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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
SAVANNAH STATE UNIVERSITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMAN HAYES
FOR THE
GEORGIA BLACK FISHERMEN

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
DR. DIONNE HOSKINS

PIN POINT, GEORGIA

Interviewee: Mr. Herman "Hanif" Haynes

Interviewer: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

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Principal Investigator: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

Affiliation: NOAA

Abstract:

Herman Haynes, better known as "Hanif," grew up watching the daily ebb and flood of the Moon River behind his family's property in Pin Point, Georgia—a small Gullah Geechee community founded in 1896, eleven miles southeast of Savannah, in Chatham County. The river played a pivotal role in Hanif's life, as it was where he was baptized as a member of the Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church and where he swam each summer with his friends. At the insistence of his family, Hanif pursued his education and employment outside of the crab industry. He returned to work as a cultural interpreter to share Gullah Geechee history at the Pin Point Heritage Museum, located at the restored A.S. Varn and Son Oyster and Crab Factory. As president of the Pin Point Betterment Association, Hanif works with state and federal government agencies to preserve Gullah Geechee ancestral lands and buildings as historic sites for future generations.

One of those historic sites Hanif is interested in protecting is what remains of Pin Point's first Black-owned crab and oyster cannery, which was owned by Benjamin Bond—Hanif's great-grandfather—and John Anderson. At the turn of the 20th century, the Bond-Anderson crab cannery employed many Pin Point residents, including Hanif's grandmother, mother, and German immigrants. The Great Depression, in the early 1930s, severely impacted the entire community and the Bond-Anderson cannery succumbed to the economic crash, leaving the White-owned A.S. Varn and Son Factory as the only cannery on the island until the mid-1980s. Hanif recalls his matriarchal family's contribution to the crab and oyster industry, including the women who occasionally harvested, "to keep the family going." Hanif's observations of declining crab populations, from overharvesting and environmental degradation, kindle his passion for protecting Pin Point and the Moon River from development, so that the surrounding saltwater marsh can recover to provide for future generations as it has provided for past generations.

[Discussing where a hurricane touched down in Pin Point]

Dionne Hoskins: Man it's pretty out here.

Herman Hayes: It's beautiful. I love it. I mean, in the 1800's, those people had that vision, that you know, Johnny Mercer and hisxxxxxxxxxxxxx Moon River

DH: That's XXXXXXXXXX Burnside?

HH: Yeah, that's real XXXXXXX Burnside.

DH: Oh, ok, that's- Ok, that's the road that takes me to Burnside Island. Oh, let me get your name on tape before we go forward. You are Herman "Hanif" Haynes and you're junior?

HH" Ahhh, no, I'm just ….

DH: you're just Herman! Ok, I don't know why I thought you were a junior.

HH: No, (smiling)

DH: So you are Herman "Hanif" Haynes and we are in beautiful Pin Point where we are looking out on the tidal creeks of Moon River on your family's property that's been in your family since the 1800's?

HH: Yes, at least. Ahh, it's one of the first lots that were bought in Pin Point, umm. From the [Galvin} I think it was the Galvin Plantation. So this was one, one of the first plots. That uh.

DH: Ok, you were saying that we are facing Burnside Island, and Burnside Island is where Johnny Mercer, his family lived?

HH: Right, we're facing it. Johnny Mercer's family, the famous Moon River, this river, circles around and comes around the front of Burnside Island. It makes like a little horseshoe.

DH: That is…I wondered where his family was, 'cause I heard the story about him having donated like $700 or something dollars to the church, Sweetfield of Eden because there was at time I guess in the 30's or 40's where it needed some repair and the church fathers had raised…they needed $2000, they raised almost all of that and somebody wrote him?

HH: Umm, ….

DH: Is none of that true?!

HH: Nah, I'm not saying that it's not true. But I'm not privy to that part of Sweetfield history.

DH: Oh, well, I just got that when um, when I was here with ah.. and that's not really germane to what, to what I'd like to talk about which is the Black families and the fishing families. But when the, when the Nature Conservancy did the "Blue Prints" activity, SOMEBODY brought a letter and forgot his name. It was not Isaac but I think it was a gentleman who was maybe vice president or something at that time. And somebody brought a piece of paper and was telling the story that this was a letter that was written to Johnny mercer and that in response, that he had sent a donation to help them..

