

**BAYSHORE CENTER AT BIVALVE  
DELAWARE BAY MUSEUM**

**ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION**

**INTERVIEW DATE:** December 4, 2013  
**TIME:**  
**SUBJECT:** FAMILY HISTORY IN CUMBERLAND CNTY  
**NARRATOR(S):** HAROLD BICKINGS, JR.  
**LOCATION:** DELAWARE BAY MUSEUM  
**INTERVIEWER:** Patricia Moore, Volunteer of DB Museum,  
Rachel Dolhanczyk, Curator, DB Museum

**TRANSCRIPTION  
COMPLETED:** August 25, 2023  
**TRANSCRIPTION BY:** Patricia Moore, Volunteer DB Museum  
Molly Graham

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Harold Bickings shared his family's history from great to grandfather to father and his own personal history. He shared how the family got started in the oyster business and the trials and hardships during the many years in this business. Harold was able to provide information on the many locations of his family businesses, plus, verified names, locations of other companies in the Port Norris and Maurice River area.

The information he provided helped the Bayshore Center at Bivalve Museum to verify previous company names, owners, boat names, and many details about daily life on the boats and shucking houses.

Pat Moore: Today is December 4, 2013. We are interviewing Harold Bickings, Jr. at the Bayshore Center at Bivalve. I'm Pat Moore, volunteer for the Bayshore Center at Bivalve Museum Oral History Program. Also in attendance is Rachel Dolhanczyk, Curator for the BCB Museum. Good morning, Harold. Thank you very much –

Harold Bickings, Jr.: Good morning.

PM: – for coming and sharing your story with us. We're pretty much going to just –

HB: I'm going to be close (to the mic) because my wife says I talk real soft at times.

Rachel Dolhanczyk: I'll put it closer. There you go. [laughter]

PM: [laughter] So, we'd just like you to start, if you're comfortable starting with the way back first.

HB: Well, it was in the 1800s that my great grandfather came over from Denmark. He had a job promised to him in Baltimore, working on a boat there. But when he got to Baltimore, the man who had promised him a job had died. So, there he was, a young – I guess he was nothing but a teenager, and he worked his way up to Delaware. He got a job on an oyster boat. He saved his money. He didn't get married or anything. He saved his money and he bought 1/32 of an oyster boat; it was called *The Flying Fish*. It was a small boat, probably forty feet long. From that, he saved his money. From that, to whereby he built up his oyster fleet to something like nine or ten boats.

PM: Now, was this in Delaware?

HB: He was in Delaware. Then he moved over to Jersey. He lived in Greenwich. He had three children; it was Helen, Marie and my grandfather Chris Peterson.

PM: And his wife?

HB: His wife was named Elizabeth, Elizabeth Peterson. She was of German descent. My mother always said she was really hard. [laughter] My great grandfather –

RD: His name was?

HB: His name was John Peterson.

RD: John, OK.

HB: His son's name was Christian Peterson. So, we got John and then Christian. So, he moved over to Greenwich. I don't know what year or anything he moved over there, but he bought one of those big houses as you go down on the right side there, going toward the marina. It's right in there. He lived down there.

RD: Do you know about how old he was when he –?

HB: No.

RD: But he was married at that point, you think?

HB: Yes, he was. He had to be in his thirties, probably.

PM: Was he still operating *The Flying Fish*?

HB: I think he sold that. He didn't have that. He had a lot of boats and I don't know all the names of them. I know my grandfather's boats, but not his. So, like I said, he had three children. My grandfather came in the oyster business with him. But [inaudible] had always used to tell the story that on the stern on the boat you would have always have somebody taking depth, checking the depth, because after you got off the reef, it would drop off. So, he did that for a while. One thing with my family, fathers were very hard on their sons. And he was very hard on my grandfather, Christian. Chris got ticked off. He left and he moved to Philadelphia. When he was up there he met my grandmother. Her name was Esther Back. [Editor's note: Family records indicate the spelling as Bach, B-A-C-H.]

PM: Pock?

HB: Back, B-A-C-K. She was of Pennsylvania Dutch origin. He fell in love with her and he married her. Then he was [inaudible] to death up in Philly. So, he moved back down to [inaudible] oyster business. And I guess he and his father had a reconciliation. Although, my mother said they were still pretty hard on him. He said that they had a house on 301 West Broad Street, and my great-grandparents were around the corner.

PM: That was where?

HB: In Bridgeton.

PM: In Bridgeton.

HB: They moved up to Bridgeton.

PM: 301 Broad?

HB: 301 West Broad Street is where my grandfather lived. My great-grandfather lived in – that would be Commerce Street, all the way at the end, where there was a restaurant. The house directly across the street. My grandmother always talks about they took up housekeeping right up the street from them. Then they built the house on 301. But my grandmother and grandfather had five children. They had three girls and two boys. Yeah. [laughter] I had to count them. Two of the sons, they were planning on coming into the oyster business, but my grandfather was tough. He was tough. My one uncle quit and the other uncle, he was claimed he was getting migraines. He quit the oyster business too. My father, who married my mother, he was from

down in Somers Point and met my mother up in Glassboro. They got married and he went to work for my grandfather. My grandfather put him in the middle of the deck, too.

PM: So, that was three boys then.

HB: No, my father was married to a sister.

PM: I'm sorry. Okay.

