

Name of Narrator: Andrew Ross (AR)

Interviewer(s): Freddy Lee (FL) and Cassidy Gunn (KG) recorded this interview with the permission of Andrew Ross for the research project “Boat Stories”

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

Transcriber: Freddy Lee

Others present: No other people were present.

Date of the Interview: November 12, 2021

Place: Brunswick, GA

Duration of the interview: Thirty six minutes and eight seconds (36:08)

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 sit down with Andrew Ross, a local shrimper.

General Description of Contents: Andrew Ross sits down with student interviewers to discuss his history of commercial fishing in Georgia. He also discusses the future of commercial shrimping in Georgia and his thoughts on the industry today.

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FL: This is an interview with Andy Ross on November 12, 2021. This interview is being conducted in Brunswick, Georgia. It is part of the research project and interview collected titled, 'Boat Stories'. The interviewers are Freddy Lee and Cassidy Gunn. Do you still consent to being interviewed?

AR: Oh yeah,

FL: If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable with, please let one of us know and we can skip it and move on. So the first question I have for you is, tell us about your most recent fishing boat, the name of it, did it have names before it, like the history of the boat.

AR: Well, it's the same boat, Burn East 2, I've been riding eva since I was about 20. I worked on boat with my father, ya know, the deckhand, and then he was getting up in age a little bit so he kinda retired and I took over of being Captain at that age and been on the boat ever since then. Basically one time the motor blown and I had to change boats three years. I rented a used boat from a friend of mine, who was used to being a Striker and took that boat off another three years. We got a new motor in the Burn East 2 so now we can go boatin'. You know been basically running it ever since.

0:01:23

FL: So boat motors typically last a long time? So like, you haven't had to change—

AR: Yeah, that's the second one we've had in there, the first, like the boat was made in 1944. It's uh getting up in there, it's one of the oldest boats around. It's a wooden boat, you know, it ain't got glass, you know it's a wooden boat and here next door too.

FL: And you said your role in the beginning was on-deck and then you became Captain. So was it generally a generation thing, your father have it first and then as you age, he passed it onto you so you just naturally took over it.

AR: Yeah, that's about right.

FL: And you mention, it was a woodhull kind of boat, not fiberglass or any kind of material?

AR: Yes, it a 50 foot boat so put in the water in '44 and make it about 76 years old. I've been told, it's the oldest commercial license boat on the east coast. Been around that long, I mean.

FL: Do you think other people might have a similar boat to it? Around the same age?

AR: There might be a couple, but I know this is the oldest around this area.

FL: So it's like a one of a kind kind of thing.

AR: Yeah, yeah! It was made out of special wood and all you know the planks on the bottom, 14 16 inches wide, you know and like modern boats are a regular 2 by 4, you know it's a whole cycle, too. Wood really lasts a whole lot better.

FL: So you had this boat your whole life, essentially. Where did you mostly fish on it and for what? Was it mainly for shrimp or?

AR: Yeah shrimp. Right here local waters, you know, right between Jekyll Island and Cumberland. When I was a kid, they used to open the sounds, you know, estuaries and you know, from the outward, inward. And they'd open those on September the first every year. Hadn't been there for four months, you know. We literally fished too much before then, you know it was kinda a win. Now when I was young, school was on the first so we'd have to skip the first week of school to go make that big, you know, first three or four days you, the ocean kinda gets fished out. We look forward to that every year. You know, the regulations in the state of Georgia, DNR and all come along, they quit opening the sounds and they put all these regulations on us, turtle excluders, fish eyes, you know, basically put hole in your net stuff. Allowed some of our shrimp to get off. You know, you lose a certain percentage of the shrimp. We thought it was just going to be for a little while. Once they got on there, they'd been there forever now since they started.

FL: So those regulations were put in rather early, shortly after you started shrimping.

AR: Yeah a little bit I guess you know. We couldn't sell any without all of that. You used to catch real large things in the nets, you know big sharks, you take the turn and they'd hardly ever be dead. We didn't make these a real long day with the fuel, drags and all. You catch one of those, you'd really be out of line.

FL: And it's not like it was intentional, your target is shrimp after-all.

AR: Yeah, you catch whatever back in the net and what wasn't got kicked out. Now it's just turtle excluder, set drape, anything large, open the net it gets right out. So you don't really catch any big thing.

