

## *James Oliver Foote Interview Log*

Interview for Calvert Marine Museum Research on Seafood Houses

Interviewers: Michael and Carrie Nobel Kline, Talking Across Lines, LLC

Also Present: Richard Dodds

Location of Interview: J.O. Foote's home in Coster, Maryland

Interview Date: 6-16-05

- 0:40 Name is James O. Foote; I was born 6-6-18, the year World War I ended.
- 1:24 Raised at Coster; Tongues and Georges were slave owners, owned my great-grandfather Thomas Foote.
- 2:57 Grandmother was a Johnson from Elms Creek; describes location
- 4:20 Our house was the oldest, great aunt Emma Bailey's
- 4:50 There were 12 in our family, nine boys and three girls; A-frame house; dad raised tobacco and worked on the water
- 5:50 Oyster season, when started
- 6:31 I started oystering at age 13. Tells story of working with Grover boys, worked until 10:00 p.m.
- 7:50 Oystered off our own boat, a canoe<sup>1</sup> named *Marie* bought from Jim Sollers; older boat; I worked it until '47
- 9:00 Boat first had a sail, then it got an engine; last engine was a four-cylinder Chevrolet
- 9:40 1939 hurricane: I was only one that went head to it; I went to St. Leonard; tells story
- 11:24 Oysters brought in just 25 cents per bushel; tells who he sold oysters too; crabs were 10 cents per dozen and I couldn't sell them; soft crabs—selling
- 12:40 I got 75 cents a day for farm work, nine dollars a week
- 13:10 War broke out—Earned five dollars a day at Fort Meade
- 13:48 *Marie* was 28 feet by seven feet; used 12-30 foot tongs; Mr. Grover and his tongs; used hoppers for one at a time
- 15:00 Mano (Clam) dealers changed things; water was clear until then

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<sup>1</sup> Most likely a Chesapeake Bay Log Canoe

- 16:00 Water was full of eels and sea horses and sand shrimps; we had it all. It all disappeared.
- 16:30 Story of being struck by a shark
- 17:50 Oystered with dad from 4:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.; first fishing then oystering; we didn't sell fish, just salted them for the winter; low prices of fish
- 19:40 Thousands of boats on water; could walk across water on boats tied up so close; oyster bills
- 20:00 Captain Tom would kick oysters' bills
- 21:00 Oyster bills
- 22:50 When it froze we'd go to Bay and cut ice and tong oysters on ice; got 15-30 bushels of oysters
- 24:10 Shucking houses started at 25 cents per gallon; Dowell and Coster had the first houses, then Sollers, then Denton: the biggest house with 100 shuckers; names other packing house; packed in barrels when steamboat was running
- 26:20 Weekend in Sollers Oyster House, started at age 28
- 26:40 One more oyster house: Dan Barrick's in Elms Creek and others across the river: Notts
- 27:25 Two dollars a day; 4:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m. "You're not standing, you're running;" oysters piled so high; I've bagged them too; 3,000 bushels a day
- 29:29 35 people worked at the Sollers Wharf shucking house. It was smaller than a tobacco barn which is 60 feet long. Machine like spoons picked out oysters, brought by fellow from New Jersey where people shucked a lot
- 31:00 Highest shucker-who and how much shucked; "He could make one shell catch the other before it hit the floor." Wife won St. Mary's shucking contest
- 32:20 Standing all day long in little boxes; throw oysters up on table, raked shells; sometimes couldn't keep up with them; we walked in shells
- 33:30 Right handed and left handed shuckers
- 33:59 They'd sing, they'd curse; pretty happy people, occasional grouch; good spirit in place except when people try to cut in on oysters
- 35:00 "You didn't buy the oysters. You bought the man in the boat." White man got more money than black oysterman; nothing you could do about it.

