Michael Kline: Can you start by saying, "My name is?"

William John Cowart: Sorry?

MK: Can you start out by saying, "My name is?"

WJC: Oh. My name is John Cowart – full name, William John Cowart, Jr.

MK: We never ask people how old they are, but what was your date of birth?

WJC: Date of birth was 23 September 1918. So I was born during the steamboat days. [laughter]

MK: What do you mean by the steamboat days?

WJC: Well, I mean, the house where I was born, which is still there, and we still own, is about two hundred yards from the steamboat wharf that my father built in 1908. So that's the reason I'm saying – of course, the steamboat period – until it came to a sad end – went from way beyond back of 1900 because we had – I found an article on the (Nomini?) River that went back to 1885 [and] showed the schedule. That's a different road, but boats came down from Alexandria to that location. The boat also went all the way up the Coan River to Eastville, at a place called (Barnes'?) Wharf. And apparently, at that time, there were only two stops on the Coan River, one at Lewisetta – what is now one at Lewisetta – and at (Barnes'?) Wharf. So that's a little of the fast back history of the Coan River as far as steamboats were concerned. So I don't have much – of course, during the war between the states, shall we say, the Union boats were in this area all the time, and they controlled not only the Coan River but all the other rivers in the Northern Neck. So that's, again, some of the back history. But anyway, I was born at a place called – my father called it Lake because – people say, "Well, why was it called Lake?"

MK: He called it what?

WJC: Lake. L-A-K-E. Well, it was my grandfather's – my father's grandmother was a Lake before she married a Cowart. He loved that family over in Dorchester County, Maryland, and there was already a Cowart Wharf and Cowart post office, which was owned and operated by his uncle, his mother's brother. So that's the reason that the – and I explained all that in the letter to Bruce, which he published in the newsletter of the museum. So that's, again, a quick history.

MK: Can you describe the whole setting there – where the house was, where the wharf was, what other buildings –? Can you describe the whole setting for someone who never would see it?

WJC: Yeah. Well, the house – the basic house where I was born belonged to a [inaudible] family back in the late 17th century. And my father bought it in 1900. He rebuilt the house. But the (inaudible) family owned the whole – what we called the Neck – Lake Neck, now, which runs all the way from Lottsburg down to the river. There was no post office before that. I don't know where the – of course, on the other side of the Coan River was the first courthouse in the

Northern Neck. Because Northumberland County was the oldest county and goes back to 1648. So right across the Coan on the south side of the Coan, in an area we called Walnut Point Neck, was the initial courthouse, which later was moved to Eastville. So very historic area. But you say to describe what was there?

MK: Yeah. When you were a child what are your memories of that place as a child?

WJC: Well, my father bought it. It was just a house, which he reworked to some extent. It's been reworked two or three times since then. And then, when he got to 1908, [inaudible] the steamboat wharf [inaudible] they built a wharf, and then eventually built a country store where the post office was involved. The steamboat wharf eventually had a cover over it from one end to the other, which is a little bit unusual. Not many places had a cover. On the end of it, on the shore end, he had a warehouse where people could deliver things and pick up things. And then, later, he and Andrew [inaudible], who became my grandfather since he married one of the daughters of Andrew [inaudible] – hey built together – they built a cannery and oyster house, and the oyster house had a long history because the oyster house is still operational today, one of the biggest in the Northern Neck. The cannery is still operational also. They stopped canning tomatoes, which was a big [inaudible] during those days, in the '20s and '30s, and – but they canned fish roe, they canned hominy, which is called Manning's Hominy, which you'll find in grocery stores. And they also were involved with canning fish for bait for fishing boats. Of course, it's much larger than it was in – for example, the tomato cannery, which was the last one in the state of Virginia, operated until 1997, and its last product was 450,000 cases – twenty-four cans to the case – and that was the biggest ever produced in the Northern Neck. Unfortunately, the tomato business got to the point they couldn't make any money because [of] competition from California. So all the canneries – there used to be at least twenty or thirty canneries in Northern Neck alone, and the Eastern Shore, a whole bunch of them. So those tomato canneries are all gone. But that was the principal – well, during the old days, when they peeled tomatoes by hand, most of these canneries running had about a hundred and fifty, two hundred people working there because you had to do everything by hand. The last years that the Lake Packing Company operated, they didn't need that because they had a mechanical – first of all, the tomato did not have to have – did not have a core, so you didn't have to dig the core out and peel by hand. It was a so-called California tomato. Also, you didn't need – you had mechanical pickers that harvested the material, just like you – almost like you harvest wheat and corn. So it was a change in – instead of having maybe two hundred and fifty people employed, maybe it only had fifty as a result of that.