0:05:34

FL: Regarding the boat, aside from its age and history, what do you think makes it unique or special?

AR: Well, most of the shrimping industry go to big boats with a lot of power, big motors and big nets. We were down to one small motor, less power boat in the fleet. Is a 671, you know, four

and a half gear. Pull two fifty-foot nets. The fuel consumption real low, had ice hold, our expenses are a lot less when you have these bigger boats that have big motors and big fuel bills, you know ours is.

FL: Cause if you can cut down on the cost, then more profit for you.

AR: Yeah like, that's right.

FL: Who did you work on the boat with after your Dad, you said retired; it was you and who else on the boat?

AR: Oh it's been several. Oh I've probably had about 20 or 30 different people o'er those years.

FL: Any family members?

AR: Well, my other half, me and her on the boat just for 25 years and you know, that was pretty unique. You know having a woman on the boat, most boats, you know men owned 'em. She could hold or work just as good as a man; pick the shrimp up fast as any man and some of her strength wasn't quite as good, but a little more on me. Took a little but I knew it was a lot better getting along with her than some, you know, stranger and someone you don't trust. Lot of the help on shrimp boats now, crew members you bring out, it's not what you want. You know, there's not a lot of people left in this industry anymore.

FL: Like some of them are just there to be there versus you can tell who actually wants to be there.

07:43

AR: When I was a kid, there was over a hundred shrimp boats at a time, probably a dozen shrimp houses and fish houses and it was a, I mean, lot of Portuguese people who started here in Brunswick. Like they say at first, the car tags, Brunswick, it was the world capital of shrimping, the best shrimping in the world in Brunswick. Bunch o' boats and now there's maybe ten of us left. One fish house, and maybe ten boats, you know. Nowhere to hardly dock anymore, all the docks have been eliminated.

FL: How does it make you feel seeing this central hub, shrimping, so many boats, and then over the years for lack of a better of a term but respectfully, dying out?

AR: I always thought if I could hold on to stay with it for a little bit longer, I would get a larger piece of the pie when the boats thinned out but it ain't worked out that way at all. I think the industry's kinda been fished out. Pollution you know and these government regulations with our nets, like I said, they don't let us drag where we'd like to. You know inland the shrimp are in

there. Maybe if we could drag it in, we'd catch a lot more, you know they don't open that anymore. The main problem with us shrimpers is the price. We don't get very much shrimp. You go to the grocery store and see shrimp for \$15 a pound you come back down to the boat where we get 'em and it's \$3 a pound. You know it's just a tremendous markup at the stores. The subtlety of Brunswick, there's only one place you can sell to. It's the fish house you sell up to. The dock and electricity and water provide that for you so you're committed to sell to them. So you have to take whatever they give you. You know, like I say, you know seems like you could get more money for 'em cause you'd rather get more. They get a big markup in the grocery store. If you have your own private dock where you sell to who you wanted, you know. You'd make a whole lot more money. It's kinda the thing, not many places around or anything left like that.

FL: Do you feel like there's fewer shrimpers, do you think there could be less competition between the shrimpers or is it all just competition once you're all out on the water?

AR: There's only a few left, we get along pretty good and all. There's less boats, there's more area, you don't have to get, you're not bundled up. You can spread out and have your own little area. Pretty much but. I thought since there's less boats there's more shrimp to get. It doesn't seem like it worked out that way.

11:08

FL: Have you noticed any changes in the water, weather, from when you started to how it is now?

AR: One of the biggest problems we have is the warmer water. But the sharks just eat holes in our nets like all year long like it used to be in the summer time we had sharks. They don't hardly ever leave now. You can go out fishing and have twenty holes in your nets in one day. And you know, I'm not good at really mending the nets cause you know I have to hire someone and if you gotta hire a man to sit there and sew your nets for ten hours, I mean that cuts way into your profit and so on. Like you see on TV and everything, sharks, there's a shortage of them and they're going extinct. If they could come out with us, we could show these people these sharks, they wouldn't have had never had no idea, they'd scare you to death, you would neva go swimming again out there on the beach. I'll tell ya that. I mean you see like on TV piranhas and all, giant schools of 'em that attack stuff on the water? When we push our scrap fish back overboard, stuff

you catch that you don't sell, when you push that in the water, man these sharks eat hundreds of them back there. If you was to fall in the water at that time when they were eating I guarantee you, you wouldn't even last a minute. Sharks was a big problem around there. We would try to put different bait to keep 'em off of 'em. Different shaker on it make it hard to pull. And that didn't work real good.