HB: There was John and Chris, and then there was Marie, Ester and Betty – Elizabeth. Let's see. The only one that's left alive of that group is my aunt Dot, who was married to Chris. So, my father went to work for my grandfather. He put him in the middle of the deck. My father finally said to him one day, "You let me take the boat or I'm going to quit." So, my grandfather did. Because my grandfather he was something else.

PM: Do you remember the time period of that?

HB: That would have been around 1945.

PM: 1945?

HB: Because my parents were married in 1941. My father was in the Army from '41 to '45 – '45, '46. Then, he was called back again for Korea. So, he was back there for about four or five years, from the time World War II was over until the Korean War started. Then, he worked for my grandfather [inaudible] still taking the boat.

RD: How old was your grandfather at this time?

HB: Well, he died young. I think he died at sixty-four. He had sugar and he had a lot of trouble with it.

PM: Do you remember the year your grandfather was born?

HB: I think it was 1895, somewhere in there. '90, '95, somewhere in there.

PM: He passed away when? We ask hard questions.

HB: I'm trying to think. I was probably eight or ten when he died. So, he died about 1950 – no, he died in 1960. That's right. He died in '60. He died of a heart attack. His heart gave out. Being sugar, that's what attacks the weakest part of the body.

RD: You said he was about sixty-five. So, if he was born 1895 and [died] in 1960.

HB: Because you figure: my mother was born in 1919. So, that would have made him about twenty something when he met my mother. There was a sister that was born a year before my Aunt Marie. So, where are we?

RD: 1945.

HB: 1945.

RD: Your dad takes over, takes control of running the boat.

HB: Well, he starts running the boat. Maybe it was after the Korean War. Maybe he was working in the middle of the deck then and then when he got called back in the service – because he bought my grandfather out in 1955 I would say – '55 or '56. But my grandfather, he was, like I said, a very hard man. Each one of my uncles wanted the oyster business because it was very lucrative back then. He offered them a deal whereby they would buy him out. The deal consisted of that whatever oysters they caught that year, they had to plant back the same number of oysters, which was very hard in lean years. Each one of my uncles turned it down. So, my father, when he went to my grandfather – I guess it was 1950-something. When he went to my grandfather, my grandfather gave him the same deal and my father took it. At the time, they had the *John C*, the *CJ*, the *WO Rose*. I know of three boats that they had at that time. When he bought the oyster business, he had a couple good years. A misperception that people have that – where the oystermen were nothing but hogs; they were taking everything they could take. But as you well know, up the bay, some years you don't get a set or you get a very small set. So, the oystermen would go up the bay for eight weeks. They would go all the way up in the middle and [inaudible] and all up in that area and catch oysters, but it still was not enough. So, what they would do, they would go down the James River and they would buy seed oysters down there and load them up here. Then, they caught a brush. For the longest time I said to my father, "What is brush?" He says, "That's James River oysters."

RD: Brush? Like brush your hair?

HB: No. I think what they were talking about, it looked like sage brush.

RD: But brush?

HB: It was the little tiny oysters. Orangutan was another expression they would use. There were big bunches of them like this. So, they were buying this brush and they were bringing it up here. They were claiming it. The idea was, okay, now we can get enough oysters to keep us going, but then 1950 – what was it? '55?

RD: Seven.

HB: '57. All the oysters died. I remember I used to ask my father what it was like, and he said they went out on the boat and all the oystermen would go out on a boat together and they would try up the bay. They would go and try. Did that for years. He would try different grounds and different beds. He said they would bring up the oysters and they were dying. They just smelled awful. He said they shoveled them back over again. I guess, one year it was (Bobby Robbins?) – have you ever heard of him? There was Lee, Dave and Bobby. Bobby was a character. Bobby was up at the pilothouse. He looks down, there are probably twenty, thirty oystermen on

the deck. He says, "The Lord giveth that the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." That was very true. So, what happened was it was the oyster business. [inaudible] he owed my grandfather like, \$500,000 dollars. A lot of money back then. He'd already paid him like, \$200,000 dollars for the couple of good years that he had. Nothing was worth anything. Oystermen were killing themselves or having heart attacks, strokes. What he did, he put the boats up there in Fairton. If you go that little body of water as you go around the bend, you'll see some piling there. That's where we kept two of the boats for years because the freshwater, they wouldn't get all barnacled up. I remember my grandfather was still alive; that's right, because my father said to him one day, "We got to put the boats up there. Will you take one of them up?" He was so happy to be able to captain the boat and take it up the river. My father had never been up there, but my grandfather had been many, many times. It wasn't long afterwards he died. So, he got to be on the boat for the last time. So, there my father was. He had an oyster business. It wasn't worth anything. He owes \$400,000 dollars, four or five hundred thousand. I don't know how much. But we ended up getting a fish market down in Ventnor. For several years, we ran the fish market. We had a takeout business there. We had a fish market. There I was probably fifteen. I know I wasn't driving yet – fourteen, fifteen years old.

PM: Remember the street location in Ventnor?

HB: Yes. It was right on Ventnor Avenue, right near the convent there.

RD: Were you living in Ventnor or you still lived in Bridgeton?

HB: No, we lived in Bridgeton. We would go back and forth. My father, twice a week, would go up to Philadelphia and buy fish up there and take that down there. So, we survived on that. Then, later on, somewhere in the '60s, the oysters left for a few years. We got rid of the fish market and came back. So, came back and then – that was something that was good. Dad always told me, he said, "You got to plan every year." He said, "Because you should figure they're not going to live. They die and they live, and vice versa." So, they just planted every year. But in the '70s, we had some really good years.

