

Name of Narrator: Jonathan Bennett (JB JR)

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

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

Transcriber: Yhambria Simmons

Others present: No others were present.

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Place: Brunswick, GA

Duration of interview: Twenty-eight minutes and two seconds (28:02)

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: Interviewers chat with Johnathan Bennett as he discusses his role in the local fishing community.

General Description of Contents: Jonathan Bennett discusses how he has been involved in the commercial fishing industry since birth. He talks about working with his grandfather and the importance of maintaining a good crew. Even though he is young, he talks about his future in the industry and the changes he wants to see occur.

YS: This is an Interview with Jonathan Bennett on November 12, 2021. The interview is being conducted in Brunswick, Georgia. It is the research project and interview collection titled Boat Stories. The interviewers are Yhambria Simmons,

KS: Kim Singley.

YS: Alright, Jonathan, can you tell us how it you all start? Like fishing?

JB JR: What do you mean like fishing from the beginning or with me?

YS: Yeah, how did it all start with you?

00:34

JB JR: I was born into it. My granddad, he owned boats all my uncle's we own bait businesses, and everything. So I just kind of raised up into it and that's what I've done my whole life since I graduated, I started running boats and I don't want to do nothing else really, it's freedom.

YS: So since you were born into it, do you like it? Or is it something that is natural to you?

JB JR: Its something kind of natural you know, you gotta love it. You know, you can't like it.

[Laughter]. You see, it's not really a fun job all the time. But yeah, I do love it. I've done many other jobs. I've done tree servicing, mechanic-ing and everything, but aint nothing like shrimping, shrimping you do a little bit of everything. You know, carpenting, welding, you name it. You gotta do it all. So, its cool, you know?

01:24

YS: Tell us about your most recent vessel. And what was the name?

JB JR: The most recent one is the one I'm running now, its The Flying Cloud its a 85 by 24 foot wide got a twin Caterpillar unit in it 3 43's. And uh she, she a good ole boat. And uh the one I ran a good almost about three years ago was the Dora F, its the one my granddaddy runs now is a 65 foot by 20 foot she's a nice ole boat. She got single 343 in it. And so we like the caterpillars. But we've had six or seven of them since I've been growing up. And that was probably my favorite one. You know, biggest one I've ever ran. That's my most recent one anyway.

YS: Really, Can you tell us about the people you work with?

02:11

JB JR: Um, I like a lot of older men really. Because like they actually know how to work you know a lot of people my age. I mean, I'm only 24 and a lot of people my age are lazy, they do not like to work and I like to work you know, I like to grind so yeah. I like pick a lot older man I got one boy my age I kind of grew up with him you know kind of look after him , so I'll take him in all the time, but most time I got older fellas that work with me. There, have one he was a Russian worked with me for about, I don't know a good four or five years he was, he was a character we call him Hippy. You know, crazy old Joker but uh he remind me of Lieutenant Dan off Forrest Gump, no joke, he got a big old beard and everything but yeah, you get some interesting characters you like people from Alaska all over the world and everything you'll find them down here docks wanting jobs you know and it takes certain kind of person be a fisherman you know, you can't have a fear of anything really. You know. So, pretty cool characters.

YS: Have you had like, specific roles or multiple roles on the boat?

JB JR: Who me?

YS: Yeah.

03:19

JB JR: I do a little bit of everything I kind of have to get greenhorns you know non experienced people you know so, I know how to do everything on the boat so a lot of times I'm out there having to show him how to pick different shrimp, according on how good of a first mate you have. If you have a good first mate I can show them you know I can stay up there and do what I'm supposed to I drive you know so make sure the boats don't drive, and a lot of hangs a lot of people think you just dump your nets over board it's free dragging but oh no you got to pay attention what you're doing and but yeah, I'll do pretty much everything on the boat, mechanic work and I'm the only engine room kind of fella though because I like to make sure my stuff right but uh yeah I do everything.

