

Stephen Norris, Jr. Interview Log

Interview for Calvert County Marine Museum Research on Seafood Houses

Interviewer: Carrie Nobel Kline, Talking Across the Lines, LLC

Also present: Richard Dodds of Calvert County Marine Museum & Jenifer Bush

Location of Interview: Calvert County Marine Museum

Interview Date: 2-27-05

- 00:00 Name; D.O.B in 1941; raised in Rock Point; rode in Dad's seafood delivery truck whenever possible; Post Office at Issue; serving in Marine Corps; buying and selling seafood
- 2:10 Early years in Issue; mention of Cobb Island; local families named Lancaster, Lloyd, Hill, Ferbush, & Stein; farming and working the water were the two main occupations
- 03:16 Plenty of oysters from when I was small to 1972; never were there as few oysters as today
- 06:28 Dad crossed Potomac into Virginia to buy seafood, then sold it in D.C. and came home; made for long days; Dad received large bonus for this effort; Dad's regular pay was \$15/week; 1947 WW II soldiers returned home; Stein family came from Germany to Baltimore to Charles County and became watermen; Lloyd family were farmers; Eugene ran grocery store; dredging by sailboat in 1920s and '30s; local storekeeper earned \$100,000 pre-Depression; Hill family: farm family and oyster house; paid with script; rented old slave quarters to oyster shuckers; script was in the form of wooden coins, one per gallon of oysters, for use in the boss's store, only store around; script was before my time, used into the 1930s
- 11:08 Beginnings of oyster house—opened before 1929; Dad bought it and took over operations and ran it until it burned down in 1958
- 12:43 Hotel: peddlers stayed there
- 13:38 Dad's shucking house: physical description
- 15:32 Trucking seafood to Washington, D.C. to markets and Railway Express
- 16:45 Arts and skills of everyday living in my day: handling oyster barrels; shucking oysters; filleting shad; we never documented everyday occurrences, like a river full of buy boats, because we didn't foresee an end to that way of life

- 19:47 Most all of the laborers around us with these skills were black; blacks and whites had same last names
- 20:43 (was 00:00)** While riding in the delivery truck, I asked my father every question; Dad liked to talk and told many stories
- 21:23 Story of father riding starter and killing battery to buy himself more time to clean fish
- 22:13 Father's family members; fiscal conservatism; story
- 23:27 Stories of shucking house and steamboat wharf burning; 1933 hurricane; oyster house had burnt several times in its life
- 25:02 Shucking house burnt in 1958; story of possible cause
- 25:42 County refused to allow Dad to rebuild oyster house, wanting the poor, black workforce to move away
- 26:36 Black people not considered valuable in the community; their lives weren't much different from during slavery; black people were paid little
- 28:03 My father worked at a black man's job in his youth; Dad respected black people and was respected by them; Dad still paid them low wages, because he had to compete with others
- 29:21 Seafood market more competitive today than in Dad's era; back then oysters were a staple for Americans
- 31:40 Dad's two best shuckers shucked 30 gallons a day; today 8-10 gallons/day is good; fast water oysters are bigger; deep water not as good
- 33:15 How to recognize a good oyster from the shell
- 33:45 Dad's best two shuckers were the foremen; they came in early to set up and received a bit more pay; they sanitized buckets with steam; most shuckers came from Deal's Island and Hooper's Island by truck in September; shuckers housed in shacks
- 36:13 Single male shuckers lived together; families lived together in these shacks
- 36:32 Homes are much larger and more costly now; my childhood home had two bedrooms for two parents and six children; six children in nine years
- 37:56 Children of shuckers; location of black schools and white schools
- 38:50 Farm people would come shuck when they weren't stripping tobacco

- 39:19 Shuckers got along fine until Saturday at noon when they were paid; fights broke out then and Dad refereed
- 41:31 Dad's response to 1958 fire: story of meeting in courthouse when; began to rebuild; County revoked building permit because weekend and summer people did not want an oyster house; Dad said if his workers could survive without the income he certainly could; Dad was concerned about how his workers would survive, but what could he do?
- 42:45 Fate of Dad's workforce: Red Cross had to come down and feed people; there were no jobs down there
- 43:50 Dad lost money invested in buying new boiler
- 44:20 Some workers stayed, some moved on; many became welfare recipients; they had no training, not even in how to apply for a job
- 45:00 It's difficult to applying for a job the first time; shuckers had no experience in this; it wasn't part of their culture
- 45:49 I opened a small oyster house in 1986; I employed 14-15 shuckers and also repacked; labor was a problem; the County wanted an oyster house then
- 48:19 I had been in the seafood industry from 1967 until then, buying and selling oysters to people as far away as Louisiana
- 49:06 1980s no more oysters here
- 49:52 Most oysters came from far away; my brother worked in the skimming (packing) room and unemployed folks worked for me; process of skimming and packing
- 59:29 Difference between father's day and mine: fewer oysters now; machinery; packing in glass in my day, cans in father's day due to consumer preferences
- 54:00 Oyster breaker machines didn't work for my shuckers; "Convince a fool against his will. He's of the same opinion still."
- 55:18 Licenses
- 56:40 At my oyster house we repacked and shucked oysters
- 57:45 Name recognition on my label may have helped, but not a lot
- 58:35 I got out of the oyster shucking business about a month ago, fed up with my help; I'll continue with fish and crabs
- 59:25 Comparison between oyster, fish and crab market over the years

- 60:20 Buying and reselling rockfish; most goes to New York
- 61:58 Operating buy boats before my time; operating my buy boat, The G.S. White; buying from dredge boats
- 67:35 Optimism in my 1990 interview for the Museum has turned to pessimism in 2005; planting Asian oysters would take ten years to yield results; if the oysters came back, could we interest consumers in oysters again and keep them affordable
- 69:40 If nothing else, the Asian oysters would clean the water; unsure about the future; something manmade is killing the oysters, probably a chemical in sewage treatment plants
- 71:35 Crab picking; just something else to keep folks working hand to mouth
- 53:00 Old shuckers gone now: Once in Crisfield I ran into one of dad's old shuckers, who was blind by then; no longer living; George Bailey is only one still living
- 74:48 Looking back over changes in way of life through my parents' lifetime and mine