Carrie Kline: Should I invite them in?

Michael Kline: How are you feeling today?

Walther Fidler: Fine. Fine.

MK: Had a decent day, did we not? What day is it today? Today is the…

WF: Fifteenth.

MK: Fifteenth. Right.

WF: December.

MK: I do not even know how many shopping days there are left or anything. [laughter]

WF: I don't either. [laughter]

CK: We are in Sharp, Virginia.

MK: We are Sharp, Virginia, right?

CK: Is that correct?

WF: Sharps.

CK: Sharps.

MK: Sharps. Why do you not start off by saying, "My name is," and tell us your name?

WF: All right. My name is Walther Fidler.

MK: We never ask age, but maybe tell us your date of birth.

WF: Date of birth, 1923.

MK: Month and day?

WF: April 18th.

MK: Could you start out by telling us about your people and where you were raised?

WF: I grew up in this village, born here, and lived here all my life except for being in service and away in college and law school. Growing up here as a child, beginning after 1923 when I was born, particularly went on up to about 1933, I was ten years old. Particularly in the summertime, steamboats would come about two or three times a week and they were real events.

Didn't have any TV of course, very little radio, practically none. I think there were one or two telephones in the village. Electricity came about 1928, I think. So, we didn't have anything else to do except fish and crab and swim. We went swimming every day, most of the time, two or three times a day. We just stayed in that river, all the young people did. That was a big thing. We went swimming all the time. Soft shell crabbing around the shores with nets and trying to find somebody to sell them to. But the steamboats coming was a thing. I mean, that was the thing. If it was 11:00 a.m., we would be down there by 9:00 a.m. anyway, particularly boys, I'm talking about, and we would fish. There were two oyster houses out there on that river. They were on the wharf. It was good fishing under those oyster houses. Particularly under the skimming room where they packed and skimmed the oysters because some of the particles went overboard and – perch and spot – white perch and grey perch and spot were just thick. You didn't have trouble catching them. We'd catch a string of fish and try to find a buyer by the time a steamboat came because one of the attractions on the steamboat was they had slot machines on them. They were all Maryland oriented boats that came out of Baltimore, and they had slot machines. They were a real attraction to, say, a child, ten years old. My gosh. If we could sell those fish, we'd have a nickel or maybe a dime. Our parents forbade all of us to use the old slot machine. We just couldn't do it. That was all that all of us did. If we sold the fish, we played the slot machine. I can't remember us ever really gaining anything or winning anything, but we just played them. Those days, of course, you didn't have – like OSHA. Didn't have any laws or regulations about children getting hurt or injured. The captain – when you first tie up his boat, would stand up there and look down on the pier. One of the things he was looking for was to be sure children didn't come on the boat. It was too dangerous, really. But he wouldn't stand there the whole time. The minute he turned his back, we were on the boat. There was just nothing to it. [laughter] Once we were on that, we were all over it, from one end to the other. We didn't go down the engine room much. But other than that, we went all over it, at the stern, at the barrel, up every deck, every level. Sometimes, the people who worked on the boat would sight us and tell us to get off. We'd make like we were getting off, but we didn't get off. We didn't get off until the boat got ready to leave. [laughter] But it was fun. I mean, this was the fun thing for children. I think the adults pretty much looked out for you. People were watching to be sure we didn't get hurt. Now the activity on the pier itself was also interesting in that you were dealing with cows, sheep, chicken in crates, eggs in crates, whole crates of eggs. Nowadays, you think, "Well, eggs won't last very long. They won't keep very long." Well, they keep a long time in those crates. They weren't refrigerated at all, and all this was going to Baltimore. That's where you sold everything, all…

[phone ringing]

MK: Can we wait for the phone?

WF: Yes. Oh, where's she?

CK: [inaudible]

MK: No, I did not.

WF: Yes. It's gone.

MK: You said, "All this was going to Baltimore." Can you say that again?

WF: All of this produce was going to Baltimore. Besides the things that interested us were those animals. We were interested in them particularly. But one of the biggest items going was the canned goods, mostly tomato cans, cases of tomatoes. There was one factory was right here at the foot of the wharf, but there were others between here and Emmerton and Farnham. There were about five or six tomato canneries, not very far apart, a couple miles apart. They up there canned nothing but tomatoes. But down here, they canned string beans and corn and English peas that were grown by the farmers back behind us but processed down here.

MK: Under what label?