FL: So it progressively got worse versus when you started, you'd see a shark or two in the summer, how about now?

AR: It's gotten way worse. In my lifetime, it's like more sharks and less boats.

FL: It kinda disrupts your time cause you have to throw the shark back, make sure it gets far away from you before you cast the net out again.

13:36

AR: We don't catch too many of 'em. Like I say, with that turtle excluder, it keeps 'em out; if the net catches the shark, these sharks are about six foot, I say on average they're called blacktips, those spinner sharks that flip in the air, most of 'em were the blacktips, they average about six foot. We used to catch them for fun, catch ten of them in an hour. Every time you throw it back, you'd have a rope like you tie boat up with, pull one in right away, just one after another.

FL: You said you had two fifty-foot nets, so I'm assuming one on each side.

AR: Yeah.

FL: Did you ever have a shark on both the nets at the same time?

AR: Oh sure, sure, lots of times.

FL: And it probably tore the net up, huh?

AR: Somewhat. We had a fish up in that net and it gets it gills in it more or less. You know that shark would be swimming around there and it instead of just trying to pull the fish up, getting the fish to eat up the net much, that shark would just clamp there and bites the fish, there's gonna be holes in the nets.

FL: So if you weren't using the turtle exclusion devices, how would you take care of the shark situation? Just kick them back or?

AR: Yeah you can throw em back, some of em would die, and you know some of em would live. You'd kill a few more of em if you didn't have the turtle excluders. We've had those in for ah

let's see, 30 years now? I don't know exactly. It's been a long time. We used to catch a giant shark or something like that, and I remember when I was little we got a hammerhead and our boat was about 18 feet wide, and we had the head off one end of the boat and the tail off the other, they were that big. Like those big giant manta rays, those devil fish they call em? Some of those are 20 feet wide. Get those in your net, boy, it pulls your boat around. Think about it, if he gets excited and starts flapping them wings, that webbing can't take that man, it'll rip that net. And those nets cost a lot of money.

FL: And then the time you have to take, like you said, it cuts into your profits

AR: You try to protect your nets. Lots of snags and hangs out there, you know, you try to prevent tearing your nets up. Sunk boats, ships, you know rocks, you know all kind of stuff that you have to avoid you know, to try not to tear those nets up.

16:28

FL: So would you say the turtle exclusion devices are more helpful than harmful?

AR: Probably. There's one thing we really used to catch a lot of, called a jellyball, kind of like a cannonball looking thing. Some of them bigger than a bowling ball. Start out at little golf ball size. When they're little, you catch em, you can't help it. But when they get bigger, you start out at four inches. Go through that hole, And the jellyfish would hit the 2 inch bar instead of getting caught in the net. It kicks it out. And then it throws them back in the water. And then you can make a full drag, hell, you might lose a few shrimp, in that smaller thang, you could let a successful long drag. You didn't have something like that, you'd end up with some of those jelly balls. You couldn't catch any shrimp. Jelly balls was a real problem.

FL: But then would they rip the net or would they just be small enough to get out?

AR: Sometimes if you got enough, we had to cut holes up at the top, and let the excess start pouring. If you do that- we've done that before.

FL: It sounds safer to say, jellyfish are better to catch than sharks? Cause the sharks took more of the net

AR: Yeah, jelly balls tear the net hardly, a tremendous amount of weight would bust it, you know, if you put a little small trinet, tells you what you're catching along, you know, you drag a couple hours. You pull in the little small net after fifteen minutes, once you get down there, some of them you pick up, you know?

FL: With that, how do you see the future for fishing? Do you think there will be more jellyfish, more sharks? In the industry overall, how do you think it's going to turn out in the future?

AR: Like I said, there's maybe ten of us left, but most of us are getting up old, couple of them are still working til they're 80 years old. You know, there's no young people coming along, face it. They're not building any boats anymore. When I was a young fella, man, boats being built, you know, 30 a year. I mean there hadn't been a new boat built around anywhere around here. Long long time. Boats are dwindling every year. Boats are sinking or, you know, they have to dismount them and do away with em. The older, smaller boats, that's kind of getting to be a thing of the past. Like there's a few bigger ones that travel the gulf all up and down the Atlantic coast. You know, just wherever they think the shrimp is the best. That's basically what's left in this industry.

