya finders at, that stuff will layup against your turtle shooter stead of going in your bag all goes right back overboard. Like the other day we had five baskets on one side they didn't have nothing on the other side. Everything went back in the river, that's kinda aggravaten'. And they talk about how to brag and how good of a job they done people ain't out there to see it it'd be ol thin all over top of water Jekyll and St. Simon. Where we drag at oh that we done such a good job. They ain't done nothing cause they aint nobody out there looking for it. Lets see time most of the time there ain't but four or five boats dragging on the beach over there and that's us, and ain't nobody out there looking so they talkin' about oh, all the boats is going shrimpin every day and doing good they ain't check none of us. Ain't nothin but a bunch of damn lies all of it, ain't...ain't none of them out there really checkin' you be well on shore on the rocks you can see the oil fan. I don't know if you know what that is. You ever put oil in water and see how it does?

KS: Yes.

JB SR: That's the way it is out there in the river. Truck, the one that works here at the University, I ain't gonna-well..he one of them I showed him what they called tar ball and from the oil it gets so thick and it just wads up in a knot up in a ball. I caught 2 or 3 of em, and everybody like ooh don't show that to him Johnny they'll shut us down. Well I didn't save it, I took it over there and threw it in the dippy dumpster. It ain't nothing like it used to be, it used to be fun.

11:50

KS: Why do you think it's changed so much?

JB SR: Huh?

KS: Why do you think it's not fun anymore?

JB SR: Cause you don't catch the shrimp you used to. You got to aggravate and you got to come in and you got to sow all day long or take another day. So next week we can go back out again.

YS: When was your last greatest catch?

JB SR: Huh?

YS: Like when was your last greatest catch?

JB SR: Shooo.. that's been damn years ago and ain't nothing like. Now row shrimp do good cause they're more of em. Now why, I don't know why they die. You can go down here this bridge in the sound where Truck and all them that dare drag and they can see shrimp in the sound. But when they get to the ocean, there ain't as many as there used to be. You know anything about farmin a garden or plantin flowers?

KS:A little bit.

JB SR: Alright if you don't keep it clean is anything gonna grow?

KS: No.

JB SR: Alright, that sound full of it, what we call that old grass, ol' yellow grass, purple, all kind of.. It's so thick in there and the mud..the mud in the sound is sludge ain't nothing to make that sludge move and ain't nothin can feed. Yeah all of the boats used to go on the sound and dump the you know the by catch whatever we call it back over board. That's what everything used to eat: the crab, the shrimp, the fish and all that. ain't no boats dumpin' nothin' in there no more. You gotta figure from 180 to 1800 license that a lot of different boats. There aint near the boats in the state of Georgia they used to be. Georgia used to be the capital of the world in shrimpin. It would almost near the bridge, that man that sailed The Vonn when he first moved here. He'll tell ya when you come across the near bridge, the old bridge, not the new one, the old one. That's what it says: Welcome to State of Georgia, the capital of the world shrimpin. But it ain't no more.

KS: Do you think? Do you think that's because of the weather or the sound?

JB SR: No, it's the sound. It's closed. If you don't cultivate nothin ya aint gonna have nothin to grow. That's same way with a garden. If they don't keep the field clean they ain't gonna grow nothing. They tried to say it's the full mill and the Hercules. When they cleaned the Hercules up, you know where that is?

KS: No, sir.

JB SR: On 17 over there. Don't go this way (pointing in one direction) but go down and come off of spur, comin that what they call the Hercules over there. Over there that's one of them, my aunt bait place is. Bennett Bait place on St. Simon's causeway, you seen that?

KS: Yes, sir I have.

JB SR: Alright. When that was over there when I was young. Before they started cleaning up the Hercules putting that stuff and it killed all the oysters over there. We used to go over there an get a boatload and boatload of oysters. Ain't no more over there. Billy B, he my cousin, baits fish when he used to go up there and steal shrimp in what we call Britville {?}. Go up there and you drag, you catch plenty of shrimp but now when you got up there and drag you gotta get the grass out the way for the shrimp to get in there.

KS: That's more work for you, isn't it?

JB SR: Huh?

15:22

KS: That's more work.