WF: Milden Packing Company, M-I-L-D-E-N. Milden was the name of this farm – Milden Hall, named for Milden Hall in England. The name of their church is Milden Church. Milden Presbyterian Church. So, Milden is a stock name around this village. The name Sharps came because of the name of the family that came here about, I guess, right after the Civil War, about 1868 or [18]70, around about that time. The last name was Sharp. They were from New Jersey. The wharf had been here for a long time before he came, but he really somewhat commercialized it and maybe improved it physically. He ran to the wharf. He was a wharf agent for these steamboats. Now, most of the steamboats are run by railroads, owned by railroads, Pennsylvania Railroad particularly. If you were on those boats, you could sense some railroad atmosphere. For instance, the dining area was in the stern at the back of the boat, down near on the first level. Windows all the way around that stern. The tables were all white tablecloths. The people that waited on it had white little jackets on. That was one thing I remember so much that impressed me. The utensils were all silver like they were on the train. It was very much train atmosphere back there where you ate. The meals were cheap, very cheap. Gosh, I don't know. Something like twenty-five cents, something like that. They stocked a lot of stuff, but they also picked up a lot of stuff, particularly in the spring and summer along the trip. They had people who'd deliver them fish at this place, and people deliver cabbage at this place and tomatoes and so on. So, they picked up a lot of the stuff that they used on these trips. Now, I only made one trip on a steamboat to Baltimore, and that was on the *Northumberland*. I remember her. I can't tell you exactly how old I was, probably seven, eight years old maybe. But I was impressed with it. I was with my parents and I was watching everything. I just loved the idea of it. But one of the things I had a hard time understanding was, before we went to sleep at night, that night, we were up heading on up the bay and there wasn't a steamboat in sight. We were just going…

MK: Can you start that again? "Before we went to sleep at night…"

WF: Before we went to sleep at night, this boat was heading up the bay, and there wasn't any other boat in sight. But I stayed up until we entered through the dock. The next morning when I got up, I immediately went to the bow or stern. I forgot which way I could see, and we were almost into Baltimore. To my surprise, here were steamboats everywhere, it looked like to me. I could see four going in the same direction we were in. What they were, were steamboats from the eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia, and from Norfolk and from other places converging in the Baltimore Harbor. But to me, I didn't understand it. To me, it was, "Where did they come

from? They weren't here last night [laughter] when I went to sleep." But I remember being impressed with that, how all these boats showed up from nowhere, to me. Handling the cargo here on these wharfs, of course, they stayed at the wharf depending on the length of time, depending on how much there was to move on and off of the boat. The things that came off of the boat, they came off first. They were products that people had bought from the merchandisers in Baltimore for these stores. There were four stores here. A little before my time, there was a barroom, but I didn't use that. What can you do with it? Oh, that'll come down. Yes. Does that help it?

MK: Yes. Maybe you can pull it back where you had it, more angle.

CK: It is still too much white behind.

MK: I am sorry.

WF: That's okay.

MK: The sunlight was getting right up on you and then it makes everything else around it look so dark.

WF: Maybe you ought to ask me some questions.

CK: Oh, you are doing fabulous.

MK: Oh, no. No, no, no. You are fine. Yes. We will jump in if we need to, but we certainly do not need to at this point.

WF: These stevedores who handled this cargo were all Black. I can't remember seeing a white one. Particularly in the summertime, they were skimpily dressed because of the heat. Most of them were very muscular. They were strong guys. They really were. Also, a lot of them were good actors. Because nearly every dock that they stopped at, either the passengers getting on and off of the boat or other people, local people – a lot of people would come down there in the morning, 11:00 a.m., just to look at the steamboat, watch it come and go. So, they always had a little audience. They were just excellent at acting and singing, making up little songs. They really rejoiced in it. The people watching them got a big kick out of it too because it was hard work and hot weather. But I remember one fellow – I didn't know the names of any of them – but he had a little crip that he would say – and they danced as they did this. They were pushing these carts. It was just two-wheel carts with stuff on them. They would just dance and carry on as they did because they were entertaining. They knew what they were doing. He said he was a fellow from Piankatank before the bullfrog jumps from bank to bank. He'd go on and on and on. [laughter] We all enjoyed it, particularly the children. Occasionally, they'd have a mishap. Something would fall overboard. I remember one occasion, a cow – a calf really – fell overboard. But again, these actors – the calf was in a pen – would be in a pen on the wharf, and been there since the before when the farmer brought It. They'd have to go get it and bring it down. It had a little rope around his neck. One up front, leading the calf along and the other one behind, just pushing along. But so often, the calf would get to the gang plank to go on the boat

and just nullify, just stop dead still, just not going to go. Well, they had a remedy for that. The man up front, who was also an actor…

[beeping noise]

Waiting for that noise. The fellow up front, who was also an actor, wouldn't look back when the calf stopped. He wouldn't look back. He looked straight ahead. He just said, "Ring that doorbell back loud." The man behind would catch the calf's tail and twist it just like a ringer – like cranking, and, of course, it hurt. The calf would jump right on into the boat, in they went, and everybody would laugh. But they knew [laughter] how to handle these problems. [laughter] They'd been at it so long, they knew exactly how to handle them.