FL: Do you think some fishermen are trying to refrain or why do you think they don't pass it on to say their kids or their grandkids?

AR: It's just not near as profitable anymore. Fuel prices, you don't get a lot of money from the shrimp when you deal with fish houses. You know, I mean, it's just not enough money. When I was a young fella, shrimping was one of those hard jobs, you're getting a lot of bycatch, you have to move real fast to get these shrimp up on the deck. You can't leave them out there, the sunshine would hurt you, too. You don't have any shade, you know? It's a lot of hard work involved. You know, back when I was a young fella, we'd get \$7 to \$7.50 a pound, and that was good. We thought we was gonna be wealthy, you know? And that didn't hold up or last very long. Price kept dropping and everything else in the world, the equipment, everything going up, you know, anything that says marine on it, you take three times as much. You know just raise the price. And everything costs so much, nets and trawl doors, cable, lot of stuff involved. To have a good fishing rig.

FL: So just realistically speaking, because everything is going up, people aren't really able to earn a living or just get by how it was back then? I made this much but now I make this much. The contrast of it is just so drastic.

AR: You know a few of us left, it's more just something we always done. It's kind of what you do certain times of the year. We'll probably do it long as we're able to, health wise. I got a brother, you know, that owns a boat with me. My mother and father passed on and left the boat with us.

FL: On a lighter topic, what would you say was one of your fondest memories on the boat, could be one, could be several?

AR: When we had big catches lots of times, me and my dad and my brother come in and make a \$1000 in a day, as a little young 'in, we go to school we get to brag to my friends, "Made a \$1000 last week." I was a big shot at school for that. Several of us around back then that did it. Every year we have a nice little fleet, a gathering, you know, town throws a big party and all the boats decorate up flags and what have you, you can get blessed by a priest. Just to mark the beginning of fishing season, it's a neat thing. You have prizes for the best decorated boats, you know you can win different things. Everybody would go all out. Now like I said, it's just a few boats; the past couple years we came in second place with the prize and there's only about three of us to decorate. So just three boats, you can put a couples flags on 'em and win some. You know the 4th of July we always take the old boat out, gather up a bunch of friends, go out on the pier out here watch the fireworks. Had a lot of fond memories on that, you know.

FL: Did you have any classmates that were also shrimpers, too?

AR: Oh yeah, like I say. Like at school, there's probably about 5 or 6 o' us boys at school that shrimp.

FL: What would your typical day be like, like when would you wake up, did you go to school or skip school and spend the day shrimping and get back, pretty much your routine.

AR: Pretty much like I say, the first week of school. September 1st used to be the first day of school but nowadays they start a whole month earlier. They still have the opening of the beaches, you know, like some of the year we have to go about three miles off. You can't go in close to the beach cause they're baiting. They used to open those beaches around June 1st. Lots of times, we'd have a pretty good week when they open those beaches up. Shrimp are thick but after you drag 'em, you knock 'em out a little bit. Look forward to the beach opening every year, some of the boats travel like up to South Carolina, and they go to Florida even and make all three states.

FL: During summer breaks, did you go shrimping or was it just like specific season right before school?

AR: We rarely fished in the summer when I was a kid. Summers were what they called brown shrimp instead of white shrimp. Because there's not nearly as many of those and they're not as big. It's harder to get shrimp up and it's rough on yourself so we can always fish in the fall, you

know, wherever you wanna drag.

FL: What would you say is something that you know about fishing vessels you know nowadays that you didn't know back then or as you grew up, did you slowly learn everything?

AR: We pay attention, you know, and learn and see all kinds of different people buy boats and give 'em a few years and they get out of it or the boats sink. You learn from peoples' mistakes. Like I say, the bigger boats from out of town took over the whole operation you know, dragging around the clock night and day; we don't really never go out draggin' out at nighttime. We only drag, you know, during the day. We go out three miles once it hits dark, you gotta stay out three miles. Bigger boats traveled up and down the coasts, they don't ever shut their motors off. Night and day basically wipe it out.

FL: So when you started, that was a government regulation, wasn't it? The first few miles you can't and then after that, it's federal water. So you wouldn't do that all day if you wanted to. How do you think that effected your shrimping overall? Because if there's so much shrimp in the beginning everyone's gonna wanna take what's closer, just stock up and sell.