PM: Where were you planting? Back in the –?

HB: The Delaware.

PM: – Delaware? Yes.

HB: Another thing. Back in the '60s, we bought a lot of oyster and clam grounds up in the Great Bay. So, during the heyday of the family, we had an oyster grounds [in] Virginia, we had them in Delaware, [inaudible] in Jersey. So, we were in three different places. But my father found out about these grounds up in the Great Bay and he decided to buy some oyster grounds up there. I was about fifteen and he would take me up there. They had a little bath towel. I'd have a set of tongs and I'd be tonging the oysters. I'll get back to me. I'll just tell you the history of the family. So, oysters did live there for a few years and we had some pretty good years. We ran the shucking house down here. That's another thing. My grandfather, I was telling you how tough he was. One day, he was running oysters across the river, FF East (owner) he would run

every day. You would get up, three, four o'clock in the morning. You'd go down to the boat and they'd have four meals a day. They had breakfast when you went there. You'd have lunch at 10:30. You'd have a dinner on the way in and then you would unload the boat. It would take you several hours to unload the boat because you were catching 800,000 bushel. Then, they would have another meal. So, they had four meals a day. But one day, FF East came out to the pilothouse. He's there with my grandfather. My grandfather would tally the oysters. He said to him, "You got to lay up a couple days, Chris. I can't use the oysters right now." I guess maybe he had too many in there or something. So, I don't know all the incidentals. Maybe he's buying them from somebody else cheaper and put my grandfather aside. Because when you bought oysters – let's say you came to me and said, "Look, I got a [inaudible] of oysters sitting up on the ledge." He would run a sample to me and in the shucking house, I would test them. Then, I would give you a price. Now, the oysters, if you get a northwester, the oysters would fatten up. If you get a northeaster, a lot of times they would get poor. So, if you shucked them, they were seven pints, if you get a northwester, you may get to eight pints. If you get a northeaster, you might get six to five pints. But the oyster house has always stuck by the price that they gave you, regardless. So, maybe that's what happened. But my grandfather said, "I'm not going to put up with this." So, he went across the river and he bought a shucking house. That's how we got in the shucking business.

RD: Meaning in Bivalve or Shell Pile?

HB: In between Bivalve and Shell Pile. The marine police are up there. It was just this side of the marine police, we had an oyster – it's tore down now.

PM: What was the name of it?

HB: Peterson Packing Company.

PM: I'm sorry.

HB: Peterson Packing Company.

PM: Okay. That was oysters?

HB: Yes.

PM: Not clams. Just oysters.

RD: This was your grandfather, Christian Peterson.

HB: Yes, with my father.

RD: With your father. Prior to that though, he had been to selling to FF East in Maurice River across the river from us.

HB: Did you also know that the oystermen – or at least we did – you would be up the bay during May and June. Then, they would come back here and they would overhaul their boats, fix them up, haul them out. That was the one down time he had. Then, what he did, he would send his boats over Delaware to put them clamming. They would go over there and go clamming.

PM: Put them over to Delaware?

HB: Over to Delaware. So, they would take their boats from here and dock them over in Delaware. They'd go clamming over there.

RD: What time of year was that?

HB: That was in August. Then, when September came around and you opened the bay back up again [inaudible] oysters, they bring the boats back and start oystering. There's a funny story. My grandfather had a cook. One day he said to the cook – what was his name? White? Something White. He says, "I love clams. I never get tired of clams." So, the cook says, "Captain Chris, I'm going to fix you." So, he had clams for breakfast, he had clams at lunch. After three days of this, my grandfather says, "Joe, I've had enough clams." [laughter] The family had an oyster house. We had boats and everything else. That was prior to the death of the oysters. Then we went up and we survived up there. What we would do – you could own seed grounds up there. So, we'd plant our own seed on our grounds and then we would take oyster shells from here and we'd ship them up here and put them overboard.

PM: Do you remember what it cost you for purchasing the grounds? Or you leased them, right?

HB: You leased them. We bought them in sections. I remember one lot that – he bought it from Norman Jeffries and he paid \$5500 dollars for it. Then, he would buy other grounds. I know he said he bought one grounds [inaudible] for a hundred dollars. So, it wasn't a whole lot of money that he spent up there.

RD: The size of the grounds varied.

HB: They're very small. Maybe some of them would be one acre. Some would be three acres.

RD: That was [inaudible]

HB: The biggest one, which really wasn't any good, that was maybe about ten.

PM: That was up in New Gretna.

HB: That's [inaudible].

RD: How did that compare to the size of the grounds up here in the Maurice River Cove?



HB: We had to use a small boat. We had a small boat called *The Vigilant*. She was called the *WL Rose* before that. That was when Elwood McBride owned her. He died out there in the bay. You heard about him?

RD: Yes. I've met his daughters and son.

PM: Do you know anything about that accident, how he died?

HB: Yes, they called him "Midnight."

PM: They called him midnight?

HB: Because he would go out there early in the morning, late at night. He had one man. He would run out and he would dump the dredges. What he would get hired for was when the ground got down, meaning when you went out, you worked all day long, you didn't catch that many. [inaudible] catch, to them, three hundred bushel, you would quit. So, then they would hire Elwood and he would go out there and catch even more off the ground. So, that's what he – but he only had one man. He was running back and forth. Probably, he shook the boat.

PM: He owned his own boat and captained his own boat.

HB: Yes.

PM: So, do you know what happened then?

HB: What was the name of the other boat, the Ronnie Melvin?

