

Thomas Welch 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 & Hanna Thurman

Location of Interview: Home of Thomas Welch in Benedict, Maryland

Interview Date: 2-23-05

00:16 Name, D.O.B.

00:54 14 siblings in family, all born in Benedict; describes house

01:29 Grandmother was a Hurley from Eastern Shore; grandmother's family and father built boats; used to take ferry over to Eastern Shore

02:35 Middle child

03:04 Dad was boat builder, carpenter, fisherman, oysterman

03:39 I've caught oysters for 10 cents a bushel, that was good money then in the 30s; they planted the oysters

04:20 State brought oysters in to plant –from where and how they did it; where oysters went after harvested

05:30 Captain Will Northam from Solomon's Island gave a lot of people work –had a bar room; family worked for him

07:24 Shucking house at Solomon's –Dick Lore

07:50 Two oyster houses in Benedict –Messick and Northam houses; 50 people worked in them sometimes; Mr. Sollers – was the last one in the business

08:30 Describes oyster house and what they do with the oysters; people came early –it's hard work; some of the black people were good shuckers

9:50 Woodfield used to pick up the oysters

10:04 Names best shuckers –Thomasases, Fords

10:48 Shuckers didn't live in Benedict –shuckers worked farms in summer, shucked in winter; names other shuckers; they didn't bother nobody

12:02 Fishing parties in Benedict, we used to run party boats; we had hard heads up to the 1950s, then they just disappeared

13:20 No crab picking here; mother worked in the tomato canning factory in Benedict

14:04 Owners of shucking houses: Captain Will Northam, Henry Messick and Sollers;

- 14:25 Northam had two shucking houses
- 14:56 Captain Marty Sites from Solomon's had shuckers; Harry Messick and his son, Harry Gray –he liked to piddle in the water when he wanted to, fool with muskrats
- 16:35 Messick oyster house was smallest place –had about 15 workers
- 17:29 Sollers brothers –Allan and Linwood; describes two brothers –Linwood stayed in the oyster business, was particular; I worked for him
- 18:20 Captain Will Northam was the man with the oysters
- 18:45 Sollers had big operation –describes; Woodfield came to get the oysters
- 19:25 Stoves for heat in buildings, but it was still cold and wet; no aprons; we didn't shuck no oysters
- 20:05 They liked to sing, some of them; paid by the gallon; a lot of women; when it first started, it was all men
- 21:20 Stand up to shuck, shelve; it was hard, stand there like that; I'd rather tong
- 23:05 Chaplans; Messick's; Sollers sold to big business; other families just shucked a few; the place down on the water in Benedict was built for shucking oysters; Toyes; Chapealler's just shucked for themselves as did brother Adolf
- 24:50 Got most oysters from the river; they get thick on the bottom – six or eight inches thick; Captain Will Northam had a lot of ground; you had different ground you would go to work on
- 26:00 Chapealler family and restaurant
- 27:06 High point of oystering –1930s, '40s and '50s; started dying off in '50s and '60s; plenty of oysters –on bars; could catch 100 bushels a day; dredged 1,000 a day; now you can't catch a mess
- 28:30 Dying off last few years; people would come and buy them off the natural bars; couldn't get no more to plant; hauled oysters off in tin gallons then; Woodfield used five-gallon containers; used to buy 60 gallons every fall and spring for a church dinner
- 30:30 Story –man from Eastern Shore wanted to buy oyster cans
- 31:10 Took oysters out on trucks; buyers came in to buy off the natural bars; most people hauled and shucked the oysters here

- 32:03 Denton had his own truck
- 32:58 Size of tongs -16 feet long, 32 inches wide; ain't no play; father and brothers worked with me; tonged until 1:00 or 2:00 P.M., then came and put them out of the boat; had to wait your turn; no elevators
- 34:33 They pay for how many we caught; culling oysters; tonging
- 36:09 Get in line because you only put them out one bushel at a time
- 36:40 Hard work; tonging's hard on your back; started at age 13 with father
- 37:05 Story – fell in icy cold water
- 38:47 Had to work in those times; every little bit of money counted, big family to feed
- 39:35 Met wife in a lunchroom where she worked in St. Mary's; Hughesville farmer's market
- 40:37 Lunchrooms in Benedict; black hotel in town –served meals for black people
- 41:40 Brother Adolf bought oysters, shucked them
- 42:47 Four black families in Benedict; black hotel in town
- 43:52 Breaking the ice with Captain Will Northam's scow to get boat through the water; boat had crank motor; eight to ten inch-thick ice; cut hole in ice with saw, then put nets in the ice; oyster tonging you get warm; clothing worn
- 46:35 We'd head out early; wind rocks the boat; stayed out until 1:00 or 2:00 o'clock
- 48:09 Oyster roasts at the hotel; first one paid for Benedict fire department
- 49:08 Describes oyster roast –how to prepare and eat them; one guy who used to come could really eat oysters; had oyster roasts in the 1950s and '60s
- 53:13 Closest fire department was LaPlata
- 54:03 Went to work at the electric company when it got so you couldn't make a living on the water
- 54:47 Large number of boats in Benedict at one time, you could almost walk across the water on them at one time; went out this past Christmas and caught a dozen oysters in three hours
- 55:21 Oysters and hard heads starting dying off; I left the water in 1952; every year it got worse; I used to take people fishing

- 57:28 It started changing; Northam went out of business then; people came from everywhere to the Patuxent in 1930s and '40s for the oysters and fish; differences in salary from then to today
- 60:04 Three white hotels; city folks would come down here –stayed full during the summer; meals at hotels –used wood stove, colored people cooked, food
- 61:38 I like (oysters) anyway they come out of the river; story –going down to eat crabs, broke out in hives
- 63:00 Caught crabs by the barrel –three bushels in a barrel; worked hard for your money when you made it; drove crabs over to Washington D.C.
- 63:56 Trot line –catching crabs; dipping by hand; bought bait at Woodfields –eel bait
- 65:45 Misses catching crabs; didn't used to start crabbing until after the 4th of July; everybody crabs now, but there aren't many crabs now
- 66:58 Oysters purify the water; now the waterman pays \$300 extra so state can plant more oysters
- 68:32 I used to run a ferry before they put the bridge in –had Palmer motor cranked by hand; if it stopped you just waited to be towed; worked 6:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. seven days a week
- 70:31 Worked on the bridge mixing and pouring concrete