MK: How do you peel a tomato by hand? What was involved in doing that?

WJC: Well, I think they first – I forget now. I think they took the skin off – had a knife. You did it by hand, and then you dug out the core, which was in the center of the tomato. But before the tomato was put on the peeling table, it was put into hot water. Hot water helped remove the skin. But all of that was done away with when we went to the new – that so-called California tomato.

MK: So if you were doing this, you always had your hand on a hot tomato or in hot water?

WJC: Yeah. I think most people used gloves, but they put them through a hot bath and then dumped them on the table in front of them. Now, later days of the cannery, when they got all the machinery and all that, they didn't have to do that. It was delivered to them mechanically, the same way they deliver oysters for shucking. The conveyor belt came along in front of them, and they just dumped it out of the conveyor belt. But in the old days, you had – somebody had to shovel – they used to shovel them on a table. [laughter]

MK: Amazing days, weren't they?

WJC: Again, in summertime, a lot of folks, particularly the Black people, depended upon the canneries for a few dollars in the summertime, as well as picking them in the field. My brother used to employ maybe a hundred people picking tomatoes before he got the mechanical pickers. That was about, I think, was 1970, somewhere along there when they finally got the mechanical pickers. Of course, it again was a California device. [laughter] They were developed on the West Coast.

MK: And what year would that have been?

WJC: Sir?

MK: What year was that when it developed?

WJC: Well, I'm sure they had them in California before this, but I'm thinking my brother bought – finally had three machines that you about ten people on the machine. What happened [was] you planted the tomatoes– in sequence. You didn't plant them all at one time. You grew them in maybe ten or fifteen acres at a time. As they developed, you put the machines at the table to harvest those ten or fifteen acres. This is one time around; you pull up the whole plant. You didn't just pick the fruit off it. You pulled up the plant, and the plant went through this machine, shook off the dirt and all that sort of stuff, and got rid of some of the plants. And then they had these ten people that were on the platform of the machine – would clean them up a little bit. If there was something left from the machine, they would take it off. So the ten people on the machine and a fellow pulling it replaced maybe eighty to a hundred people that used to pick them by hand. [laughter] Mitch (McInnes?) over here [inaudible] had those machines. So I'm just guessing it was – I wasn't down here then, but I'm guessing it was – they came around about '70 – '65 or '70. (McInnes?) is the fellow who – the family owns the [inaudible]. They had a cannery in this area, and of course, that's all gone, too. Lake was the last cannery in Virginia – 1997.

MK: And what was on the label?

WJC: Well, they canned things for different people, and some of them – the Lake Packing Company – most of them had some other name. Well, the label shows where they were canned. You have to do that.

MK: Well, let's get back to the steamboat and talk a little bit about what were your earliest childhood memories of the steamboat coming in.