RD: Yes. Ronnie and Melvin after his sons.

RD: I've met Ronnie and Jacqueline and Linda, but I know they've referred to the other brother.

HB: But he (Elwood McBride) died. He fell overboard. His widow owed us quite a bit of money. My father said, "Look, I'll forgive the debt. Just give me the *WL Rose*." So, he took her up there to Mauricetown and put her on the – what's this thing – [inaudible] Marina and put a lot of new wood in her. Then we used her [inaudible]. She can turn on – she can dredge a half an acre to an acre, as long as you know what you're doing, when to pull your dredges. It's very difficult dredging up there. We [inaudible] from here up there and they didn't do very well. That's where I learned how to dredge. So, we'll get to me now.

RD: Actually, I have a follow-up question.

HB: [inaudible] [laughter]

RD: Before we move on. I started to ask about the size of the grounds out here in the Maurice River Cove because you were saying in Gretna it would be an acre, a couple acres.

HB: The ground that we always planted, it was out on the ledge and it was sixty-four acres. That one was out there. But we had grounds down by the Cape Shore. We probably had a hundred acres down there. But when we sold out, we sold all of that.

RD: So, when you see the map of the oyster grounds and how it's all divided up – so each block is representing – it could be a hundred acres?

HB: It'll have it marked on it. On the map it will say – 618 was the ground that we always used. So, 64-A was sixty-four acres. That's what that means.

RD: Because people ask that question to try and get a sense of the scale. We have a copy of one on display. I'll have to look at it a little closer and see.

HB: Look up there on the ledge. You'll see one that says – do you know where the ledge is? It's all the way up.

RD: I've heard of it, yeah.

HB: Towards [inaudible], the end of the old planting grounds. Then, we have one ground that my great-grandfather took up. We call it the original Peterson ground. That stayed in the family until we got out of the oyster business.

RD: One other follow-up question. When you're talking about the shucking house, Peterson Packing, do you remember how many employees – how many shuckers there were?

HB: Well, the original building –

RD: Whatever you might recall on that.

HB: – was probably fifty. Then, they added the front one, which was a two-story building. That had another fifty. So, there were probably a hundred shuckers in there. I see different ones around town that as children they were – like the (Brotons?). Several of the (Brotons?) worked in our shucking house back then. They always used to talk about the mother and father, who would come with the children in tow. [inaudible] They put out a lot of oysters. The oysters were big then too. Oysters were like this.

PM: Were the shuckers still migrating in the '50s and the '60s?

HB: Yes, somewhat.

PM: Somewhat?

HB: We would always get crews to work on the boat in the Spring from out of Maryland. Then, the men of Maryland, they [inaudible] be worthless. So, we went down to Virginia and got men. So, what they would do in the Spring, when they planted years ago, they would anchor out there so the men couldn't leave.

RD: All week, right?

HB: Yeah. They would come in on Friday night and leave Sunday morning. We used to get them. We'd send a bus down to Virginia and bring the men up. A lot of them stayed right on the boat, but then they weren't worth much.

PM: When you were harvesting, did you come in every night or again, did you anchor?

HB: Came in every night.

PM: Came in every night to unload.

HB: Yeah. You would work from dawn, sun-up, until 2:30. And then 2:30, you came in. My grandfather, he had a man dredging for one of his boats one time. Was it Captain (Rock)? Anyway, he was five minutes late. He called him on the telephone. He says, "No [inaudible] of mine is going to go to work late. Go on back in." He wouldn't let him work.

RD: Yeah. During the harvest, you didn't need such a large crew of guys. Is that correct?

HB: We did. We did. Yeah.

RD: So, did you still have guys, say, from Virginia working at that time?

HB: No, there were enough men around here.

RD: Okay. Why was there more —?

HB: Back a long time ago, they had Polacks on the middle of the deck. They talked about during the Depression, the men would come up and they would say, "Look, I'll work just for food. I'm hungry and I work just for food."

RD: Was there a reason why the guys who worked the harvest didn't work bay season? Were they doing something else? And vice versa?

HB: The ones in bay season were usually watermen down in Virginia. They were [inaudible] and in the spring it wasn't very busy, so they would come up here and work.

RD: They'd come up here, right.

HB: And the ones in Maryland. That's what they did. They [inaudible] and worked on the water.

RD: Then the guys who worked the harvest, say, if they were [of] Polish descent, what were they doing in the spring that they wouldn't be working the boats?

HB: Usually, we had had, let's say, three boats, but the wintertime, we only worked one. So, you had two other ones. So, you would be able to crew your boats up from around here. Now, we live in Bridgeton. What they used to do, they used to – the old train station in Bridgeton – are you familiar with that? It's the information center now. The men used to stand there and wait to work on the boats. So, they would stop there and they'd say, "I need three men this morning." They'd pick up three men and carry them down here. Then, they would pick up different men along the way.

RD: So, like a day laborer?