YS: And you said the boat that you're on now the name is Captain..

JB JR: It's the Flying Cloud.

YS: The Flying Cloud is that boat, Is it special to you? Like does it have any special features or like-

04:13

JB JR: Not really it was a it was a straight lemon when we bought the joker, shouldn't of bought it you know put way too much money into it we have I mean I don't know, I like it but I've just I've put so

much money into the boat ain't no getting rid of it. You know so but I mean it's one of the nicest boats you know you get in the pilot house [disruptive noise] this is like the living quarters for the crew just on the boat you know and you got the neck spotter there where I sit and drive pretty good size boat but you know so I mean it's comfiest one I've ever stayed on, you know. But so far, sentimental, that one my granddaddys got, he had that one since he was 16 years old. And that's pretty much bought every other boat there is, so that one is sentimental and I'd get rid of the big one before I would that one.

YS: Do you have like any can you discuss any good or bad memories with the boat?

05:08

JB JR: Well I mean a lot of heartache, you know what I mean? Like most time you know what the storms you got all your break downs anytime you know, it's it's a business you got to stick to because it ain't always just money, money, money like you can't like if it's rough, you know you ain't making no money if you nets aint in the water your not making nothing. And like right now I'm just doing nothing but spending money, spending money you know I can't work. And so that's that's your downs of it but you know what I mean, but as long as you can get out here and work with it your ups with it the money you make so I mean that's that's why I like it that's why I stay into it, but yeah, so very very aggravating job you gotta, yea.

YS: Can I guess do you remember like what year you make probably make the best money from your fishing?

05:58

JB JR: Probably whenever the first year I graduated high school it probably be like 2015 or 2016 and one of them years. Yeah, it's probably my best year whenever I first started actually running a boat. you know, I don't remember exactly what I made but it was pretty good little chunk. And that was probably my best year around 2016 or so. I had a decent one at the beginning of this year but then my boat you know I broke a shaft I've been waiting months to go on a railway to get pulled up so yeah, I've been dealing with that issue is probably my worst years.

YS: So how do you think commercial fishing is doing overall in Georgia? Have you seen changes in water or sea life?

06:40

JB JR: Well I've seen a lot of changes since black gill that's been here for a good four or five years probably longer now you know, and that's mostly a change you get from you know what I mean? Like every shrimp you get probably three out of five or so gets black gill in them, and I don't know if that's exactly what's killing them all. But you ain't got that in North Carolina. You ain't got it in the bottom of Florida. They're just kind of like starting to get in South Carolina, so I believe that's Georgia ain't been the same we've been having to travel to go make money, like I made most money this year in South Carolina and Florida. Georgia just kind of been like falling off terribly. I don't know if it's all the mills around here. I don't know if this to get anything to do with the ship but it's all just Georgia has had a bad streak the last few years.

YS: So like what do you think Georgia should do for the future? Like changes they make, changes to make commercial fishing better here?

07:34

JB JR: I believe they should keep the beaches shut a little longer you know instead of opening them up so much you know because as soon as they open them up you're out there getting 40, 50 basket drags of tiny little shrimp like that. And if you're killing all your little ones you ain't getting no big ones you know, you can't have big ones, they're having babies, you know, if you kill them all when they're small, you're just killing your crop. You know, and that's that's really the only thing I can really think of and open the sounds up so you can clean all the breeding grounds out you know, if you don't tend to your garden, you know, all the Briars and everything get up in there. Same thing with the bottom of the ocean, man. You got to till it up, clean it you know, like natural selection and with animals if you ain't got enough animals taking these animals out, these overpopulate like sharks. Sharks are like our biggest problems. You get to work for three or four days, you got to take four or five days off to sew the nets. And it's nets are about four grand a piece. You get to drag them for about two months and you gotta buy all the new ones you know because the sharks just destroy 'em. And I mean, they definitely need to do something with them for sure. But so far shrimping industries, yeah, they just need to DNR need to regulate how they open them and everything in my opinion.