HH: And that is very much a great possibility that that happened. But I'm not privy…

DH: But I want to hear about you and your family!

HH: [Laughter]

DH: So tell me what... I'd like to heat all I should know about the Black people in Pin Point and their relationship with the water. Your family, you, or anything that I should know.

HH: Ok, well, you know there's been a lot of talk here recently about the museum an A. S Varn cannery. But prior to AS Varn there was a cannery, as a matter of fact we are sitting on the site right now.

DH: Ok, we're on the concrete slab- one of them.

HH: Right, of the old crab cannery. As we look forward, we see the foundation of the oyster plant which was um… organize din the late 1800's maybe early 1900's by my great grandfather and his son in law who migrated from Darien, uh, Liberty county, to Savannah. And he married my great great grandfather's daughter, which was Sylvia Barnes. Uh, my great great grandfather was Ben Barnes.

DH: Bonds or Barnes?

HH: No, Bonds. And uh, they spend some time over on Ossabaw Island. But at the time of the inception of this oyster-crab cannery what we're sitting on now his son in law that can up from Liberty County was also an oyster man and that kind of fit right in to the family he was marrying into. And in additional to- and his name was John Anderson. Um, he had several brothers and sisters from Liberty County. He brought one of his brothers here- his youngest brother. His name was Charles Anderson. And um, we used to call him Uncle Charlie. And they all had uh, the sea in their blood. They built their bateaus and they crabbed and oystered for a living.

DH: hmmm.

HH: As a matter of fact, uh, I'm told that my great great grandfather or either my great great grandfather or my great grandfather, he was a pretty wealthy man during the early days. He lost his wealth and during the great depression banks folded- didn't have the FDIC then. All his cash

was gone. But uh he was the predecessor to AS Varn, which got started in 1926 I believe. But prior to then it was um John Anderson and Ben Bonds on this very site where we are now.

DH: So this was a Black-owned crab cannery and oyster cannery, so was it was it all family, or was it community-wide? Like, where did they who was working where and who was bringing products here?

HH: It was family and community-wide yes. They would uh, they would go out and they would catch their own crabs, pick their own oysters. As a matter of fact, you can still see remnants of the oyster mounds. Well, the tide is up right now but…

DH: Oh, Ok. Yeah, but in the Spartina over there…

HH: Right, you can see the oysters where they would pick the oysters and throw the shells in the water. They all were maritime men. They lived basically off the sea. Yet, unlike today, they fishermen they respected the water. They fished and crabbed seasonally, you know? There was a season to catch crab, there was a season to pick oysters, there was a season to harvest shrimp, and they didn't overlap. When the season was for oystering, there wasn't no crabbing, you know, or vice versa. You know? Unlike today where you see female crabs being harvested and sold. They didn't harvest female crabs during those days especially when they had, they uh…

DH: When they had the sponge?

HH: The sponge. I think that uh, I can hear my mom calling them "sooky crabs."

DH: Sooky, that sounds familiar! That's not foreign to me- that does sound familiar.

HH: Ok, yeah, the females were called sooky. But they never would harvest the sponge or the sooky crab when they were out of season. They only harvested big male crabs.

DH: Your um, you talk about your mother. Did she, ok so did your father work in your grandfather's plant?

HH: No, my father didn't work in the plant.

DH: And your mother, did she?

HH: Yeah, my mother did. And my mother also worked at the Varn's plant. My mother's mother also worked in her father's and grandfather's plant.

DH: The Bonds and Anderson Plant?

HH: Right.

DH: And she was primarily a picker?

HH: Right- she was primarily a picker. I've heard stories that um, there were times when women would actually go out to collect oysters and crab just to keep the family going.

DH: Really? I haven't heard anyone say that.

HH: Yes, I've heard stories. I've heard that story. One of my uncle's, um- he was my grandmother's oldest son would tell me the stories of his mother and her sisters and aunts would literally go out and harvest oysters and crab.

DH: Did they do it here on Moon River or further out?