HB: Yes. Now, oystermen were very generous too. They always talk about Henry Ford giving his people, what is it? A dollar a day? It was what they considered a good wage, but the oystermen already were paying above that, plus they were paying – giving them food. So, if he was paying them a dollar an hour, they were paying twelve dollars a day. I think the numbers were. So, they were paying four dollars more. Now you ask about how many men you took on the boat. In the wintertime, my grandfather would carry twelve to sixteen. He would have that because he was not a real good dredger. He would always want to keep the men working all the time. So, every once in a while when you dredge, you get a blank where the chain will catch or something. So, what he would do, he would keep oysters piled up in front of him. So, if they had a blank, they still had plenty of oysters, so they would be working all day long. He had his quirks. I, as a kid, I remember I went out on the boat with him one time. I guess, it may have been my father was in the Korean War, but he would whistle. He'd whistle "Yellow Bird" and I remember he whistled all day long. I said, "Pop-Pop, can't you whistle something else?" There weren't a whole lot of radios. They didn't mess with those things too much. But he just whistle, "Yellow bird, up high in ..." [laughter] But he would take July off and he would go throughout the country. He'd brag. One time he said, "I've been in every state in the Union, except Hawaii and Alaska." He would drive into a state and step out of the car and then get back in the car, just so he could say he was in that [state]. He would take the month of July off.

RD: Interesting. Because August was then clamming in Delaware.

HB: Right.

RD: How many guys were working on the boat during bay season then, if it was twelve to sixteen men during harvest?

HB: I would think that – I don't think it was that many. It might have been. I really don't know. I would have to research that.

RD: But they were getting paid good money. I've heard that twelve dollar number before. Then, with shuckers at Peterson, do you recall what they were getting paid?

HB: They got so much a gallon. Because I remember when we had the oyster house there, shuckers were really [inaudible]. You would scoop the oysters into your bucket and then you would hold it up and you would score across the top of it. If you went like this, you would lose money. If you went like this, boy, that [inaudible]. "Did you squeeze all the water out?" Well,

you're letting it sit there too long inside the skimming tray. So, you have to get it off there real quick. They did pretty good money, the shuckers did. They made pretty good money.

RD: But you don't recall how much it was per gallon?

HB: Three something? Dollar something? \$1.10?

PM: Were you in business when the shuckers became unionized?

HB: That's another episode. They tried to become [unionized]. They talked about becoming [unionized]. (Bob Morgan?) was running [inaudible] Oyster Company at the time. There was the center of wanting to unionize. When the union came in, they came in, they said, "You want to be unionized." Obviously, we were against it. So, we was – (Bob Morgan?) did this. The union people would drive up in their brand new cars, Lincolns and Cadillacs and everything else. He would say, "Come here. Look at that. Look what they're driving. Look at what you're driving in, and they want to collect money from you."

PM: Teamsters used Thunderbirds. [laughter]

HB: So, they had a vote on it. Those shuckers voted to keep them out. So, they did never get in here.

PM: I thought the Phillips Shucking House was unionized.

HB: I don't know. You're telling me something I don't know.

RD: Yeah, that's what I was –

PM: Yeah. According to –

HB: Clyde?

PM: – Clyde.

RD: Clyde there, when he talks about his dad.

PM: His dad's shucking house did go union.

HB: Because we were never union-ed.

RD: So, maybe it wasn't across the board then. That's an interesting question then.

PM: But we did some interviews with shuckers. They said even unionized the wages were just pitiful. He called it paid slavery.

HB: Well, it's pitiful if you're slow. If you're fast – we had shuckers – Todd Reeves tells me that some of the shuckers up here [inaudible] place up there. They're making a hundred dollars a day. But if you want to work, and the oysters are good, you'll make good money. You'll make real good money. So, I saw Sugar Pete – Curtis Bart, Sugar Pete they called him. He would make thirty, forty dollars a day, when some of them would only make ten. So, it's really up to the person.

PM: Rachel had taken some notes. When was this partnership with Luther Jeffries?

RD: Did I get the right name?

HB: You know about that?

RD: Well, when you stopped by, we were chatting. I jotted down some notes.

HB: Let me think when that was.

PM: Was that with your father?

HB: Yes. My father and Luther was character. He was married three times off. Three wives were twenty-one years old. He was a character. Anyway, he owned the place down here. He bought out – I forget the name of it, what it was called. We had the oyster house up the river a little bit. So, he came and he said, I have a deal with Progresso. We can supply them with surf clams. So, he and my father got in the surf clam business together, converting our own oyster house into a clam house. The one here we used as an oyster and shucking operation here. We had fifty shuckers in there. Those were good years. That's when the years were good in the '70s.

RD: That's 1970s?

HB: Yes.

RD: So, there were shuckers shucking surf clams?

HB: No, they were shucking oysters here.

RD: Here in the shipping sheds.

HB: And they were shucking surf clams up in our old oyster –

PM: At Peterson Packing.

RD: At Peterson. But here at Jeffries they were shucking –

HB: Oysters.

RD: Oysters. Here in the sheds.

HB: So then, the partnership dissolved some – I know they had clam boats together. They had oyster house down there. I don't know what happened, but we left here and went back up to [inaudible] that was called. We had already had a [inaudible] plan up there. What we'd found back in the '60s, I guess it was, that we would take our select [inaudible] oysters and we would bread them and freeze them – [inaudible]. I hated working in that place. There were women all over the place. We decided that we would add on to that breeding plant – because all it was, was a front building and back building was for storage. So, we converted all that into a shucking house. We shucked up there for quite a few years too.

RD: And breaded?