YS: So like, was there a time where the sharks were the sharks weren't a problem?

08:53

JB JR: When I was a boy it wasn't too bad I used to swim around here all the time. You know, never had problems wouldn't think twice about jumping overboard, but now you know, I can show you pictures of 10, 12 foot sharks I caught right there off the boat and everything. I've had them swim around me when I'm diving under the boats and you know they're just everywhere you look never seen sharks up in here you know, offshore you might have seen one every now and then in the nets. But now it looks like something off of a movie. You throw a fish, so it's like a bunch of piranhas everywhere. It's not a joke its crazy. But yeah, when I was probably I don't know 8 or 10 they weren't that bad. The last six seven years they've really increased like they've gotten really bad.

YS: So going back to your boat have you had to make any major structural changes to it?

09:44

JB JR: Oh yeah, we had to take and tear the whole actual top of the deck off everywhere you walk, we had to take all the rigging off to we had to rebuild the whole entire boat when I first bought it pretty much. yeah, all new ribs, all new deck boards, new ice holes. We took and redone the whole back of the pilot house. Everything is and I'm fixing to get ready take all the rigging off again I got to rebuild all my outriggers and everything so this we put an actual shaft in it now so 28 foot shaft I got two of them in there but that's what we're doing to it now, replacing the shaft.

YS: And what is it made out of like, is it fiberglass or wood?

JB JR: Its wood over fiber or fiberglass over wood.

YS: So Like, how expensive does it get for you? Like with all the repairments?

10:33

JB JR: Well, just this one repairman right there and my shaft by itself was about 10 grand and it's \$250 a day every day my boat sits up there and I'm paying two other workers \$70 an hour to help me out. And so I'm looking at around 25 grand and within a week and a half worth of work over there. Yeah, [laughs] its terrible sometimes but thats what I say you got to love it you make up for it though if you get it you got to you got to put money into your boats. A lot of these people man, you see them with raggedy boats and they don't put their- No, I mean ain't a joke, I'm funny but my boats got to be clean. It's got everything's got to be taken care of because I don't want nothing to break, it could cost somebody's life

you could lose your boat. If you lose your boat, you aint paying for nothing and you just losing all that but yeah, you got to put money back into your boat that's the main thing about it. If you don't you just wont have a job that's a hole in the water.

YS: Okay, do you have any recommendations for I guess in the future for the future of commercial fishing?

11:53

JB JR: Honestly, I don't know man it's gonna be tough for them, it really is. Shrimping it ain't done nothing but get harder and harder every year you got more regulations, more things you got to do, more things you can't do, more things you got to have on your boat just to go fishing and you know you got to go through the act of law just to go out there and go drag. Coast Guard's got to help you with all kinds of certifications and it's mostly because I bought such a bigger boat though, if you got a 65 foot and under you don't have to have as much which you can go drag in the same places I do just because I got a bigger boat I have to spend like an extra \$15,000 just to make sure I have all the equipment and everything just to go out there and go drag, it just gets aggravating. And your license is more expensive. Everything. But the future shrimpers? Man I feel bad for 'em. I really do. Because a lot of them just don't if they weren't born into it, you know a lot of them coming off of it you know they it's just too much work for 'em. It really is. Because its back breaking man by the time you 50, 60 years old you about worn out on that scrap. [Laughs] Thats why it does help to have future ones to come in and help them out. But not everyone is lucky as my granddaddy you know a lot of them you see him they're 80 years old and they're still working. Because they got to you know, they aint got nobody else Cuz nobody man they're like, the heck with that crap. Yeah, it's like woof it's a tough job for sure. But, money can be made. It's just you got to have a big boat, you got to put the time in it and you got to be dedicated for it. That's all it is to it.

YS: Do you see yourself being 80, 90 years old still on the boat?