MK: Was there a cut passed? Was there any kind of remuneration for this entertainment or it was just part of the way…

WF: No, just part of the way. As the boat went away, they'd wave at you. They used to have the head stuck out through the windows and they'd wave at you. The other thing about those boats that impressed me as a child, and even after I got grown, the odors on that boat were distinctive. They were different. They were not the same odor all the time. But they burned coal and made steam. That's what propelled the boats. But they had these cattle on there, these animals, and they had an odor. All of them had an odor of their own themselves. All of the railings and doorknobs and things of that sort, all of them were brass and all of them highly polished all the time. I never saw one that wasn't. Really impressive to a young person. You'd get up on that level, the odor was different, completely different than it was [laughter] down there. You get back towards the stern to the galley, the kitchen, the cafeteria area, and that was different. You had food odors back there that were very different from the rest of the ship. It was interesting to be able to go on the stern and look everywhere, go up to the bow. Even though she was tied to a dock, it was interesting for a youngster. You felt like you were John. You could see everywhere. You were because it had a lot of hype. Those captains and mates on those boats, of course, had experience. They knew what they were doing and did a good job, generally. But I don't think the average person realized how much those boats were affected by the wind because they were so high, so tall. The wind bothered them a lot. They had to riggle it to be able to calculate for the wind, particularly the wind was blowing because it would push them this way or that way. Once in a while, you'd have a captain – I remember this happened on one occasion – who enjoyed drinking whiskey. Sometimes, they would forget that they were on the job, drinking whiskey. I remember on this one occasion, it was Captain Archie Long, who everybody knew, and everybody loved him. Everybody in this village knew him and everybody liked Captain Archie Long. He was from Weems. But on one occasion, he apparently had been drinking too much in the daytime, and he missed the wharf by, I'd say, two hundred feet. He wound up in shore among a whole lot of other oyster boats that were tied to stakes. So, she hit bottom. She hit on the mud and he had a little time getting her back to dock, but he got it all finally. But he just missed it. Now, at that time, I saw it and I was out there, but I didn't realize why. I saw what happened but didn't realize why. Except I remembered that all the men, the older men, were laughing and giggling among themselves about it and making comments that I heard, but I didn't really understand what it was. I learned later, that's what it was, that he'd been drinking [laughter] so much. Didn't hurt anything in that instance. I don't know of anything else

I can think of about the steamboats operation out there.

MK: Tell us how the wharf was laid out exactly.

WF: This wharf was nine hundred feet long. Nine hundred feet. Quite long. In the early days of it, it had railroad tracks right down the center of it and a cart. It had railroad wheels on this cart – big, heavy, made out of oak. My gosh, it was a heavy thing. I would say it was maybe six feet wide and about twelve feet long. You just pushed it, but it took more than one person to push it. We didn't have trucks then you see. We didn't have trucks. So, you load your stuff on here, if it was going out, and you push it out there and unload it and push it back if it was bringing stuff back. Then later years, trucks came along and they eventually took up those rails. But they were there, well, certainly up until 1933 when we had that storm, the hurricane. After that, trucks could go up and load and unload things. But prior to that, all this stuff was brought down by horse and wagon. I've seen pictures of it, where they would have half a dozen wagons at the foot of the wharf, just, what we would say today, parked, waiting for this or waiting for something to come off or something. It was almost a traffic jam of horses and, sometimes, mules. But everything was done by hand. Didn't have any electricity on the wharves. Didn't have any electric lights over there. The boat had lights, but the wharves didn't. The oyster houses out there didn't have any electric power at all. The only way they could pump any – they had artesian wells out there that drilled right in the water. But the only way they got any water pressure was a donkey engine that ran on gasoline. So, it was very restricted because you couldn't have motors and electricity or fans or heat or anything else. It was cold out there on those wharves in the wintertime. Awfully cold. My God. It was just so cold. But we didn't do much in the wintertime out there. The children didn't. We did ours in the spring and summer.

MK: I just wonder if – oh, did the laundry just stop?

CK: No, it is still going.

WF: It must be a drier. The washing machine went down. Has he stopped?

CK: Pausing all these machines. Is that one paused or not? Counting down, I guess.

MK: Now, the…

CK: Are you ready?

MK: So, you had this nine-hundred-foot wharf…

WF: Yes.

MK: Can you describe which side the steamboat came in on or how it was…

WF: Well, most of the time, they were right across the front. I guess the wharf across the end was about fifty to sixty feet probably. But sometimes, instead of right across the end of it, sometimes they'd come into the side, just the bow end, either side or the other, but most of the

time, they were right flat across the front face of it. Those boats would run from – oh, no. The average would probably be 225 feet. So, they were good size boats. They didn't draw too much water. Probably drew about six – eight feet maybe at the most. They didn't draw a whole lot of water because it was rather flat.

MK: So, they could go way up ahead of these rivers?

WF: Oh, yes. All the way to Fredericksburg. Yes. They were all painted white, of course. I never saw a steamboat that wasn't white. Some of them were side wheelers. The *Middlesex* was. I remember the *Talbot* was. They were all named for counties in Maryland and here. Talbot County, Maryland.

CK: What does that mean, a side wheeler?

WF: What about them?

CK: What does that mean?

WF: They were wheels that propelled them on the side. What was visible outside of the boat was what we call a [unintelligible]. They were doing things like this. They did just like this all the time, making those wheels turn. All still running on steam.

MK: Like a big piston?

WF: Yes. Yes.

CK: What is that?