WJC: Well, as I recall as a kid, the steamboat wharf was a gathering place for the community, in effect, just like the [post office]. Well, they came to the post office to pick up the mail, and they came to the steamboat wharf right there. The steamboat would blow the whistle, and a lot of people were dependent upon the whistle-blowing to where they would go. They knew that the steamboat came to Bundick, which is up [inaudible] River and Coan Wharf first, and then they came down to Lake, which was the next stop. But people came there – I'm sure even more so down here in Irvington and Kilmarnock area. And kids would come just to see what was going on. They might have to walk two or three miles. In the area at Lake, the other side of the area – well, it's south of what we call Bundick, and Bundick goes back – it was a tobacco shipping place, which went back again to the early 18th century where people shipped tobacco to England, that area. But people came over to our area for the post office and also to see what was going on on the steamboats. Of course, their products were shipped to Baltimore and Washington [from] my area. And I'm talking about fruits – peaches, apples, and any products that were produced on the farm, in addition to tomatoes. Also, we shipped – we had some cattle in that area, and they shipped cattle and pigs on the steamboat. It was interesting to a kid to watch the big people who handled the work – had little carts, two-hand carts. They would run back and forth from the warehouse to the steamboat wharf landing, and that was interesting. We would bet on who was going to beat who and things of that nature. Also, a lot of kids would come down just to go swimming when the steamboat was there and jump off the wharf and swim in the back of the – well, sometimes around the boat in the summertime, of course. I had a cousin who made a habit of when the steamboat was getting ready to pull out from the wharf, the prop boats – propellor boats – he would hang on to the back of the boat in spite of people yelling at him, "Don't do that. Don't do that." He would do it anyway. [laughter]

MK: Kids.

Carrie Kline: That's wonderful. I love how you talk about all this.

WJC: Are you turned off now?

MK: No. What was it like when the boat rounded the turn or came in or went –? How was it when the boat came right into the wharf? Can you describe that?

WJC: Well, it would vary completely – what product was there to be shipped, or what the steamboat was going to deliver. For example, I remember going down one time at night. This must have been November or something like that. The boat went up to [inaudible] Coan Wharf at the head of the river. That's about a mile and a half away. My brother and I went down to be there when – because my grandfather had some oysters to ship on the boat. The oysters were in the warehouse on ice, and ice was hard to get in those days. [laughter] It was difficult to get any ice. So they didn't do much in the oyster business until it was wintertime, really. But anyway, he had some gallon cans – no, five-gallon cans of oysters in the warehouse – had to be shipped on the boat to Baltimore. So he came down, too, to be sure that was done. But my father had a signal arrangement with the captains on the boats in the nighttime. If you wanted them to stop at your wharf, you just held a lantern, a kerosene lantern, at a stationary position on the wharf, which meant that they had something for you to pick up – for them to pick up. But my brother

and I had got – I said, "Dad, can I hold the lantern?" He said, "Sure, but don't move it very much." Well, we started running around the wharf, and we were chasing each other, and we were moving the lantern, which was a bad signal, see? Finally, the steamboat came in. Again, this is black night. In those days, you had no electric lights. It was just this kerosene lantern. And the captain yelled off the deck. He said, "Mr. Cowart, your signal indicated that you didn't want me to stop. But we have something to deliver to you, so we thought we had to stop." My grandfather said, "Oh, gee." He said, "What did those boys do?" [laughter] Luckily, he had something to unload, see? A situation like that, he would come alongside the wharf. Of course, the engine's running. We had one sidewheeler – the *Dorchester* – that came in there. I think all the rest of them were propeller boats. So they would come alongside and just put a temporary platform out and unload small stuff. [inaudible] But they didn't have much to ship. And this is what happened that night. He had two or three packages for the store, for my father's store, and he took the five-gallon cans of oysters, and everybody thanked everybody. [laughter] He said, "If you boys ever … I'm not going to loan you that lantern anymore at nighttime." We were about ten years old, I guess. So that would have been 1928 or '29 or something like that. My grandfather died in 1933, and my father died in 1936.

MK: But it was your father who built the wharf?

WJC: Well, they built it together.

MK: Your father and grandfather?

WJC: Yeah. They were partners at that time, but the land belonged to my father – the property belonged to my father. And it still does. Still belongs to the family. But now the cannery and the oyster house is ten times the size of what it was then. They employ about a hundred people in the oyster house practically all year round.

MK: Now they do.

WJC: Yeah. Twenty-five of them are from Mexico City, unfortunately. That's the only way they get enough labor to – all men from Mexico. They have temporary quarters right there on the Coan, where I used to play baseball. [laughter] Now they play soccer.