- 36:35 Paid the same in the shucking house because few whites worked there; names white workers
- 38:00 When went to shucking by the pound things changed
- 39:35 My job was to bring oysters in and out and keep tables full, remove shells and ship to Baltimore
- 40:10 Closed right after World War II
- 40:25 I did every kind of work a man could do; lists jobs
- 41:00 McManny- bought oysters before they put up oyster house
- 42:00 I have old galvanized square nails
- 42:20 Fellows prayed for a freeze; price of oysters rose; oysters and manos bring high prices now
- 43:50 Jesse Coster had a sailboat. When I was six he carried us to the Eastern Shore to pick strawberries; Coster's shucking house-small; where Jesse Coster lived
- 45:30 Shucking house fell in production; it was on Truman's land, Meathouse Cove; locates it
- 46:38 Mr. Pitcher had a boat, came from around Shady Side in Anne Arundel County; had place on back of Solomons Island and bought oysters; I sold to him; I also sold to Sewell and carried to Baltimore
- 47:55 Most shuckers sang Spirituals, a few sang Blues, but more middle-aged people sang "*Old Time Religion*;" names other songs and lines; it was all old people singing
- 50:00 Got married, went in the Army, came back and raised a great big family
- 50:30 People brought their breakfast and dinners
- 51:01 Shuckers began work at 3:00 or 3:30 a.m.; might not shuck all day; shucked until all the oysters gone
- 51:20 They were their own bosses; could take as much time as wanted for lunch
- 51:44 Sometimes people would reach over and take some of your oysters
- 52:20 Oyster grading
- 52:50 Packed in gallon cans, pints and quarts; packing machine
- 53:40 I remember steamboats, one named Anne Arundel and other steamboats and the steamboat era

- 56:40 Dolphins
- 57:00 Trucks ran off the steamboats in 1930s
- 57:50 Worked on Grover's boat oystering; we had neighboring farms and were always close
- 58:30 Edward Sollers was around Sollers shuck house; he was a gentle man; my mother was a Bishop; their families were close
- 59:40 Edward Sollers' father was a comical man
- 60:15 Pardoe gave Lusby its name—he really made Lusby; everyone went to Pardoe's Store and got money orders
- 61:40 Pay at oyster house
- 62:30 Tried to get a Union, but local powers stepped in pre-World War II; some went up to New Jersey and shucked with a Union; in spring people here went to New Jersey to dredge
- 64:30 It hasn't been easy around here for people of color; "You didn't get the opportunity to do the things that you had the ability to do."
- 65:30 Colored person couldn't be a carpenter or bricklayer, but could be a laborer
- 66:30 Ricky Shelor (of Lusby)— I know him. I worked with his Bowen grandfather on Parran's farm—talks of Ricky's father and grandfather
- 68:12 I've always treated everyone right and got along
- 68:40 Picking crabs- mostly Denton's
- 69:30 Everybody got a different crab to pick, different parts; shucked manos there too
- 70:10 Roughest day on the water was in '33 and '34; it was fun when Solomons was flooded in '36
- 71:40 Mano (Clam) shucking easier than crab shucking; manos used to be bigger (shows with fingers five inches rather than three inches); some large ones
- 73:50 Mano (Clam) dealers destroy water by culling up everything; manos can redig, oysters will die. Grass used to be tall and soft crabs would surface; now they're replanting grass.
- 74:40 Sand shrimps used to be plentiful
- 76:30 How do you deal with racial wrongs? After white kids turned 16 you have to call them Mr. or Miss

78:15 Racial inequalities in Army; just as much Jim Crow there as anywhere else; I was over there when they dropped the Atomic Bomb—told us it was an earthquake – And we're right back at it again (in Iraq)

**Disc 2**

1:20 After World War II I couldn't get a real job here in Maryland so I went back to my old work; they wouldn't let me join the Legion

1:22 Used to have hangings all over Solomons when I was young

1:23 My nephew and cousin got killed on the highway (implies it was not an accident). There was a hanging here over on Filers Place. Other cases of violence.