WF: Big piston. He said, "Like a big piston." The propeller-driven boats, of course, you didn't see any of that. They were just propellers at the back, underneath at the back. But these side wheelers, one thing that was unique to them, they wouldn't go straight. You couldn't make them go straight. They'd go like this. I've seen many of them. Watched behind them in a boat, small boat. I'd watch them go from here to Bowler's Wharf. They didn't go straight like the propeller-driven boats. They'd go zigzag. So, the helmsman had his hands full [laughter] trying to keep – only thing they had in the back was that rudder. Just that one rudder. They reversed too, just like a propeller boat does. But they would make pretty good speed. I mean, they did pretty good. They'd run about ten to twelve miles an hour. Maximum would be twelve, but they'd average about ten to twelve miles an hour, any of those boats. They were able to keep on schedule – remarkably close to their schedule, when you took into account what they had to take on or take off the boat at each place. But they would run – if they were supposed to be here about 11:00 a.m., they would be here just about 11:00 a.m. They weren't ever like two hours late or anything like that and they made all these stops up down this river.

MK: Where did they stop before they came here and where did they go when they left here?

WF: Well, if they were going up the river, they'd go across to Bowler's Wharf, then on this side

to Wellfords Wharf near Warsaw, and then across on the other side to Wares Wharf. Then the next one would be Tappahannock. Then on this side to Naylors and so on and on up the road. But you got to bear in mind, we didn't have any railroads. We didn't have any trucks back in the [19]20s. Hardly any. So, this was it. This was the transportation system. These young couples, they'd go get married and they're going to go on their honeymoon. Where were they going to go? There wasn't any place to go except Baltimore and that's where they'd go, most of them. They'd be married here at the church and get on the boat and head on to Baltimore for the honeymoon, or possibly, to Fredericksburg. Occasionally, to Norfolk, but we mostly went to Baltimore. Most of these boats went to Baltimore. But it was just a way of life. The other thing I've thought about a lot since, as a child, I didn't realize that this was the end of an era that I was looking at and living in. I didn't know. To me, this is the way it was going to always be. If anybody had asked me, I would've said, "Oh, yes. This will always be like this." I didn't have any idea that I was right at the end of an era. Looking back at it, it certainly was clearly ending. I remember when the last boat came up here on the (Turner base?) was *Anne Arundel*. She had been coming here a lot. The last trip she made, it was sort of a celebration thing. I remember that Captain Davis was the captain on her, John Davis. He took her to Fredericksburg and back on to Baltimore, and that ended it. I think that was 1937, probably [19]38, [19]37, I guess, but I remember that. As far as this river was concerned, that was the end of the steamboat era.

MK: Because by that time…

WF: Because trucks were more available, roads were improved. See, we had such poor roads, my goodness. All these roads were dirty from here on out to the main highway. Route 3 was paved, I think. I think it was paved around about 1937 probably. But all of these, when I grew up in this village, we played baseball in the street. That's where we played. [laughter] So, the whole picture was changing. Incidentally, the 1933 hurricane knocked out so many of these wharves, a number of them. By that time, business was getting slack because the bridge across the Tappahannock was done about 1928. The road to Richmond was done. So, you could get to Richmond fairly quickly. So, the steamboat companies didn't replace some of those piers. They just let them go. They kept replacing this one in Tappahannock. But they let a lot of them go rather than spend money rebuilding them because it was a little expensive. They were using the big piling. They didn't use little, small ones. They had the steam pile drivers come up here to drive those piling. So, they rebuilt this wharf after [19]33. It stayed long time until really Hazel, 1954, just took it away. By that time, those two oyster houses had moved down to – my parents were one of them and the Smiths were the other – moved down to Simonson, which is the lower end of this county. So, the wharf just went. You could see the remains of it. I want you to look at the remains of it when you – it won't help this tape, but you can see where it went out.

CK: You talk about the end of an era. How would you characterize the era?

WF: Well, I really interested myself with just the steamboats, the idea of steamboats because they had started about a hundred years before that. I don't know what exact year they started, but way before the Civil War. So, I guess they had started by 1830, [18]35, on up to 1937. A hundred years of it.

MK: You saw the *Anne Arundel*?

WF: Oh, yes. Yes.

MK: You saw it?

WF: Oh, yes. Yes, sir. Yes. She came here regularly, toward the last.

MK: Did you miss the *Anne Arundel* after that?

WF: Oh my, yes. Missed the steamboats, yes. [laughter] Everybody missed them. See, they'd blow the whistle long before they got here, certainly, a mile or two, a mile anyway. So, you'd have time to get to the wharf by the time they got there. But you could hear that whistle all over. It just echoed. A loud whistle.

CK: What did it sound like?

WF: Well, they had rather distinctive whistles as you could tell by the whistle which boat it was. You could tell the *Potomac's* whistle because it was different than the *Anne Arundel*. You could tell the difference. They were all steam whistles. They were but just long, three-sided things, brass. Then the pilot had a string with a knot on it, a good big knot on it. He'd just pull it once. They'd let children do it every now and then. That was exciting.

MK: So, did the whistle shriek or did it roar or did it growl?

WF: Oh, roar. Roar. More like a roar. Yes. Yes. Yes. A little different from train whistles. It didn't sound like a train. It was steam. It's had a definite steam sound to it. A swishy sort of a sound. But it was loud. It was good and loud. Sometimes, you'd see women particularly on the end of the wharf. They would blow the whistle before they left so everybody knew they were leaving. Yes, I can remember seeing particularly young girls shake. It'd startle them because it was kind of loud. But you could hear it – oh gosh, you could hear it three, four miles, five miles.