MK: I've heard that sometimes the women would sing in the oyster houses or in the canneries. Did you ever hear people singing while they were working?

WJC: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. That's a good point. The kids would go down and listen to them sing. About twenty-five people, as I remember, all men in the oyster house in those days, and one of them would – they were all members of a – most of them were all members of the Baptist church in Lottsburg, the Zion. They had a leader, and he would start to sing. It was beautiful, beautiful. You've heard the Menhaden people sing, but this was much better than that, I thought. I still think so. They would shuck oysters and sing. [laughter] Of course, that was more prevalent, as I remember, than during the tomato season. Of course, during the tomato season, it's both male and female working. And they did sing some. But I remember particularly the ones in the oyster house. So I'm glad you reminded me of that because I was thinking about that

the other day. Of course, the oyster shucking season is very standard. Even today, they start to work anywhere from around two o'clock in the morning and shuck oysters until about ten o'clock, eight to ten hours. They're paid by what they produce. So some of these Mexicans will work longer than that. They can make ten times as much money as they can make in Mexico. That's what they keep telling us.

MK: Talk about when you were a child. What was the scene like then? Were people paid in little chips?

WJC: Yeah.

MK: Can you talk about all that?

WJC: I forget what they do now. They keep an accurate record. Somebody keeps a record. But in the canning factory days, they got so much for peeling a bucket of tomatoes, and they got a little chip. When they delivered the tomato bucket to where they would dump it, they got a chip. At the end of the week, they turned the chips and got paid, usually on Saturday afternoon. This, I believe, was also the case for oysters. I don't remember exactly on the oysters, but I know that – see, we were going to school during the oyster season, most of the time, but we were not in the summertime. My family – we all went to school in Callao where the high school – the grammar school – there was no middle school. Everybody went from the first grade to the eleventh grade at the schools in Northumberland County. I'm sure Lancaster County, also. So we paid more attention to the – in the summertime, we helped pick tomatoes and things like this, too. Got in the way when we was little kids. [laughter] There was a government regulation about the age. You had to be, I think, twelve or fourteen years old before you could work in a cannery. I was down there doing something when I was eight years old, and my grandfather would say, when you see that funny car coming down the road, I want you to hide. [laughter] So we would run and hide. In fact, one day, he had to put somebody in a barrel and put the top on the barrel. [laughter] I'd forgotten that regulation. Of course, a driver's license was not required in Virginia until I was – let's see – 1932, I think it was. You'd get a driver's license when you were fourteen, and that's the same year I turned fourteen. That's quite different also.

MK: I'll say. Which was your favorite steamboat, and where did it come out of? What was it carrying?

WJC: Well, my father's favorite boat – because he was born in Maryland. His mother came from over here at Cowart. She was born in Cowart on the Coan River. But Dorchester County was his birthplace, so the steamboat *Dorchester* – and also it was a sidewheeler, which was different. It wasn't a stern wheel. Didn't have any sternwheelers on the bay. They were all sidewheelers. And it was a beautiful boat. There's some photographs available around. Then, the next one, as far as I was concerned –

MK: Say more than that about it.

WJC: Pardon?

MK: Tell me more than it was a beautiful boat. Describe how it was decked out or everything you can remember about it.