13:38

JB JR: No, not at all. I'm still gonna have boats but i'm not going to be no, we're pretty set now. you know what I mean? I'm just going to buy other businesses you know, because I don't want to be that old

workin, I just really don't want you know, some of them they like to you know, because some of them old men and once wants you work that long you can't just quit you know, your body can't take it so used to it. But yeah I don't plan on wanting to work when I'm 80 years old.

YS: What have you understand about fishing vessel vessels now than when you first started?

14:17

JB JR: Well, When I first started I was just crew man, you know, so you just had to kind of worry about crew duties but understanding now you know being as a captain, you know, its, a lot more responsibility. You know, you definitely got to pay attention a lot more what you're doing you got every man on that boat's lives or in your hand you know, you're driving the boat, you're supposed to know what you're doing. You know, and so far as learning about them as I got older and I had to start paying for them, they're expensive. And they're they're like their toys pretty much at the same time but they are a business. And they turn out to be your wife, pretty much if your married that boat is gonna get way more attention than she is. So that's that's about what I've learned about 'em. If you want to make money you got to spend most of your time. You know, you miss a lot of birthdays, lot of holidays, a lot of stuff, you know, because sometimes you know, when it's pretty nice days, there ain't no shrimp out there. But when it's rough, the weather's beatin', you know, and I mean, it might be somebodys birthday, but hey you could make that much money this day. You know, I'm sorry, we can make up for that later. You know, but you miss a lot of your life on a boat.

KS: So what is the best memory you have on your boat? Or any of the boats you've ever been on? What's the best memory?

15:45

JB JR: I mean, just catching a bunch of shrimp. It really is. I mean, the whole part about it, you know? I don't know, I don't want to say the best one I've had. i dont know I've had to sit and think about it for a minute, but just kind of throw it out. You know? I mean, I'll just it's beautiful being out there. You get to see a lot of stuff. Nobody else gets to see cool animals you know, man, stuff you wouldn't believe. You know, you always get watched sunrise, sunset. You know, except for when its rough, you know, but my best memories are probably just you know, it's like a camping trip. You know, you're hanging out with the boys out there making money. You know, hanging out you got all your TVs, your air conditioned, you know? Yeah. You know, you aint out here living un-comfy you know, we'd be playing video games,

zombies on the boat, you name it. We watch everything. Its pretty cool man its,its. So like I said, You gotta love it, man. I wouldn't do nothing else.

KS: What's the funniest thing that's ever happened on a boat? Cuz, We heard about mayonnaise and mustard fights.

16:47

JB JR: Nah, I've never done that I'm kind of clean freak, you started throwing mayonnaise and mustard in my pilot house. I'm gonna-[laughs], We've had deck hose fights, and throwing baby sharks and jelly balls at each other and this and that at each other, and you know ice fights, stuff like that little, long as it's on the back deck. You know, but I don't know, probably one of the funniest ones I've ever had is I've had boys fall over boys. You know, it's like [laughing] screaming for help. You know, they gone get ate by a shark. That's everybody's biggest fear. They hit the water. They're like, Oh, God help me! You know, the funniest moment I think I've ever had is, whenever I fell off the boat over at the dock, I was actually taking a big old part and it was cold. It was very cold. And I went across the boat. There's a little bit of ice. And when I was holding that part, man, I hit the water and it was like, instant I was on bottom. You know, trying to come up had to kick my boots off. And I finally get up on the dock man. I feel like an icicle. And I don't know. I thought it was funny cuz I was screaming the whole way down. That was probably one of my funniest moments on there. I've had other ones but I said I'd say and think about it for a second.

KS: So we heard you have two children. You don't want your kids doing this type of job or what if they want if they grew up and said I want to be a shrimper, would you let them?