CK: What would you do then if you were home or at a store and you heard that whistle?

WF: Oh, you'd go. You'd get on your bicycle and go on down there. [laughter] Be ready to go out and look at it and watch it. It was fun to watch them. They would go back and fill – go ahead and back and water stirring up, you know what I mean? Fun just to watch it. They would throw off a small line, but as big as your finger, that type size. On the end of it, it would have a big knot thing. They would stand up the bow when she was coming in and the guy would throw it. It would hit the dock. You had to get out of the way because it would knock you out. You pulled it. That was tied to the main hawser, which was about this big around.

MK: Hawser?

WF: Yes, the hawser. The rope that tied the boat to the dock.

MK: How would that be spelled?

WF: H-A-W-S-E-R, I think. Maybe it's H-A-U-S-E-R.

CK: It was what, you say?

WF: What?

CK: It was a what, did you say?

WF: It was the rope that tied the boat to the dock. It was just a big rope, giant rope, big around – not a little small rope like this. This thing was big.

MK: A couple inches.

WF: Yes. Oh, yes. So, the man, really, the man, the wharf agent would have a man there to catch that thing and pull it in for them and put it over the ball of the post. That would be standing about this high with this big around. Then they would take that little rope off, wind it up, and carry it back to the boat. That was the way to get the big rope on the wharf. Had to get on there some kind of way. Sometimes, the captain would back and fill a little bit after it was tied to pull her in, make her come in closer. So, it was a little bit of an operation you were observing as they docked her. The steam smell was distinctive. You could smell it and you could smell coal. You could smell it. So, it was a little smutty in places around the boat. Even though the boats were painted white, you could see the smut from the coal. I imagined they'd wash it down probably the trip – when they got back to Baltimore, I imagined they'd hose her down pretty good. As I said, I don't think I can think of anything about the boat themselves.

MK: Did the boys all want to grow up to be steamboat captains, do you suppose?

WF: I don't remember us talking about that much. I really don't because as soon as the boat left, we'd forget it. We'd go do something else. We didn't linger around. We'd go swimming or we'd go playing baseball or something. You had to make your own entertainment back at that time.

MK: You did not play steamboat then?

WF: No.

CK: Did you swim around the steamboat?

WF: No. We would swim after steamboat left. Yes. We would swim after the steamboat left. I can remember one thing, one period there. I was a little young for that then, then later I did it. Lifesaving badges. One of the places they did was on that wharf. I remember it had a brick wrapped in cloth or something and throw it over and you had to go down and get it. The water was, I'm guessing, fifteen feet deep, but very muddy bottom, very muddy. I mean, soft mud. You had to be pretty good to find that thing. You had to be able to hold your breath quite a little while and find it. I remember that. Well, most of us had a skiff or something available to us. Nearly everybody did. Every child did. The parents had them. We didn't have any motors then.

We had to row everywhere we went. But we stayed in those, and swimming, that was the main thing in the summertime. But the boat would come no matter what the weather was. Once in a great while, these rivers would freeze up. I know they said in 1918, they did. Froze up here all the way across, the wharf across to Bowler's, about three miles across there. Then they just have to stop. They just couldn't break through the ice much. But as far as storms, northwesters, and northeasters, they'd keep going. They'd just keep going. It must have been rough out there in that bay, though, on them. [laughter] I don't see how they did, but they did.

CK: Summer and winter?

WF: Yes.

MK: Because they have a lot of height. Some of those…

WF: They had a lot of height, you see. That's the problem. They were so high, they were subject to so much wind. These oyster boats, like those bay-built boats we were talking about, they were much lower. They didn't have all that high sided thing. Had to fly the American flag at the stern and sort of like a Union Jack up the front on the bows of them. Of course, the names that the bow end up on politics, about the politics.

CK: The Union Jack, you say?

WF: It looked like a Union Jack. It was a black one. It got a black and white something. May have been a railroad emblem thing. I don't remember. But it was black and white sort of looking flag. A triangle. A little triangle flag.

MK: You mentioned the connection with the railroads, that the railroads owned these boats?

WF: Yes.

CK: What is that now?

WF: The railroads owned these steamboats. Owned them. Pennsylvania Railroad particularly. Yes.

MK: So, I was wondering if the tradition of Pullman porters on the trains, if it was related somehow to those.

WF: It was somewhat that way. Yes. Yes. But only place I could notice it really was in the food end of it. You could tell you were on a railroad-operated restaurant sort of thing.

MK: Because the Pullman porters did not organize until 1937. They did not have a union until [19]37. That would have been too late for this.

WF: That's too late for this. Yes. Too late for this. They had life jackets, the old caulk-type life jackets in that main salon, I guess you'd call it. Lounge chairs were all leather, very expensive

looking sofas and chairs in that thing. You could walk around. They had a lot of space to walk up on the level where the state rooms were. Of course, in the center, it was where the smokestack and all that stuff came up. So, you had to walk around that. That was all walled off. But I remember those life jackets where at the end of that would be a big sort of container thing, really, with maybe twenty-five, thirty life jackets. I remember as a child, thinking, "My gosh. That would be a lot of people in the water if all those people had life jackets on." [laughter]

MK: Now, was there ever such a thing as a showboat that came through this part there?

