

Carrie Kline: So, can you say, "My name is" and say your full name?

John Lee Callis: My name is John Lee Callis.

CK: Your date of birth?

JC: October 18th, 1950.

CK: Where do you live?

JC: I live on Gwynn's Island on Callis Wharf Road.

CK: So, today, we are at the Gwynn's Island Museum. Is it November...

Michael Kline: Fifth.

CK: November 5th, 2003. Will you start out by talking about your people and where you were raised.

JC: I was raised here on Gwynn's Island. I've been here my entire life except for the four years I was in college. My family goes back, as far as I can trace it, seven generations with my great, great grandfather being the last one that I had been able to trace. I know he has some brothers and sisters that also lived in Mathews County. But I was never able to go beyond that because all the local census records were sent to Richmond for safekeeping in the Civil War because they all got burned. There are calluses on the Kingston Parish registry from the sixteen hundreds. There are calluses that signed the application to make this part of Gloucester into a county. They petitioned the general assembly. I think they have three calluses that signed that, but I've never been able to connect my family to any of those early ones.

CK: So, how far back up do you remember in your own family?

JC: I never knew my great grandparents. They both died before I was born. I remember my grandparents. They lived well into my twenties so I knew both of them well. I have often regretted that I didn't ask more questions about my family until it was too late. I guess, a lot of people do that, a lot of people do that. If you want to talk a bit about Callis' Wharf, I remember, as a young boy, what a booming place it was. It was a big seafood center at that point that probably employed almost a hundred people. I'm not sure of the numbers, but the crabbers spawning crabs which were cooked and picked on site and there was a big oyster house. Of course, during that time of year, there was a fertilizer factory that took the crab shells and grind them up into big bags and did all that. A lot of the crab pickers were Black ladies who did not have any kind of transportation. So, my grandfather had an old school bus and he would go and pick them up and bring them to work and then take them home every day.

CK: Where did they live?

JC: In various parts of Mathew's.

CK: What kind of places did you ever...

JC: I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I can barely remember that as a small boy. That's when the seafood business was really booming.

MK: Did they sing when they work?

JC: I believe some of them might have, but again, I can't remember. I've heard the story of one who was like the grand champion crab picker. I'd pick everybody and I'm sorry, I can't recall her name. I don't actually know her, but her stories are better. She could pick so many pens a day and nobody could even get close to the number that she had.

CK: She lived in this community?

JC: She lived in Gwynn's Island. She lived in Mathews, somewhere in Mathews County.

CK: Well, let us just back up. You say you remember your grandparents. Who were your grandparents?

JC: My grandparents were (Elwood E. Callis?) and his wife was (Mary Blakehaus?). She was a Blake.

CK: Blake?

JC: Blake. They had one son. My grandfather was an only child and my grandparents had one side, which was my father. Edward Eugene Callis Sr. was my grandfather and my father was Jr. and have a brother who is the III.

CK: Tell me about this grandfather.

JC: Well, like I said, at one time, he was running this big seafood operation down at Callis Wharf. But as things changed and it's just as the seafood business has slowly died around here because of a lot of different reasons, I guess. My family also ran a grocery store, which was Danny Callis Wharf. That was open until probably early 1970s, in the early 1970s.

CK: On the wharf?

JC: Yeah, right on the wharf. It's partially on the wharf and partially not. Have you been down there taking any pictures or anything?

CK: Tell us about it.