18:07

JB JR: If my boy wanted to yeah, my little girl, no never I don't ever want her on a boat. She can come out there for a trip, you know, just for fun over the summer. You know what I think my little boy, he's growing up. He's a lot like me, you know, he's real talented to be young, you know, and I think he would be a pretty good captain. And if he didn't want to be, you know, 'cuz I didn't want to really be a shrimper. But kind of went in there but whatever he wants to do, thats what im going to let him do I'll

probably want to put him through college. You know, that's what I kind of wanted to do. But uh, you know, just my granddaddy you know, he's kind of taken care all of us so I had to kind of jump back in his spot so.

KS: Had a good question where to go. Do you see yourself buying another boat in the future? Are you just gonna stick with this one?

19:05

JB JR: I was thinking about having myself buy another one I was I don't know. It's a hard decision . You know? I gotta get this one a little more ready. And when I get this one ready, I will probably go ahead and fix my granddaddies boat back up. But uh, I don't know. It just depends. It's hard to find a good captain. You know? Because like I was telling her that we bought a bought one about two years ago now. It's same size as mine. My uncle and us we you know, we went in there and we went and got one. And as man it was more so we probably ran it for good, good few months and the captain actually ran it up on the rocks, the [second force?]. And we've still had to pay for that boat. So it was a big nice boat. I had two motors like mine, you know, central air and heat ,everything on it you know, big, big old boat. Yeah, that's what happens for you. We, you know, it's hard for somebody you can trust you know, here's this piece of machinery run out here in the middle of the ocean with it. You know, it ain't just like I tell people you know, just because you see water don't mean you can go. You know there's a lot of rocks, sandbars. I mean you got to definitely, like out here you got to go at least six seven miles offshore for you can cut to the north you can come off the channel on the right side you got to go about two miles offshore for being cut through the right because all just sandbars and rocks everywhere you look, you know but that's what he was he was drinking alcohol and stuff on the boat wasnt paying attention ran right up on the rocks. But so far as buying as another one, I'm thinking about it but if I do that we'll get rid of the one I got now, get me a solid fiberglass one because you never got to worry about replacing the wood no more you can only sink in like three spots. Your row tube , your shaft log and where your deck hose comes in, you know, wood boat, you know, big enough swales, you got swale side of the double wide trailer hitting the side of the boat, I ain't too hard to break one, but other than that yeah, I might get me a glass one.

KS: Do you prefer, so which boat do you think is best Woodhull, fiberglass or steel?

21:04

JB JR: Well if you want to make millions get you a big steel boat, you know because you can fight any of the weather that you want to you know, but you aint going to have a life on a steel boat that's the only thing you know you stay out for a month, 45, 50 days at a time before you come home and when if you want that boat to continue to make money when you come home you unload, get fuel, you know might take two or three days off and you go right back out. But so far as like my opinion, a glass boat is the best one because big steel boats took a lot of maintenance they rust really bad with the salt water, got to paint them, got to clean them all the time, fiberglass boat it never rots it never rust, you know. That's the cool thing about them you ain't got to worry about no wood, nothing they're just good to go. All you got to do sand them and paint every few years. That's a lot less and having to sandblast them and cut out steel and redo all that but so far as fighting the weather and making money steel boat is where its at.

YS: And as for fishing Have you fished outside of Georgia?

22:08

JB JR: Oh yes I fish from North Carolina to St Augustine Florida the furthest I've ever been, furthest I've , we've been at the bottom of the Virginia line down there and North Carolina that the furthest I've ever been up there. You know I fished in sound in North Carolina but probably one of my favorite spots I would say is South Carolina is called Fripp Beach or Fripp Island or whatever, thats one of my favorite spots. Most money ever made one day, right there.

YS: So, where was like the worst place you fish, you would say?

22:45

JB JR: So far as the worst luck places is probably Florida you know I went down there I couldn't catch enough shrimp to eat down there I was I don't know I tore up everything. Costs- there's so many hangs down there I mean everywhere you go, there's certain spots you know it's pretty clean dragging but if you get up in there where the shrimps at oh man I broke main cables, broke the end of my outriggers off, I mean dude, it was I come home with my tail between my legs, in Florida I couldn't.. Yeah, I like to go north, I don't like to go south, uh uh.