WF: Oh, yes. The floating theatre. Adams Floating Theatre. Yes. Adams Floating Theatre.

MK: What in the world was that?

WF: They came every summer and they stopped here and they stopped in Tappahannock. I remember that. I've seen pictures of it, of course, lots of times. They had plays, dramas. They'd been doing it for so long that a lot of these people in the village got to know the actors, particularly the main actors. It was a rectangular barge. The seating was on the incline. I can't tell you how many people it would seat, but probably a hundred, 150 maybe. I remember at intermission, they always sold taffy – candy in a box – in always sort of like a cracker jack box and always with some kind of prize in it. The stage itself was very colorful. Very colorful. Even the whole inside of the thing was. It was very attractive. She tied up to the wharf and you went out on the wharf, you just stepped down on it and walked in. They'd have a matinee in the afternoon and then the main show at night. That floating theatre was pulled by a little small tug, very small tug, but they'd go from place to place with it. I don't know what year that stopped. I just don't know what year it stopped. But they came out of Baltimore, essentially, and they spent the summer with that thing. I can remember one time seeing them going back down the river. It was summertime. These actors – we rowed there on a boat, just playing around. The actors were up on top just sunning themselves, like you would be. We went out real close to them, to wave to them. They all waved, just going along down the river. [laughter] But that was soon to end. I don't remember which year it stopped.

MK: How long would they tie it up here then?

WF: Oh, for just maybe two nights. Not very long, and then go on to the next place. They would've sent their bulletins ahead of time and they would be posted in the stores, telling you exactly when they were going to be here. So, you could plan ahead of time if you wanted to go to the Floating Theatre. But there again, you see, you didn't have any TV to compete with it. They were excellent actors. No question about it. Excellent.

MK: So, you had some melodrama and then did you have minstrel shows too?

WF: Yes. Yes. That type of thing too. Yes.

MK: Tell me about that.

WF: Well, of course, we did that in the village a couple times a year.

CK: Did what?

WF: Minstrel shows or dramas. Practice for them. Practice for them. As a child, I'd be in them. I think it's because I talked so much. [laughter] They figured I could do that job. But my aunt was always the director of these dramas, these plays, here in this village. We'd practice and practice and practice and did a good job. She did a good job. She was good at it. She knew how to do it. Men and women and children, depending on the play, but always had pretty good assortment of people. People would come and they always served ice cream at those kind of things. Ice cream was a little scarce and that was a good treat for people.

MK: Where did they get it?

WF: They made it, these crank types of ice. You've seen them. I mean, I'm sure you have. Double-sided things, in the middle, you put ice and salt on the ice. You've got to crank them. Today, people have a little electric motor on them. You don't have to actually physically crank them. We'd crank them and crank them and crack them and crank them. It finally gets hard. Peach ice cream, strawberry ice cream, all sorts of things.

MK: When I think of a minstrel show, somehow I associate that with the blackface. Was there more to it than that or was that primarily what you had?

WF: That was it. You had end men.

MK: End men?

WF: End men. One on each end on the stage. That was a part of the show. That was a standing. They would ask questions back and forth. That was a part of it. I'm trying to think of some of that. I played the end men several times.

MK: You had blackface on?

WF: Yes.

CK: What is that now?

WF: Yes. Blackface. Yes. Things like this. They're very cony today. The other end man and I, we would get up and meet in the middle. "Let's be Frank and Ernest about this thing. Hello, Frank. How are you, Ernest?" That type of thing. That's the way it went. I say today, it would be very corny. Young people today would just laugh at it. I mean, just say, "Oh, for goodness sake." But that's the way it was. That's the way those minstrels were.

CK: I love that. What else were your lines?

WF: [laughter] I can't remember. I just happened to think of that thing.

MK: Frank and Ernest?

WF: Yes. [laughter]

CK: I am trying to picture the theatre in town, the Floating Theatre, the atmosphere in the salons. Was it all white people?

WF: Oh, practically all. Oh, yes. Everything was segregated. Yes. I can't remember whether – it may have had two, three state rooms there for Black, I suppose, on the boat itself. I can't even remember. Come to think of it. I can't remember ever seeing a Black person traveling on that boat. Yet, I'm sure they did. They had to. They didn't travel much though. There was such a disparity, you see, between the whites and Blacks. Oh, they got along in a way because they had all these oysters. They had very few white people working on them. Almost all of them were Black, shucking oysters, opening oysters, almost all of them were Black.

MK: What did that sound like? Did those people sing too?

WF: They'd sing. Yes. They'd sing a lot.

MK: Really?

WF: Yes.

MK: What would they sing?

WF: Black men can sing too. I can tell you that. Nearly all of them can. They had good voices.

MK: What kind of things would they sing?