JC: Well, it's this big, sprawling spread out place with different areas. There was a crab picking room. There was oyster room. There was a big warehouse for storage that was the fertilizer plant that I told you about that's still there. That was a place where they all loaded fish, like all

these different sections, and there was a grocery store. I'm not sure when that started. One of my grandfather's cousins had a grocery store there earlier, which was at a different place. But I just remember the store when I was a little boy and just grew up down there in the grocery store. What I've been told about the origins of Callis Wharf, where my great, great grandfather, which was the gentleman that she showed you the picture of a few minutes ago, he ran a schooner to Baltimore during the Civil War and used oyster shells as ballast. On his return trip, he dumped these shells out on pilings built out on a point. This land kind of eventually built up and that's what the first dock was built on the first wharf, et cetera. His son, who is supposed to be my great grandfather, who, again, I never knew. He died in the 1930s. He built the seafood business up big. The steamboats used to come in there. Back then a lot of people traveled by steamboat. If you went to Norfolk or you went to Baltimore, you went on steamboat. Anybody that ordered anything from a catalog or whatever, most likely it came in on steamboat. A few years ago, someone had bought an old oak bed at an auction, someone had sold it, and it still had the label on the back. I forgot the name, but the address was Callis Wharf, Virginia, which means that it came on steamboat. At one at one point, my grandfather had a trucking business, in which he would take the things off the steamboat and deliver them to people who had ordered them. But again, that was all before my time. I think the steamboat stopped. That was during the [19]20s and [19]30s and sometime during the [19]30s, it stopped. It ceased to exist.

CK: But the trucking business was related to steam travel?

JC: It was related to delivering the items that people had ordered that came in to Callis Wharf on the steamboat.

CK: How did that work? Do you know?

JC: I don't know, not sure.

CK: But you are talking about an actual truck, not a buggy?

JC: Yes, they were actual trucks. They were actual trucks.

CK: It is amazing to think about, is it not?

JC: Well, things have changed a lot, for that's sure. Like I said, I've often regretted that I didn't talk to my grandfather more about information. After my grandfather died, I tried to talk to some of his cousins. I got a little bit of information about family and things that I didn't know before, but not what I would have gotten if he'd still been alive and I could have talked to him.

CK: What would you ask him?

JC: I would probably be asking him about his grandfather and did he note to pass down to try to make that connection. I did a lot of research. I went to a lot of places. I went to the local library and searched records and searched the local newspaper archives. I have little snippets here and there, but I never could make any connection back. My grandfather did tell me that all the Callis' originally came from Calais on the English Channel coast of France. But that's as far as I know.

CK: When are we talking? Do you have any concept?

JC: I'm sure 1600s to 1700s.

CK: Do you imagine, in your mind, a scenario that would have brought them here?

JC: I haven't really thought about it. I don't really know. I don't really know.

CK: Well, imagine one other thing that you are in your prime years of observing, maybe about ten years old, and the wharf is active and the store is going. What are you seeing? What does it smell like? What is going on in the different parts of the steamboat wharf?

JC: Well, again, back then the steamboat was number one. I never saw a steamboat.

CK: I understand. If you could go back in time and being, what do you think it would have been like?

JC: Well, of course, the smells, I mean, it was a hustling and bustling place. The smells would be smelling the steamed crabs. Also remember that you could catch great rock fish off the end of the dock. Because back in those days, they would take a lot of the crab scraps and just put them overboard, which is against every environmental rule now. But because of that, those rock fish would run through the haven and you could catch a nice size rockfish on the other dock. People used to fish there. I don't know. I just remember hustle and bustle and lots of people working. They had these big walk-in coolers, too, which was kind of unusual in that time, I guess, around here. They would grind the ice to extend the seafood in the big wooden boxes and the fish and all that. A lot of the equipment, I think, is still down there. I don't think it's actually changed. Everybody in my family's wondering what's going to happen there because it's recently been sold and it's not real clear, I think, what the new owners want to do. They say they want to restore it, but that just doesn't make sense. I feel like there's going to be some kind of commercial enterprise.

CK: What was it like in the store in your day when you were young? Do you do remember a lot of activity?

JC: Yes. Well, I'm sure you talked to somebody about all these stores. At the time I was going up there, it's just two. It was the one that we still have up at Grimstead and it was ours. A lot of local people shop there. Of course, it's very small and tiny compared to what people shop at today. I can remember working there, unloading trucks and price groceries, and put on the shelf and delivered groceries. People would call us and give us an order over the telephone and we will write it all down and then go fill their order and take it to their house for them, which is something that I'm sure it doesn't happen today.