HH: Yes, well you know um. You know, 80 90 100 years ago everything was flourishing. You didn't have to go 8 or 9 miles to harvest oysters, you know. And then too, again, people respected the marsh. They, after opening the oysters, they would take the oyster shells back and replant them, you know for that area to continue growing.

DH: So they ain't take everything.

HH: No, they didn't take everything. They, you know, what they took, they replaced it back. Um, for the future.

DH: So what did your dad do?

HH: Well, my dad um, I really didn't know my dad growing up in Pin Point. And I really didn't know what he did.

DH: Ok.

HH: But on my mother's side, that's basically where I'm XXX from, my mother's side.

DH: Well you're like, like many. So tell me about what kind of living did your mother make, given that this was the family that had the factory-you said at one time your grandfather was quite wealthy. Did that find its way to other members of the family? Or what?

HH: Well, now again because of the great depression times were hard in those days. After he lost everything that he had, um, it didn't trickle down.

DH: Yeah.

HH: No, it didn't get a chance to trickle down. But again, I was told that he maintained or he helped everybody that was in the community. Even uh, some of the White immigrants that were here- German immigrants that whenever his family ate, they ate also.

DH: Oh, wow.

HH: Again, this was the transition from Ossabaw Island to the Pin Point area because they lived over on Burnside. Probably prior to Johnny Mercer.

DH: Uh huh. These are the German immigrants?

HH: Now, I'm talking about our people. Our family, the African Americans.

DH: The African immigrants…found their way over from Ossabaw over to Burnside and eventually over here to the other side of the river. To Pin Point.

HH: Right. And not only Ossabaw but Green Island. Um, as a matter of fact my my grandmother, they, they lived over on Green Island. A lot of them grew up on Green Island. And uh, Skidaway Island you know. All of part of the Sea Islands. I think that was part of that like 40 acres and a mule deal back in the day.

DH: Did your mother continue to pick until she didn't work anymore?

HH: Yes, um. I watched my mother, I would say not only just my mom but most of the women who worked down at the Varn's plant just kind of deteriorated. But that was their way of living, um, they uh, opened oysters, picked crab . I've been told, I don't know but somebody told me by some other research that my mom was one of the fastest pickers there. But I don't know. I never learned how to pick.

DH: I was about to ask. She didn't… you didn't get involved in none of this?

HH: I was too young. I never learned how to pick. My brothers, they picked the claw…

DH: Ok.

HH: Um, you know for summer jobs, but uh I never got the opportunity to pick other than when I was eating crabs.

DH: And that's a different kind of picking.

HH: Yeah, that's a different kind of picking.

DH: I've seen the picking that they do when they cut the knuckles off with a knife

HH: Right…

DH: And they get through real quick.

HH: And I've watched her and she was pretty good at it. I've watched all of the ladies because like I said all of the families, aunts and grand aunts, you know. And It was a task it was a skill to be able to cut the knuckles , we call them fins…

DH: that's actually the right thing to call them.

HH: And and crack it open because I think there was, if I remember there was 3 sections of the crab, or four sections. You had what we call the claw meat, which was separated. Then there was white meat, and then there was the expensive lump meat.

DH: Yeah, back fin.

HH: And then it got to a point where, um there was a part of the crab, we used to always call it the dead man or the fat. And they started canning that also.

DH: Oh, I didn't know they canned that.

HH: Yes, they canned that also. And a lot of times when they made deviled crabs they would kind of mix it to kind of stretch the deviled crab.

DH: Um hm. I've heard about that. So none of you kids was encouraged to go into picking? Were you discouraged? Did they say, don't do this- you need to go over there and do that? How did that generational communication happen?

HH: Well it, they emphasized the younger people to go to school and try to get an education because they didn't want the future to grow up picking crab because it was, it was kind of a hard task to do especially because of the conditions. In the wintertime it was excruciating, it was cold. Summertime it was hot. You know they didn't have air conditioning, and they didn't want the kids growing working at the same jobs they had.

DH: I didn't realize there was no kinda control in there, I mean given that the Varn's factory was going into the 80s. I remember Miss Sula saying something about "old folks getting the cold in their bones".