WF: They'd sing hymn type things. They'd just be quiet. You can hear them shucking. Then all at once, just one voice and a line would just start off. All would just join in, one at a time, until you had a chorus going. Beautiful. Beautiful. Didn't have an accompaniment or anything like that. But they knew how to sing and they sang slowly. They didn't sing fast. They sang slowly. They took their time. Every word would last for quite a little while in singing. I guess it sounds peculiar to say nowadays, but I can't remember any crime in this village or even outside this village. I can't remember any instance of any kind of serious crime. Once in a while, a person would be caught stealing something because things were so important and so scarce. But other than that, as far as murder and robbing people or assaulting people, I just never heard of it. Never heard of it during the whole time until I was going off to college. That was never a worry. People never locked their doors. We never locked our houses. Now, we are locking them now. We didn't when we first got married. We didn't either. For years, we didn't. Unlocked every night, all night long. But we lock them all now. [laughter] We lock them every night now. It's changed. Just a change. A big change in those days. There had to have been poverty then. I know there was because up the road here, a number of people I knew, their little house had a dirty floor. They were all Black people. But I remember that very well going into two of them, particularly, I remember. It was dirty. That dirt was packed downright hard, but they would

brush it and sweep it. It was dirty. Absolutely dirt. I don't how they really kept themselves warm to save my life, but they did. It was tough going.

CK: You had some sort of friendship that would have brought you into their homes then?

WF: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Well, my mother was unusual. She was an outgoing person and she spent her life really helping people. Everybody in this village knew that. [laughter] Knew about her. So, she was the one who dragged me off to see – particularly, when she heard somebody was sick, a colored fellow, a colored lady or somebody – a colored man was sick. She knew them all. She couldn't wait to go carry them something, carry them some food or something. Now, not all the people in the village did that. But I'm just telling you, my mother was just unusual in that regard. I can remember her carrying us to see this fellow. I think his last name was Wood. It was back in the woods, I can tell you that, because we had to park the car and walk to get to his house. I was just a youngster, six, seven, eight years old maybe. We had carried some food to him. He had something cooking in his kitchen stove. Had a wood kitchen stove and it was a little separate room was his kitchen. But he wanted us to see it. So, we went back in his kitchen. He opened the oven and it was a possum cooking with his eyes looking at you. His teeth had shrunk because of the heat and there was just nothing but the whole mouth full of teeth looking at you, and a tail. I thought to myself, "I've never seen anything like this before in my life." [laughter] It was the first time I'd ever seen anything like it. He was so happy to have that possum cooking. I thought to myself, "I don't think I could possibly eat a piece of that possum." But it impressed me, I can tell you that. I don't think it bothered my mother. So, it was rough. It had to be, looking back at it. It was rough living for the Blacks most of the time. Yet, they had a spirit about them. They just had a spirit about them that you just couldn't beat. They didn't appear depressed or act depressed. They would do things for you too. I mean, they'd do things for white people. There was some playing back and forth between particular boys, white boys and black boys. We'd play right much together. Schools are separate, completely segregated, but we would play…

MK: Were there two schools here in the village?

WF: Way back, there were. Yes. Well, yes. In Sharps, there was high school here. But they all closed about 1932 or three, I'd say. From then on, we went to a consolidated school, but still segregated. Didn't integrate until the [19]60s.

MK: So, there was a Black school here too?

WF: Just up the road. Just a little mile up the road. Just a two-room school.

CK: But the boys would still play together?

WF: Oh, yes. They'd be down in the village. They'd come down in the village a lot and we'd play together. We'd go into the woods together and do all kinds of things, just playing. Find a stream or find a bank or anything. We'd tie ropes up in trees and swing. So, you have a big, long swing. Find a spring. Play around in that spring. Clean it out and open it up and dig it up. Just something to do, just things to do. But not to get too far away from these steamboats now

because people say, "Well, you haven't covered enough on the steamboat." But I don't know anything else I can think of to tell you about steamboats.

MK: Well, we are interested in what was going on on the bank too, as well as the boat itself.

CK: The whole era.

MK: The whole era. So, I think it is all appropriate. Did you say your father owned the oyster?

WF: Oyster. Yes.

MK: That was his business then?

WF: Yes. He started about 1918 and the oysters died, well, pretty completely about 1988. That ended it, really. He was dead by then. My brother and I owned it. But that ended. I mean, they died so many. Their death rate was so universal and so complete that you couldn't even keep on. You just couldn't keep planning. Couldn't afford to because they wouldn't live more than a year and die. I never dreamed, and none of [laughter] the people around me dreamed that that would ever happen. Just nobody ever thought it would ever happen like that, I mean, that badly. We had some years a little better and different than others. But when that finally sunk in, everybody realized, "This is it. This is over. We are out of the business. We are out." We've given up. We had oyster ground leases. We've given all of them up now. We kept hanging on to them for a few years, but nothing would happen. So, we finally let it all go.

MK: What was involved in 1918 for your father in establishing an oyster business?

WF: Getting two or three people who could shuck and he would accumulate oysters in the shell. He and a great uncle of mine were partners, really. They gradually leased the oyster shore to plant and grow oysters. They didn't depend on the public rock entirely. They wound up out on the wharf with the – they started on shore down here, but they wound up down the wharf where they shucked and handled the oysters. Sold most of them by parcel posts through the mail. Quartz and half gallons and some gallons – shucked oysters. Did that for years.

MK: Through the mail?

WF: Through the mail. Yes, sir.

MK: Now, how did that work?