CK: That is amazing. Do they sit around the store?

JC: Yes. I'm glad you brought that up. There was a place in the back of the store, a little room,

which had like a gas heater in there. It had an old church pew inside. I can't remember what else, but at night, the men would come and sit back there and smoke and talk and hash out whatever that happened that day. I hadn't thought about that in years, but when you asked me that, that reminded me. I guess, when the store was somewhat modernized, it probably took the place of sitting around the old stone barn on the pickle barrel and all those things that you heard about. But they had a little separate area where they would go and sit at the back of the store every night.

CK: Does any of those old codgers talk about the steamboat era?

JC: I can't recall. Again, I regret not talking to my grandfather. Most of the stuff that I found out about, has been after he's gone and just in my research and looking for family information.

CK: What else have you heard about that era, particularly on the wharf? Which boats came? When did they come?

JC: My gosh. In my mind, I've heard of the Piankatank. I think the one was called the [inaudible], which probably came out of Maryland, but I believe there was a (Mob Jack?). I'm not sure with all the names. My mother was from New Point, which is at the lower end of Mathews, and she can remember going to Baltimore on the steamboat as a young child. That's how people travelled. They would get on the steamboat and go.

CK: What did she say?

JC: I think she was tiny. She can remember it was a big event. I can't remember what she said, but I do remember her telling me that story of going to Baltimore and probably also to Norfolk. They were going to Norfolk, too.

CK: So, these steamboats carried passengers, different kinds of passengers, or what sorts of passengers would be?]

JC: I'm not sure. I don't know.

CK: Black and white?

JC: I don't know. I can imagine there were too many Blacks. I'm not sure.

CK: What about the workforce? Do you know?

JC: No, I don't.

CK: What about the freight, what would have been coming into to the store and going out with your family seafood business?

JC: As far as seafood, I don't think that was said. I don't think there's steamboat. I think it was just freight as far as people ordering just like from the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog or

something, I guess. That's how it would come instead of a truck bringing it from wherever. Obviously, today, things come up planes and then get freight somewhere else, but that was the way it was done. It wasn't that many years that all this happened. I think as these people got vehicles that it kind of died because I guess, that's when the automobile and truck started to become more widespread. That's probably why the steamboat died.

CK: How did they transport all this freight before trucks came in?

JC: I guess, people would just come and pick it up. I'm not sure. I don't know. I don't know. Again, I wish I knew more to tell you.

CK: Let us take a little break and just visit it and get you off the hot seat.

JC: Okay.

CK: This particular photograph, which she has just showed me, is a photograph taken at Callis Wharf from the old store. It has my father and some other people sitting around just talking. Whoever did this book, there was not a show on Broadway as entertaining as that Callis Wharf store, which is probably true.

MK: That is right.

CK: Did you see that even in your day?

JC: Yes, somewhat. In the back room I was talking about, yes. I didn't go back there, but I remember that the smoke was thick and they kind of kept to themselves. It was closing time, they all got up and left.

CK: What time was closing time?

JC: Probably, 8:00 p.m. or so, probably 8:00 p.m.

CK: Who were the men in the back room?

JC: Just mostly waterman. They would just gather there.

CK: You see, we are from the mountains of West Virginia. So, what would that mean? What was a waterman?

JC: Watermen were people that did that worked in the water, crabbing, fishing, oystering, whatever. They made their livelihood in these local waters. A lot of them probably bought whatever they caught into Callis Wharf and that's why that was the gathering place. My mother told me this story. My parents had their first television on Gwynn's Island. It was a month before I was born. My grandmother was staying with my mother. It was in September. I was born in October. There was a knock on the door and it was about 15 or 20 men from the wharf. They had walked up to our house and knocked on the door because they wanted to see the World

Series, which was on television. Of course, none of them had ever seen it on television. So, they all piled into the living room. I can remember that TV was in a cabinet, a bit this big and the screen was like this, right in the middle of this huge, big wooden cabinet. We had that TV in my younger years. I remember when we got a second one, probably when I was about four or five years old.