HB: Until '85 when we – well, we breaded probably for ten years. Then, I don't know why we stopped breaded. I remember we were selling to a guy up there in Hammonton. His name was Paul Gagliano. Man, I can't believe [inaudible]. It was called (Dinette?) Foods. We were supplying him with oysters. He was using us as a bank. He owed us quite a bit of money. One day, we didn't have many big oysters. We had little ones. A lot of standards. So, we were taking two standards and we were putting them together and we breaded that way. So, you'd have a big oyster. So, I mentioned something when I was up there at (Dinette?) Foods. He called my father up. And you don't get mad at him. He proceeded to chew him out. My father says, "Fine. You don't have to get oysters from us anymore. Pay me what you owe me." It was like, forty thousand dollars. Paul paid it. Then, it wasn't long after that Paul went belly up. HE owed the breeding people, the people who supplied the bread crumbs he used [inaudible]. So, we got paid, but nobody else did. Now, me. We talked about my father, my grandfather. When I first got on the oyster boat, I was probably four years old.

PM: Let's even start earlier. Let's start with your birthdate.

HB: September 30, 1945. I was the second. I had a sister who was born in 1943.

RD: Where were you born? Bridgeton?

HB: In Bridgeton. I was very sickly. I weighed seven and a half pounds when I was born. I almost died. My grandfather [inaudible] this again. I would have projectile vomiting. One day my grandfather went in. He looked at all the babies. He saw me sitting back in the corner. He said, "Why is my grandson sitting back there in the corner?" They said, "Well, there's nothing much we can do for him." So, they were putting me back there to die. He says, "That's a hell of a way to be." My family never [swore]. He goes, "That's a hell of a way to be." He got ahold of my Uncle John. My Uncle John, my Aunt Betty loaded me up inside a shoe box. They carried me up to Children's Hospital or Cooper, one of them. They found out that my esophagus was real narrow. So, they gave me oatmeal and it stretched it. Then I was alright. They stretched me too much. [laughter]

PM: Now everything goes down. [laughter]

HB: Everything goes down and stays there. So, in 1946, '47 – my father was gone until 1951, I think.

RD: It was the Korean War.

HB: No, he was gone – what I'm driving at is that when he went overseas, we went and lived with my grandparents. That's how I got to know them so well. It was my grandmother, my grandfather and then her mother, Esther's mother, and we called her Nanna Bach. She was an angel. She's the sweetest woman that ever walked the face of the earth, next to Mary. She was so sweet, but she died when she was eighty-four years old. She didn't have a gray hair on her head. My grandfather was down in Virginia when she was dying. She held on long enough for him to come. My mother tells the story that they were sitting in there and she was taking her last breath. She goes, "Oh my god. It's so beautiful." Then she said, "Oh, mother." She saw her mother and father. But we lived with them. My grandfather would take me out on the boat with him. That's where I heard "Yellow Bird." But I would get tired of sitting up in the pot house. They had a little wood stove inside there. They would tie me to the mast. I remember the first time I went. All the men had bets about whether or not I would get sick. I did get sick. I got green, but I didn't get sick. I enjoyed that because you would eat with the men. There was a special seat. The captain, that was his seat. Nobody else sat there. They would get cookies and things like that the day before when I would go out with them. So, then, when they had the oyster house, I started working in the oyster house on Saturdays. Used to like to come down with my father. You'd go to the Palomino restaurant? [inaudible] (Hughes?) owned that.

PM: Were you in your teens then?

HB: No, I was ten, fourteen. I remember I was young because my father would buy me boots. I thought that was the greatest thing, had the gum boots on. But yet, they would give me the job of – they would put up [inaudible] and they'd put them in barrels. You would have to lean over the barrel and catch them and put them in a certain way all around. You build it up. They always had that job for me. All that would hurt my back.

RD: So, you packed the cans in the barrels.

HB: Yes.

RD: When you were ten years old.

HB: First job I had was overhauling the boats. I was probably eight or nine then. It always worked. People say when I retire, "What are you going to do because you never had any hobbies because you just worked?" But I always find something to [do]. So, when I was fifteen I told you I worked up there in [inaudible] because in the summertime that's where we would go. I'm probably confusing you.

RD: No, no.

PM: No.



RD: You're [inaudible].

HB: My father had that up there, not my grandfather. So, we would overhaul the boats at the beginning of the season. Then, come June or July – because bay season was in eight weeks during that time. You got four weeks.

RD: It had been scaled back.

HB: Two weeks sometimes. Yeah, scaled way back.

PM: What kind of boats were you using in that period?

HB: We had the (*John C* and *CJ Peterson*?). The two boats that we had. Then, we got *The Vigilant*, which was the *WL Rose* from (McBride's?). Then we had another boat called the *Rose* (*Gassel*?), that was her name. We used her mainly for staking. Anybody ever tell you about what it's like to stake?

RD: No.

HB: Oh my god. One day, we used the (*Louise Ochers*?). She was a good boat for sticking stakes out here in the bay.

PM: What kind of boat was it?

HB: It was an oyster boat. It was smaller. It had a lower bow, so you could stick stakes on her. One time, [inaudible] and I – a full day was forty-pump stakes and a hundred hand stakes. By pump stakes, I mean you had a pump and you got to jet them down. Hand stakes you got two men on it and you muscle it in the bottom.

RD: Wow. And how deep are you going?

PM: How long were the stakes?

RD: Yes. How long were the [stakes]?

HB: Stakes were probably forty feet.

PM: Wow.

HB: Because you would go down about – the water on high tide was probably twelve feet. So, you got to go over and then you pump it in, maybe about four feet and then you've got the rest sticking up above.

PM: Sticking up, yeah.

HB: Then this one time I remember, we had seventy pump stakes on the boat. We ended up putting all of them in that one day. I was young. I was probably twenty, twenty-five, and I couldn't walk. [laughter] I was so tired I could not walk. But I digress. So, I got my start – dredging a boat is not easy.