AR: It's hard to go three miles out. You know you use more fuel, usually when you get off shore, the sharks are worse, too. You get to shore you might get some muddy water but not as many shark bites. Everything off shore is clear water, them sharks can see. It's easy for them to eat in clear water than it is in muddy water.

FL: Cause the further deeper you go, the more sharks there are usually.

AR: Sometimes you can go a couple miles off shore and the water will be a little muddy and a little murky. When it's clear, you can see down about 20 feet.

FL: Do you have any recommendations for future commercial fishermen?

AR: I don't really recommend anybody try to get into it at all. It's kinda a tough deal.

FL: That must be hard to see because I bet as a kid, you were so excited like going on the boat and nowadays it's almost like where did everybody go kind of thing?

AR: Yeah! We used to have a good time back in the day. You know you'd have ten of your friends out there, you'd be tryna work together, find the shrimp, talk on the radio, you know joke around and tie up together. We'd all get together and eat dinner, play cards you know, it was kind of an enjoyable commadore amongst shrimpers. It doesn't exist anymore, you know. Nobody hardly stays out you know in the Brunswick area. There's people like I say move around, it's not quite the same anymore.

FL: Did you only shrimp in Brunswick or did you go a couple places like in Florida or South Carolina?

AR: I moved around some you know but as I got older, I stayed right here in my home area where I do the best and I know the waters real well. From Jekyll to Cumberland, I know that like the back of my hand. But if I were to go somewhere else, you know, St. Simons or somewhere below, it'd be harder to do.

KG: To go back to what you said earlier in the interview, you used to be a striker on a friend's boat, was that the same boat?

AR: Yeah, it's basically the same boat well I worked on several different ones but most of the time it was the Burn East 2.

FL: What's the role of the striker, exactly?

AR: Say it again?

FL: The role of the striker; is it when you're trying to reel the net in?

AR: Yeah, they pull the nets and main thing, their job is is you dump all the stuff on the deck and they have to separate the shrimp and the fish, you gotta pick the shrimp up and put them in baskets and wash them off with a hose. And then you put 'em on ice, it's important to be fast getting the shrimp up. Some people head the shrimp, take the heads off, that's a lot slower. Some people ice 'em down and head 'em later. The striker's job is basically on the deck to take care of the catch. You know get the shrimp up and get them iced down. And that's basically the job.

FL: How many strikers would you have on the boat, is it dependent on the size?

AR: Bigger boats have more, they pull four nets, like four 55s, I'm pulling two 50s. So you wouldn't need quite as much people. Like most of my time, it was me and one striker. Some of the big ones need a couple strikers and I've seen as many as five strikers.

FL: Was your brother on your boat?

AR: Yeah, he's mostly been a mechanic all his life, he was a diesel mechanic. He shrimped off and on for years. You know, he ran a couple different boats but he made more money as a mechanic that's basically what he does now. He works on yachts and sailboats and stuff working down there in the coast. I think he's supposed to come down here and talk to some of y'all. My brother's probably gonna come down later today, he got a big ole beard that looks like Cy from Duck Dynasty that show on TV. He looks just like Cy, people are like, 'Damn, is that

him?’

FL: I believe those were all of the questions we had for you but if you have any questions that you would like to ask for us.

AR: Uh, not really. I enjoyed telling you what I could about everything. You know like the history of Brunswick, I’d say was the place for shrimping as a kid. Back then you could make more money with your boat like my daddy built these bridges around here, I had a great grandfather that built all these jetties around here you know my family has been in the marine business.

FL: So being by the water is basically in your blood a little.

AR: Oh yeah. We’ve been out here making fisheries for DNR. A tire and a rod with concrete at the bottom, load ‘em on the boat, and go off in certain places off shore here, throw them over and make fisheries. That was a fun job for the boat. There were different things before all of these big companies came in and took over. One thing recently, we made money on the boat in a couple of movies, you ever seen that show the Walking Dead?

FL: I’ve heard about it

AR: It’s a TV show- kinda weird- but, yeah, they rented the boat out to film that show! You know, we made a little money doing something like that.

FL: So you’ve got a piece of history

AR: Yeah that’s kinda neat, you know a lot of boats don’t make money on a movie. We fixin to haul the boot up on the dry docks and clean the bottom of the tanks next week.

FL: Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Ross, it is greatly appreciated.

AR: Anytime, anytime.