CK: You are talking about a colored television, right?

JC: I'm talking about a television, a black and white television.

CK: So, they are looking at this staticky little screen?

JC: Yes, I guess.

MK: [inaudible] change hands?

JC: I don't think so. I think it could be my father that said, "Go up the road and knock on the door." Who knows? [laughter]

MK: Can you hold that picture up on your chest there and see if I can point it right toward me.

JC: Okay.

MK: Hold it a little more level up on the side, up a little on the side, something like that.

JC: The gentleman in the center with his socks rolled in and had one with his foot up, that's my father.

MK: Bring your right hand up just to here. We have to zoom in on sockless feet here. [laughter]

CK: We have got some more pictures. This first paragraph, what did they talk about?

JC: This is at the other store, which is the island market. A gathering place for oystermen after a day's haul is Scrooge Callis' general store where everything from horses to politics is discussed. Mr. Callis standing beside his office is also the postmaster. That's him right there.

CK: So, this is another Callis?

JC: Yes. Scrooge was my grandfather's first cousin.

MK: Scrooge?

JC: Scrooge was his nickname. His name was Louis L.R. I can't remember what it stands for, but he was always known as Scrooge and the store has always been known as Scrooge unofficially even now. Even though it didn't say that on the on the wall, everybody still calls it

Scrooge's.

CK: How did he get such a name?

JC: I don't know how he got such a name. That's what I knew him as all my life.

CK: You were allowed to call him that?

JC: Everybody did, yes.

CK: Because he was your great uncle?

JC: He was my great uncle. Everybody's still calling him Scrooge, old, young, didn't matter.

MK: Can you do the same with that picture?

CK: That is a great picture. Saturday night at Scrooge's which is now the island market. That looks like a fun place to be.

JC: I'm sure it was where you can hear the news.

CK: So, this wharf really went through generations of commerce, is it?

JC: Yes. My family sold it in 1970 to another island brothers, (Shelton and Julian Rowe?) and they are somewhat limited at seafood down there. Some of the other parts were occupied by different things. There was a woodworking like a little factory there and he just recently moved out. There was like, I don't want to call it a junk store, but like a curio shop, new, used, type of things. The big warehouse they used to be for storage was used as a boat building. I'm not sure if he's going to still be there or not. It's recently changed hands again. Everybody's wondering what's going to happen in there next. It did suffer some damage during the hurricane that we just went through.

CK: So, just run through a little more time the generations of commerce as long as it has been in your family.

JC: My great, great grandfather, William James Callis, is the one who ran the schooner. He's the one that used the oyster shells that eventually built up the land that the dock was built on. His son is the one who really established a big business down there. He died in the [19]30s, unexpectedly, and my grandfather basically took over things when he was like nineteen or twenty years old, if I remember. He spent his entire life down there until he got so old, so sick that he couldn't do that any longer. He died in 1975. During his lifetime, did seafood business deteriorate. Obviously, during the 1950s was when it was in its heyday.

CK: You know what it was?

JC: The seafood business at Callis Wharf was in its heyday. It was big and bustling then. Then



as the [19]60s were on, if you do some research on Chesapeake Bay seafood industry, I'm sure you could parallel this. We continue to run a grocery store. Even after the wharf was sold out to my family, we still maintain the grocery store for a few years, as I recall.

CK: So, all around have always been these watermen around the wharf and around the store telling tales?

JC: Yes. I'm afraid they're a dying breed today, though. Not that many of them left.

CK: I am sorry?

JC: Because of the decline and the fact that a lot of them just can't make a living doing that anymore.

CK: What kind of breed were they?