JB SR: Yeah. The shrimp won't go in there. They don't want to go in there cause there ain't nothin to feed on that bycatch as ya'll call it, as they call it, that's what everything feeds off of. The seagulls, the shrimp, the fish, the sharks, everything that's what they feed off of the bycatch. And on nets, the sharks will hang up in it. I mean the little fish will hang up in it an the sharks eat the hell out of it. They used to let em catch sharks but they cut that off, say there's a shortage of em. And them things look like piss ant beds out there. There's so many of them. They aint on a boat every day to look at. That just like that right there, all that stuff you reading there I don't know what that is. And like Bryan, I can't tell him what to do, I never done it. You got to get on a boat and work on it every day to know what's going on. That's like any kind of job you just can't walk up there hey you doing this wrong. And there ain't nobody never done it. Used to..they used to uh, let's see I done forgot all their names. They used to all of em, Billy Reddit and all em used to go. Jim Paige, they all used to go shrimpin with us, conckin, shrimpin. They get on the boat, they write down that stuff every day and they know exactly what we caught. When they grazed them other channel deeper and they pumped all that sand on Jekyll beach and they call it nursin. That's what killed all the conks and want to call him big black mussels. It killed everyone of em. You tell me now tilt this table, take your end and pick it up this way. (JB

showing us how to tilt the other side of the table up) So you had it real high, how's sand gonna stay up there when water comes up there washing it back and forth? Is sand gonna stay up there? Oh, it's gonna stay there. I said there ain't no damn way that computer crazy. That's sand you put up on that beach aint gonna stay there. It ain't not up on a hill, it's gonna wash downhill. They claim it's gonna stay there that's the reason why they pumped it there. Since they pump that sand over there point to Jekyll where they got that ship sunk, there used to be a sandbar run right beside the channel now that sandbar done moved way over there. You better watch where you goin you gonna run the ground and a whole bunch of stuff has changed since that ship run the ground there

18:05

KS: What...when do...what do you think the future of commercial fishing is going to look like?

JB SR: You wanna know the truth, shit?

KS: Yeah.

JB SR: It's gettin worser every year. Everybody, a lot of people around here gettin out of it. If you ain't got the money to buy one of them big steel hulls to go travel from Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina. You, like us with a small boat, you ain't gonna have no future. Cause ain't no fish out there like it used to be and they got everything closed. The sound, North Carolina, I think is the only state left that got the sound open and they do the best there is. Every winter coming up now they kill the shrimp. I don't think we gonna have no shrimp this year cause of that ship. I dont.

KS: Because of this one..the ship? (pointing to the sunken ship outside)

JB SR: Yeah, the one that sunk.

KS: Yes sir.

JB SR: There ain't nothin up there. That's the only thing I figure. We have so many row shrimp we do every year, we got all boats come from everywhere. Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Alabama. All them big ol steel hulls over there. That why they need to put it twelve mile and close it at night time. Kill the shrimp, the turtle, the fish, everything, chance to lay their babies, lay their eggs. They ain't got a chance no more. You're going to rob a chicken house you ain't gonna have no babies steal all the eggs (laughter) That's the way I look at it.

19:51

KS: What changes do you think need to be made so that you can progress?

JB SR: Just like I just told ya just then.

KS: Just all of that.

JB SR: Yes uh, you need to open the sound up. You ain't gotta drag no nets, just let em going to hook tickle chain to the door, clean the bottom up, let the mud move in there, creeks. And that's what we call sluge I don't know what the hell they call sludge, is all it is. They got clean the bottom off where they have something to eat, in my opinion.

KS: Why do you think South Carolina still has their sounds open?

JB SR: They don't, South Carolina dont.

KS: They dont?

JB SR: North Carolina.

KS: North Carolina? North Carolina.

JB SR: Yup. Oh, they try to close it too now. The Sport fisherman tryin to close it too. They all pushin it to close it.

20:54

YS: How do you think like..um the closure of the sound and then the um kind of the shrimp like how has it affected you? As a fisherman?

JB SR: Oh, we gettin' poorer and poorer over here, broker and broker. I'll ask ya a simple question, you take a pie you got 18 pieces in there. Right? I mean 180 pieces. Should you get a bigger piece, when you think about 180. You should get a bigger piece of pie. You know you ain't understanding me. You got 1800 eatin' that same pie. Ah, you ain't got bought 180 left? How..how much should you get then? A bigger piece. Alright, we should be catching more shrimp. Right? They closed the sound you ain't catchin near as many. So what that tell ya? All the boats in North Carolina you can go up there, check with all of them. They tell you the same story. Brian Kent, Joe Wimms and all their daddy and all that. But all the younger fishermen bout my age in the 60s they'll tell ya they all want whats here. When our sound was open all Georgia sounds were full of out of state boats. They closed it. How come there aren't as many shrimp. It's got worser. Huh? It's not makin any sense to yall, it dont.