RD: I imagine, yes.

HB: It's even more difficult up [inaudible] because you got small grounds and you got to turn all the time and you got to make sure your dredgers don't upset and the bottom goes like this; it's not flat. It goes like this, especially in sea grounds. So, you got to be able to throw your dredges certain places. Anyway, I was clamming. I had gone clamming. We bought these clam grounds. One morning I was heading out from up – got all kinds of reaches to get out to the ground and it was foggy. I being young, you go too fast. I went too fast and I put the boat up on the bank. The tide was falling.

PM: Not good. [laughter]

HB: So, then, the boat's sitting up there. It's early in the morning. So, a guy comes by. He said, "Harold, you ain't going to be able to get that off until high water in the night." I said, "Well, you better take me out with the old man. I'll go out there with him." I'd been after him to teach me how to dredge. He taught me how to dredge at that time.

RD: From your father?

HB: After he chewed me out for an hour. "Stupid idiot" was his famous expression. "You stupid idiot." I said, "Yeah." I said, "I know."

PM: Yes, we all had names like that. [laughter]

HB: Then, after I got done working with him all day, then we went in and used *The Vigilant* to pull the boat off the bank. We put lines around her and pulled her off. But, I learned how to dredge there.

RD: You were a teenager at this point.

HB: No, I don't know how old I was. I don't know when that was.

RD: It was in the '60s by this point.

PM: You had finished high school.

HB: Yes, I probably was eighteen to twenty, somewhere in that neighborhood.

PM: You weren't married yet or anything.

HB: No, I don't think I was. Anyway, I ended up – after college I came back.

PM: Where did you go to school?

HB: Wisconsin.

PM: What school?

HB: Carthage. It's in Kenosha. So, I came back and I came into the oyster business. That's right. That was the time that the partnership with (Luther Jeffries?) was just taking shape.

PM: Excuse me. I'm going to back you up just a smidge. What did you study in college? Why did you go to college?

HB: Business, economics. In the oyster business, when it was doing well –

PM: Dad insisted that you do that.

HB: We all went to college. Each one of us there was a certain thing planned for them. My sister, I think she wanted to be a nurse. She ended up being a medical secretary. I was to come back to the oyster business. Duane was going to West Point. John went to Annapolis. So, each one of us had our niche that we were to fall in. Now, my sister is since deceased. My brother John is with us in spirit. He's like the number two or three man up there. My brother Duane is in a bank down in Little Rock. So, we each went our own separate ways. Then I also was mayor up there in Hopewell for a lot of years. That's another story.

PM: Now we'll get you back to – you finished college and you went back to the oyster business.

HB: Oyster business. That was a time where in the summer times I would be up there working the dredge boat, the oyster boat. In the winter, I would be back here running the shucking house. My father was getting older. He finally said, you're going to take the boat. So, for probably five or six years I took the boat in the winter. I took it in the spring to plant and I took it in the winter out there in the bay. It was during the time back in the '70s, early '80s when we had quite a few oysters around. He always told me, he said, "Save a section of that ground up there [inaudible] so when the weather looks like it's going to get bad, you can catch a lot quick." So, one day, he came to me. He says, "Al, it's going to blow for the next two days or three days. I need a lot of oysters in because it's around the holidays." He said, "You go get five hundred bushel." I said, "Alright." So, (Izzy?) and I and the crew went out there. I had saved the section. He said to me, "I know you didn't save any. Like every other captain, you've been all over that old ground." I thought, "Well, I'll show you." So, he said, "Get me five hundred bushel." I said, "Alright." So, I went out. (Izzy?) and I got them by about 10:00, 10:30. [inaudible] and I and the rest of the crew. So, I go on up to him [inaudible] middle of the deck. We had oysters all piled up on the back of the boat, all the way up in the front. I said, "(Izzy?), what do you think?" He said, "Captain, you got more than five hundred bushel now." I said, "Alright. Let's hold him and we'll go in." So, 10:30 we started in, got in here about 12:00, 12:30. They were [inaudible] it was tooting. Soon as we left, it really started to toot. So, we got in. He said, "How many you got?" I said, "I got over five hundred bushel." We had a little (scatback?) on the boat, where

you would scoop them and it would be five bushel. I got 497. [inaudible] So, I went up to the shucking house. He had his little book; he filled it in every night. “How many did you get?” I said, “497.” [inaudible] he looked at me. He said, “When I tell you five hundred bushel, I mean five hundred bushel, not 497.” [laughter] I said, “Oh my god.” I just got up and walked out. That was something.

RD: At that time, how many oysters were in a bushel? I know it depends on the size.

HB: Probably 240, 260.

RD: Right.

HB: Did anybody ever tell you about the men and the captain, the game that was played between the shucking house and the boat owner?

RD: I don't know. Would you like to tell it?

HB: The oystermen, some of them, and the crew figured they would get on the good side of the captain. They would take a bushel and they would turn the shovel this way. Then the next shovel, they turned this way, and then next shovel they put it across the top. That's called cribbing the bushel.

RD: Cribbing?

HB: Yeah. If you then take that bushel of oysters and measure it right, it comes to about three-quarters of a bushel. So, the captains would have a man there and they would try to crib the bushel. The shucking house would have a man there going, “Hey, they're cribbing the bushel.” The captain would say, “Hey, Joe. Stop cribbing the bushels.” And then they would stop.