HH: Yeah, that's what she was talking about because, you know, especially with the oysters, and everything is concrete, kind of concealed and cold- the women had to stand up on cold concrete. I mean they had heat but it was like the old pot-bellied stove.

DH: Ok.

HH: They had a couple of those in there. But…

DH: That's not real heat.

HH: No, it was still cold. I mean, it was like working inside of a freezer, you know.

DH: Would you, do you have children?

HH: Yes, I do have children.

DH: Would you have your children involved in any kind of fisherman, fishery type career? I mean, maybe not the career your mother had but seeing the careers that are available now, shrimpers and it…

HH: Well, I would say no.

DH: You can say, no is ok. No is an answer.

HH: For the simple reason that uh, that the river has been so disrespected in the last years and um. Being overharvest, and the shrimpers now they aren't getting any money for the shrimps they're bringing in.

DH: Um hmm.

HH: And the way of living for, as far as, during those days, now you have everyone got a boat and nets and traps and the competition is greater now. It's, it's just too many people competing for that way of living and again, I think the water, you know, if full of pollution and you know, uh, the fisherman's not respecting the water like he used to in the early days.

DH: Okay, that's fair enough. So you talk about the transition from the Varn's and Anderson crab and oyster factory to the Varn's, so after the depression, the company, did the company close down exclusively because of that?

HH: Uh, from what I was told, yes, because I mean he was kinda the major funder you know, and um, after he lost all of his money there was no way to regain…

DH: Okay. To recover. So that's when people started working at the Varn's? Um…

HH: Well, I've, well you know Yes I would say you know by that time the Varn, Varn had, uh there was maybe two factories I yeah would call that east, east side. Yeah.

DH: Um. Three were more?

HH: There was another, um, but I think the Varn owned that particular factory also. Um, but that was way way way before my time I don't have any recollection of it of that particular factory. But the other guys that you interview, they will be able to fill in all of these gaps that I am not able to.

DH: Okay- that's … they'll know? Oh no this is really helpful, and I wanna get back to… you were talking about growing up here on the water and this being, right here on the creek that we're on, this being a swimming hole.

HH: In addition it was our baptism site too. This was one of our baptism sites…

DH: Ohhh…Tell me about that. I think I heard, I member, I heard someone talking about that because it was a woman who had a dock…

HH: That's, that's the dock that you're looking at.

DH: The red building?

HH: Right. Uh, what's left of it.

DH: Wow. So this was where, was this just Sweet Field of Eden or was it any church in the community in addition to Sweet Field of Eden?

HH: Well, back in those days yeah because the old folks said that um you know when you're baptized in the river they um, they always held baptism on the on what we uh the flood tide or the high tide. That way, once you get baptized, on the ebb the water would take your sins back out to the ocean.

Dh: Ahhh! That's nice.

HH: But um, yes, this was the baptismal site AND this was our swimming hole at the same time.

DH: That sounds wonderful. The water was joy and for sustenance and for play but working- you got in the books for that.

HH: Right, exactly.

DH: Ok. Well, I, I appreciate you talking to me about this. What is, is the anything else I should know = that if you if you know, read about the Varn's factory and its history in Pin Point, what is it you hope people don't forget? You know, we know about Clarence Thomas and his relationship to Pin Point having been born here and his mother and his sister still lives here. But you know, if we go ten years from now and people are celebrating and seeing that museum that they are building, what is it that you hope they don't leave Pin Point and not know about the people here?

HH: Well, basically the camaraderie among the people in Pin Point. Ah, it's the the uniqueness of Pin Point. Um, ah, this beautiful view that we have. What I would like to sustained is that Pin Point don't become a Daufuskie or Hilton Head or Harris Neck . Um, I would I would like someone to walk away seeing a community that is basically unchanged from the early 1900's to the present as far as people leaving doors unlocked and you know security and this that and the other.

DH: Okay. Well thank you. And thanks for talking to me on tape, I know some people don't like to be interviewed but I I really do appreciate it.

HH: And you're quite welcome. I hope our talk will benefit your research and your program in some way.

DH: It certainly has, thanks.

HH: You’re quite welcome.

—----------END OF INTERVIEW—----------

Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 4/18/2022
Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/25/2022