JC: Gosh, I don't know. Just what's typical of this area, eastern shore, western shore.

CK: What would that be?

JC: I would see hardened man. That's what they had known as boys and that's what they had grown up with and that's what they did. We still have a few that do that, but with all the "progress" that life has made, I guess, more and more and more people left or worked elsewhere. Whereas in the early days before we even had a bridge connecting us to the mainland, most people stayed here most of the time. So, they worked locally at what they could, which in most cases was some type of water work.

CK: What would a typical waterman's day be?

JC: Gosh, most of them get up very early, 4:00 a.m. or so, and they go out. If they're fishing cray pots, they go ahead and do it while it's not hot. They're in early afternoon or something or late morning with their catches so that was that kind of a day. But again, I just can't remember. I can't remember a lot.

CK: Was the wharf area sort of wholesale similar to what buy boat would be?

JC: Yes, it's similar. Also, people would go down and buy things right off the dock. They've done that in recent years as long as the Rowe brothers were still doing that. You could just go down and buy, but a lot of it was shipped to different places. I stay in the ship every day.

CK: You see hardened men.

JC: Well, I'm sure you can imagine it's not an easy life and there was no guarantee you're going to catch anything. You never knew. There would be big news that someone would hit a big run of something and you could make thousands and thousands of dollars a day after being almost broken that haven't caught anything for a really long time. So, that was that uncertainty. When

that did happen, it was a big relief and a big celebration, I'm sure.

CK: Everybody knew?

JC: Yes. Word would travel fast and it would get in the local paper and things like that.

CK: You see the guy on the street congratulate him?

JC: More likely, yes, at the store sitting around the stove or whatever. Did that come from one of the stores?

CK: [inaudible] in my house. They use that in their homes.

JC: It's similar to the picture that we were looking at, yes.

CK: Seems like you were at the heartbeat of all of it.

JC: I have two older brothers who because they are like eight or nine years older than I am, probably a lot more into it and can remember more of it. But it was bustling when I was a little boy. But as I grew, it was on the decline. So, I never really got involved. I can remember leaving and going with my father one time right in the bay. I remember it was like in May. It was nice and warm. Our boat froze to death once we got out there. It was so cold. I couldn't believe the difference. I didn't have enough clothes on.

CK: The difference?

JC: In being on land and going in the bay before it warms up for the season.

CK: So, your dad would go out?

JC: Yes. My father worked down there until there was nothing else to do. He actually stayed in the seafood business. He went and worked in Baltimore and stayed with a cousin who lived there and would come home on the weekends. He did that until he retired. But there was no work here as far as seafood and he went up there and worked in it.

CK: So, the freezing day was on the water?

JC: It was in the water out in the bay.

CK: So, you get out on the water?

JC: Yes. I can't even remember what the circumstance was, what we do is fishing or crabbing. I'm not sure. I just remember I got really cold.

CK: You want to look at some pictures upstairs?

JC: Sure

CK: Do you have downstairs questions?

MK: No.

Female Speaker: Hi, John, I have a couple of questions if you do not mind. Shelly Rowe used to go out and worked on the pound nets. That's maybe 3:00 a.m. to get up to do that.

CK: Can you get a little bit louder?

FS: I did not know you are recording, so I just proceed. I do not know.

MK: Go ahead.

FS: Shelly Rowe, he took over Callis' Wharf, used to tell us that he'd get up 3:00 a.m., go out, and work the pound nets. Then get them on the truck and drive all the way up to Baltimore to deliver it to the to the wholesalers and come back home that same day. Get up at 3:00 a.m. the next morning and just repeat that. It had to be a really tough life for them. I don't think they have much time for themselves.

CK: On that note, let us look at some of your family pictures.

FS: [inaudible]. John Lee, I wondered if you could swim too. You mentioned being out in the boat with your dad. Did you swim? Because a lot of the men tell me they didn't know how to swim.

[end of transcript]