KS: Why is the North better?

23:23

JB JR: I just know it better. You know what I mean? It's not as if there's a lot more free dragging range, you know where you can get in shore you know, but I just I've been more raised up there and never have down, down south because I went on boats with other captains you know, growing up my granddaddy would send me out what a few of his friends, you know so I can learn different territories because my granddad just got it set in his head he ain't going no further than out here you know he wants to go and make his day trips and he coming back home and watch TV, you know so. But yeah, he sent me off on several other boats and I've just kind of learned in northern more you know, and last few years North Carolina and them boats have been killing shrimp over there. You get 90, 100 basket drags during the wintertime this year you know it's ridiculous at the shrimp that's up there and that's why everybody's just kind of been migrating. We got boats from the Gulf, Louisiana, Alabama. They're all piled up here. It gets aggravating with all them down there.

KS: What's your favorite thing about going up north?

24:28

JB JR: I dont know, I just like traveling to new places. You know, it's cool to see all the different docks and everything up there and how the tide works, you know, like up there you know, there ain't really no tide in certain spots once you get so far inland because you can be up there eating at a restaurant that shrimp boat dock ran across thing, you know, they pulled a boat so far in the creeks. But uh, you can go there, you know, and I don't know it's just different. You know, I like going there where its cold weather. You know, I'd rather be cold than sweat to death. Georgia can't make its mind up, you walk outside with a hoodie on you know, next day coming outside with shorts and T-shirt. But up there I'm just, made more money to the northern. Like I said, last few years since I've been a captain you know Georgia just kind of went down hill really, South Carolina is my lil' hole.

KS: When you go to a new like if you go to Florida or North Carolina or wherever are there certain rules and regulations you have to follow?

25:25

JB JR: Yeah there's different like you can't go inside a mile line if you have, in Florida you know you can't go inside the mile line if you got anything bigger than 225 foot nets I want to say and other than that you know you can stay offshore I pull 4 55's and I can stay offshore you know but that's only really different regulations you know you can drag the beaches a little longer down there and you can like I said you can drag all the way to the mile line like all year long and up here though you know you got to stay outside of three miles I'm pretty sure it's the same in South Carolina too I'm not sure about North Carolina I'm not really, I ain't been up there a couple years I'm not exactly how they do it again but I've been up in the sound more you know, but up there you got to have different turtle shooters or not turtle shooters but fish eyes you got to have them a certain amount, you gotta have two one in the back, one right below the turtle shooters I don't really care for that too much, fish eyes let half of your shrimp out but other than that different rules you know, they're not too bad you just got different game wardens some of them funnier than others you know a little more lenient and stuff but it ain't too bad.

YS: Lastly, did you want to add like any advice for I guess younger fishermen that may want to join?

26:48

JB JR: I don't know, I mean just if you want to get into it's a good thing to get into you know, but you gotta get dedicated to it you know you can't just jump in and just think you gonna get rich right off the rip you know I got a few younger boys my age buying boats and their getting into it you know, man you just gotta you gotta stick with it don't let the the worst part of it get to you. You know be smart, don't go on a boat and you know sketchy people and don't go on a raggedy boat. That's the only thing I can tell you. You know man, if you if you're going to start out as a crew man, find you a captain you know wants to work ,make your money you know? If you want to eventually be a captain one day, be a crew man pay attention what the captain tells you, do as you told you know, pay attention don't just don't just watch and not learn you know, actually pay attention, learn what he's doing. You know, and won't be long, you'll run a boat. Like said, I was 17 I wasn't actually 18 when I graduated. I was 17 when I started running a boat and you know, I've never met anybody younger than me that ran one you know, personally, but I've always did pretty good, you know, make good money. That's what you look for, you know.

YS: Thank you, Jonathan for the interview.

28:04

JB JR: Yes, ma'am.