WJC: Well, I just delivered a painting to the museum recently that covers the *Piankatank* boat, and that was a prop boat, too. The newer ones were all propeller-driven. All steam, of course. There were no – there was no diesel. They were all steamboats. That's why you call them steamboats. [laughter] The best description would be to look at some of these photographs. The *Piankatank* is a good example, which – the painting that we were given by people that lived in our area up there – it's about four or five-foot long and two-foot high. It's a painting. But it's a pretty accurate painting. If you look in his book, Robert (Birds'?) book, you'll see that that's what I compare things. But he has a lot of photographs. The other thing I remember – in the summertime is when the community groups in Baltimore and Washington, too, would come down on steamboat trips through the Northern Neck area, and I assume they also went down as far as Norfolk. The Masons, for example, Masonic orders – they would always wear their uniform on the [inaudible] or something and be up on the deck looking. They did it at every steamboat wharf. They would stand up there and talk to people if they could yell loud enough. So those were things that we expected, something to look forward to – the contact with Baltimore to Washington. Baltimore is a principal place for – the principal city for this area because, first of all, Baltimore supported the efforts of the Confederacy, even though they were not – and the Eastern Shore, where my father was born, sent a lot of people over here to fight for the Confederacy. In fact, there were, according to my records, ten or fifteen people in the Lake family alone that came over here, and that's another reason why he called this place Lake, to recognize the fact that the Lake family in Dorchester County, Maryland supported the Confederacy. And a lot of people – there was a lot of marriage back and forth, just like my case, my grandmother married a Cowart, who was born on the Eastern Shore [in] Maryland, in Dorchester County. That's the reason that we – again, Baltimore – when people went to work – at that time, you had to go to work; most of them went to Baltimore. Of course, it was a bigger city. First of all, more jobs available than in Washington unless you want to work for the government. So we had a lot of connections with Baltimore family-wise.

MK: Did you travel on the steamboat to Baltimore as a child?

WJC: No. The only time I went to – my wife went up there quite often, but I only went once. My dad ran back and forth, but he left us all home with my mother. [laughter] So I only remember one trip when I was four or five years old.

MK: Talk about that.

WJC: I remember more – we went one way going up. We went to Colonial Beach, took the ferry across to Maryland, picked up a bus at Leonardtown, and rode the bus to Washington because we had an aunt who lived there. That's where we were going to visit – my mother's sister. Came back from Washington on a steamboat, but all I remember was maybe eating in the dining room and – four years old. I just remember there was a pretty good meal. [laughter] She had some pictures taken. My brother was two years old. I was four years old. We still have the pictures. I had no pictures of the steamboat. There wasn't much photography going on unless you had a – there was one professional in this area, and that was about it. I remember coming

down here to Kilmarnock when I was twelve years old and getting a camera that Kodak gave to everybody who was twelve years old that particular year. That was recognition of the end of World War I. People born in 1918 all got a camera, which is now [inaudible] Kilmarnock.

MK: Wonderful story. Do you have a final question?

DJ: He knows so much.

MK: I know. This is incredible. This is [inaudible].

DJ: We've got to come back.

MK: I want to do this tour on Saturday night.

WJC: I would like to add one comment relative to the – very few people living today remember the steamboat days, actually. You had to be eighty years old or something like that. I'm eighty-five. The fact that the community effect from the steamboat days was great. Just like I say, it was a place to get people to go. Just like the camp-meeting days, where we had religious services for maybe two weeks during the month of August, where people came not only from our area here, but they came down from the Baltimore/Washington/Richmond [area] to be with their families. I think that the Steamboat Museum operation should try to follow that procedure, that is, to make it a community affair very much the way they've done over in Reedville at the menhaden fishing museum [Reedville Fishermen's Museum], where they, many times, have special meetings at night in an auditorium that's available to talk – not strictly about menhaden fishing, but also about community things, history of the area, etc. I think that's what we should do here with the steamboat museum, try to get the general population [inaudible] and those things – they only charge five dollars, for example, to go to one of these meetings that take maybe two hours. They bring in an outside expert, a historical person from the Maritime Museum in Newport News, from the museum in Richmond, etc. I think that's my recommendation to the Steamboat Museum.

MK: She likes the sound of that.

DJ: Yeah. I definitely support that.

MK: Just before we fold up here, could you give us any quick recollections of the floating theater? Did it ever come to your wharf? Any of the showboats or floating theaters?

WJC: Yeah. The showboat. Sure. The showboats came every summer, and they had various stuff. One was Colonial Beach – no, I'm sorry. No. Kinsale in our area. Kinsale. They came into the Coan River and went to Bundick and stayed there for four or five days or [inaudible]. But anyway, it was a sizeable – it was a big boat. Of course, the theater and everything was on the boat, and the quarters were on the boat. It was a big barge, and it had two or three propellor-driven push boats – or yawl boats, I call them.