WF: Most of our customers were people who could afford to do it. A lot of them were bankers, I remember, in those days. Some, doctors. I can remember the names of the places that we used to send them to, Winchester, Fredericksburg, Charlottesville. I can just remember the addresses. You'd have to make a card and attach it to the, say, a quarter oyster, just in a quarter can. You would solder the card to the thing with a little piece of wire and just carry it to the post office and it went on. They had put stamps on it, of course, on the card, and it had the address on the card.

MK: So, the oysters were canned.

WF: Yes, in a can. Yes. Didn't start until about 1st October. So, it was cool. The weather was cool, but they weren't refrigerated at all. But they got there pretty quickly. Once in a great while, we'd have a complaint that the oysters were bad. But once in a great while.

CK: Did you can them like you canned tomatoes with hot processors?

WF: No, no. Not in hot. No, no. They were just cold, these oysters. Just raw oysters. Just like with shuck. No, no. They were not processed at all. They were raw oysters.

MK: In a tin can?

WF: In a tin can. Continental Can Company, American Can Company, I remember we used to – where you got the cans from. We had little capping machine – what they call a closing machine – to put the top on, did by hand. The little can would go around and the top would be sealed right on there. We'd bring him them ashore to the post office to mail. The mailman would come and he'd have to put them in his car or whatever he was driving, a pick-up or something. Some old time, model T4s. [laughter] But they went that way. That was quite a little business. Of course, the prices were so cheap. Prices were low. Quarter oysters was something like sixty-five cents, I think. Something like that. Not any more than that. A quarter oysters today is $16.50. That's about the average price. I've been checking them at the seafood place. $15.50, $16.50 a quarter. [laughter] Prices were entirely different.

MK: Dianne?

Dianne Jordan: I have heard a lot of stories about shipping oyster, but I have never heard that one before.

MK: Oh, that is great.

WF: Oh, yes. Both of these oyster houses did it. Yes.

DJ: That is amazing.

MK: That is fantastic to hear about.

DJ: I think we have covered just about everything.

MK: He has done a good job. [inaudible]

DJ: He certainly did not need any prompting.

CK: How long would it take for them to get from your cannery to wherever they were going?

WF: Oh, two days. It'd be there the second day. I went off to college to Randolph-Macon in

Ashland, just above Richmond. I remember we had several customers there. I went off to college in 1940 and I knew these names because I'd had to dress some of these cards for my parents. One of them was the postmaster in Ashland. I remember him very well. I introduced myself to him when I got there. Two of them were bankers, cashier banks. But they were nice to me just because – oh, one college professor, (Dr. Burlington?) was one of our customers. He was a biology professor and he realized who I was once I got there.

CK: Did you arrive at college laden with canned oysters?

WF: No. No. I didn't. When I was in the legislature, I used to take oysters over there to Richmond every Monday morning particularly. But all that's gone. Oysters are so scarce now that…

MK: Would you say that oysters were influential in the passage of any bills that you were familiar with?

WF: Yes. Oh, yes. I think so. Yes, because I represented these counties here in the Northern Neck, four counties. Toward the end, it was five, King George. I looked out for the oyster people. No question about it. That was my job. [laughter] I mean, I felt it was part of my job.

DJ: What was your party affiliation?

WF: Democrat.

MK: No. My question was these oysters you took with you to the legislature those were the oysters I was talking about.

WF: Oh, yes. Yes.

MK: Were those oysters ever party to the passing of bills?

WF: I don't think so.

MK: [laughter]

WF: No, because the ones I gave them to were just personal friends of mine and their wives. Martha and I got to know them so well. I didn't have to do that. I don't know anything else to tell you. You just have to come back next year.

DJ: That was a lot.

CK: Oh, you have been wonderful.

WF: [laughter] All right.

MK: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

CK: You just painted a whole era. I know you will start thinking – tonight, you will lie in bed and think, "Oh, there is another piece –"

MK: I should have told them.

CK: [laughter] Was there something else?

DJ: Well, before you turn it back on, he may not want to do it.

MK: It is fine.

WF: Well, what's that?

DJ: The boys that were doing the research were talking about you telling them about the songs and dances that the guys did on the wharfs.

WF: Oh, well, did a bit about what I told you. That was…

CK: No particular songs that went with the dances.

WF: I don't think I demonstrated anything much for them because I…

DJ: Well, they seemed to be terribly impressed by some sort of dance that you did for them.

WF: [laughter] I don't think you need to do that. [laughter]

CK: Well, we are impressed.

WF: That won't do it.

CK: We are impressed with what we heard and saw.

DJ: I'm holding it.

MK: Still will not work.

DJ: On it. My turn to work.

MK: Thank you again. That was fantastic.

WF: Oh, you're welcome.

DJ: Yes. That was wonderful. Thank you.

WF: Where do you go next?

MK: We are going back to St. Mary's County, Maryland.

CK: Sadly, this was the twentieth of twenty interviews that we were contracted to do and it is just the beginning of the story. There is so much more to tell on Northern Neck.

WF: St. Mary's is the interesting place.

MK: Yes, sir. We live right at the historic city there.

WF: Oh, you do?

MK: Yes, and we have been associated with that place.

CK: You have been over there?

WF: Oh, yes. Yes.

[end of transcript]