KS: It doesn't.

JB SR: Well, same thing if you got a whole bunch of people eatin' at a restaurant, used to come here to travel just to buy food all the time. You gone get richer, right? Alright, there ain't nobody comin no more. Since they closed the sound, they don't come as bad, they used to pour in here. That's where State game used to make their money at 1800 license they sell. But they dont sell but 180 now. So what that tell ya? Ain't near as many boats. But they knew...do now they need to do something about the sound. If they don't let up they used to let us, I think it was three times or two times out of the month drag. That did help a bunch. But they don't let you do that, no nothing no more. South Carolina you can't even go in their sound with ya net dragging in the water and they'll prosecute ya. You anchor with your door just ya door in the water they can write ya a ticket. North Carolina, they drag in their creek, everything what they called a little skimmer boat. You dont drag nothin in our creek except for bait boats and they got they got way more shrimp then we got. That's the way I look at it, if they don't ever open it up they just gonna get worsen and worsen every year. Just let the boat go in an drag tickler chain and move the grass around and let that mud steady been. I can get a bunch of cars going into ball and all that mud just sit there and settle you got to move that. They get to the hard pan where they can feed. Ain't hardly nobody drag around here. I dont see no folks no more. Oh, we caught fish this week. Up to yesterday. I've been on this boat I seen on Jekyll Beach. There used to be 50 or more boats up there ain't nothing up there no more. All of what we call the middle of the slew, the dump, the racks slue, Sea Island. Once in a while you might see four or five boats. That's it, everything is change. It sure ain't for the better is for the worse.

KS: Why? Why is it that other boats can drag 24 hours but you can't?

JB SR : Oh, they got them big boats. They are all short and they can fight the rough weather. Them pictures in there, the old little boats, that's what used to be here. But the boat has gotten so big, now they drag 24 hours a day, they don't care, they don't own the boat. If they owned it they wouldn't do it; they don't give a damn what they catch. Yeah they do good. I ain't gonna say they don't, they do real good. But they drag 24 hour a day. Ain't a fish or shark, nothins got a chance with them draggin out there. Them ol big boats will tell ya, they eat their nets up, but they got so much money they can afford to buy stuff. I know I don't like them freezer shrimp boat. I don't like eaten shrimp of them. I done tried em. I don't like em. And like anything is fresh tastes better than anything froze. They call em fresh shrimp. They ain't fresh shrimp. They ain't caught that

day and ain't come in here and unload. Some of them be 30 days or longer or older. So how that fresh, it's called froze fresh. That don't mean nothin.

26:13

YS: Do you have any recommendations for the future of commercial?

JB SR: Huh? Do what?

YS: Do you have like any recommendations for the future of commercial fishing?

JB SR: Hmm, yeah like I told ya, open the sounds up. Clean it back up, so that they don't clean that up. Ain't no ain't ever gonna be like it was. I don't care what none of em says. That's where that black gill comes from, a shrimp feeds off the bottom he laying down that mud gets up in his gills. And that's same thing like you get a sore it just, it dont heal.

KS: Well, do you have any other information that you'd like to share at all?

JB SR: Mhm.

KS: No. You just want to get back to work.

JB SR: Yeah, I gotta go back over there to work. If I don't they go goof off.

KS: We can't have that. Alrighty, well, thank you for coming in sharing your story with us.

27:10

JB SR: Like I said if they need to get a whole bunch of people like Jim and them use to go with us. They used to go shrimpin with us all the time, shrimpin, conkin. Now you don't see no more conkin, you dont see no more crabin. There used to be so many crabs here in the state of Georgia, it was pathetic. You dont see the crabs we used to catch 5,000 to 10,000 pounds a day.

KS: Wow.

JB SR: Since they close the sound there ain't hardly no carbs no more like it used to be.

KS: We need more crabs because that's what I eat.

JB SR: What? Crab?

KS: Yes sir.

JB SR: I like hard crab.

KS: I eat crab and shrimp.

JB SR: Yup, crab and shrimp. I like fish.