MK: What do you call them?

WJC: Well, they pulled the boat or pushed it. Maybe one was in front [at the] bow, maybe the other one behind [at the] stern. And they pushed them all around this area and docked them at several different places. The one I remember, I think, was at Budick, which is up – it's only a mile and a half from where we live. They also stopped at Reedville in the Northern Neck, and I forget – and went into Piankatank. I'm not sure where else it went. But the Adams Floating Theatre was the name of it. The actors and actresses all lived on the boat. [laughter] They didn't have to come down by the – I don't think it had any cars. I think they were strictly bound to the boat. [laughter] And it was an interesting community effect. Had an interesting community effect, also. Because, again, people who had grown up down there and who lived in Baltimore would come down sometime on a steamboat just to be at the Adams Theatre. I'm glad you mentioned that. [laughter] I wish somebody would develop a floating theater again.

DJ: [inaudible] I don't want us to wear our welcome out, and they won't let us come back,

MK: Well, that's true.

WJC: The meeting I'm supposed to be at is – it's ten-something. 10:30, I think.

DJ: Yeah, but there's a meeting in this room at ten o'clock.

WJC: She said ten o'clock?

DJ: Yeah. That's only five more minutes. I don't want us to have bad vibes with the local people.

MK: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

WJC: Well, I told you a few things.

DJ: I hope we can do this again because this –

MK: Charming and wonderful.

DJ: – just covers the service, and I know you know so much because I've interviewed him before.

MK: Yeah.

WJC: Research I made was that we had about twenty-five steamboat wharves in Northumberland County alone. In the whole Northern Neck, there were about fifty-something. So Northumberland really was the biggest county from the standpoint – just like it is now. It's still the biggest county. It has four-hundred-and-some miles of waterfront as opposed to the two-hundred and two-fifty or something for Lancaster and Richmond. Well, Richmond has a [inaudible] and Westmorland, too. But the twenty-five steamboat wharves, and far as I can

determine, the Cowart Family is the only one operating the same kind of products that we did in 1908, and it's the only one left that does that. The same family owns the property.

MK: Maybe we can visit down there sometime.

WJC: Yeah. [laughter]

MK: Do some video down there.

WJC: Yeah.

DJ: Yeah, do you think we could go down there and [inaudible]?

MK: Yeah. Be glad to show it to you if you want to see what I'm talking about.

DJ: Oh, that would be great. That would be great. Then we could take our time, and we wouldn't have to feel like we were rushing you. Thank you.

WJC: Yeah, Diane, if you want – I gave you a copy of one of those things. If I can be of any help, I'll give you –

DJ: Oh, yeah. Everything that we add to the collection is important, I think.

WJC: Yeah. Okay. Well, you can have this one.

DJ: Okay. Thank you. Thank you. Oh, here. I have this one.

WJC: But I mean, I can send you this letter.

DJ: Okay. Well, I'll come over and pick it up one day. Just copy it, and I'll come by and pick it up. Because we want to – we really would like to drive up to the site and look at what's there now and have you stand there and describe it to us.

WJC: Yeah. Be glad to do that. I did it for Bruce. [inaudible] pictures.

MK: Can I see it? Yeah. Also, any of the old – that picture you described of you and your brother – was it on the boat?

WJC: Yeah. [laughter]

MK: Maybe we could scan that or something.

CK: Take a picture of the picture.

WJC: Yeah. The wharf's all gone, but we still have a dock there. My brother has a dock that will accommodate a big barge.

MK: Thank you, Diane.

DJ: Yes, sir.

WJC: Well, appreciate you all coming

CK: We appreciate you.

DJ: Well, thank you so much for giving us your time.

MK: And tolerating our strong yellow lights and all the rest of it.

DJ: If we do the next one outside, we won't have to put lights in your face.

WJC: Oh, okay. [laughter]

DJ: What can I help you all with to speed up the process?

CK: [inaudible]

WJC: Well, we're having a meeting with the – we have a welcome committee that welcomes people in here.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 11/30/2022