RD: That was a technique of shoveling in so it would pile itself up. It's like when you get soft serve yogurt and they don't fill it up in the middle.

HB: Well, with oysters, if you were going to bring me – you had a ground of oysters you were going to run. So, you'd bring me a sample of three bushel. You'd take [inaudible] three bushel and somebody else. Then, we would shuck the oysters. Now, when you brought the sample, there were no shells or no boxes. They were just beautiful. But when you run a boatload of oysters, you don't have them like that. So, the oyster house would have to take that into consideration. Towards the end, when I was down here, we would pay the captain according to how the oysters shucked out. So, if you brought in two hundred bushel, we would shuck your two hundred bushel. We would measure everything off and then we would pay you accordingly.

RD: To the captain.

HB: Then, if they got poorer, you got less money. If they got better, you would get more. The shucking house did make the money.

RD: But earlier on though, when you would bring your sample bushel and shop it around, would the captain get paid right then and there?

HB: No, he would get paid for the number of bushels he brought in.

RD: The number of bushels, right.

HB: So, if you had a ground of oysters and you got three-thousand bushel off of it, we paid for those three thousand, [inaudible] dollars a bushel.

RD: But you're saying maybe by 1960, '70s, you're not paying [inaudible]

HB: By the '70s, you were doing by the boatload because we were [inaudible]

RD: After they were shucked though.

HB: After they were shucked.

RD: Interesting.

HB: Then, a lot of people – we wouldn't worry about it when we were [inaudible] our own oysters. But if we were buying oysters, like we bought [inaudible] oysters [inaudible] bring them in and we would do his that way. Then, (Luther's?) oysters, we would do that. He would have oysters.

RD: Then, you would actually have to count them though, is that right?

HB: Count what?

RD: When the oysters in the bushels –

HB: You'd count the bushels.

RD: Count the bushels.

HB: So, that's why you got to make sure that they don't crib a bushel because you're only getting three-quarters of a bushel instead of –

RD: Because you're counting on there being about two hundred and forty to two hundred and sixty oysters in a bushel.

HB: Now, back during my grandfather's time, they probably ran about 180, something like that.

RD: Because they were larger.

HB: Yeah. He figured you were out of the oyster business if you ran a ground of oysters that was less than five years old. Whereas now, they clam and they're working directly with the sea beds. Years ago they used to that, work directly with the sea beds and take them up to Philly. But they found out that by bringing them down the bay they got fatter. That's when they brought them down there, to fatten up. They're worth a lot more. Then, they had the floats out here, that would fatten them up even more.

RD: That was during your grandfather's time and a little bit into your dad's.

HB: [inaudible] I don't know if he ever floated oysters.

RD: I don't know if he ever did floating. Well, probably not.

HB: Floating oysters probably ended –

RD: Because that ended in the late '20s. So, that would have been – yes. That's interesting.

HB: So then, in 1985, we sold out to Hillard Bloom.

PM: To who?

HB: Hillard Bloom.

PM: Hillard Bloom.

HB: It was Hillard and (Norman?) Bloom. They had an oyster house out in Connecticut. They bought us out. I went to work – where did I go then? My father worked for Hillard for years. He kept saying to Hillard, "I'm going to quit. I want to quit." They would say, "Harold." He says, "I'm not doing anything." He said, "Harold, all I want is your presence down there." He'd go down to the shucking house, he'd make coffee, everybody'd come in, drink coffee, go over to the shipyard, come back, and go home. So, finally, he had a back operation. When he had the back operation, he died from it. He went down to Bacharach. He had a leak in his spine. He was such a hardhead. I would go to him. I'd say, "Pop, you're getting these terrible headaches. Something's wrong." "You leave them alone. This is their house," he said to me. So, finally, after about two or three weeks of this, he called up one Sunday. He said, "Harold, you got to come down here and do something." So, I went down there and he said he had a spell. Said he's got to back up to Thomas Jefferson, they got to fix this. So, when he went up there it was April. He was all set to go in, be operated on, and he died.

PM: How old was he?

HB: Maybe he wouldn't have died if he hadn't been such a hardhead.

PM: Yes. How old was he?

HB: He was eighty-one. So, he lived long. My mother lived to be eight-seven, I think she was when she died. So, my brother John, he got out of the Navy. He went to work down in Texas, Beaumont. He didn't like Texas. As a matter of fact, he hates Texas, but his wife was from Texas, Jayme. They moved back and John was in the oyster business for three or four years during that time too. I remember several springs John would take the *CJ* and I would take the *John C* up the bay. Any other questions?

RD: We covered a lot. [laughter]

PM: We did. We did.

RD: It's been about an hour. We usually try to go for about an hour.

HB: Have we got an hour?

RD: We do. I did have a question. I should have wrote it down. I was going to ask: with the boats that your dad had and then your grandfather, do you know what happened to them? Put up on the banks or sold?

HB: They're still being used.

RD: Are they?

HB: One is called the *Harold Bickings*. You'll see it. She's owned by [inaudible] Packing. The Bloom Family is still in existence up in Connecticut. They own the *John C* and the *CJ*. They converted them. They are totally different than what they were here. The pilothouses are way up high. They cut the stern off of the *John C* and the prettiest part was their stern. She was a beautiful boat, a beautiful boat.

PM: The *John C* and the *CJ* were purchased by Blew, B-L-E-W?

HB: Well, let me tell you. *CJ Peterson* was built by my grandfather. She was built up in Greenwich. The *John C Peterson*, she was owned by a man name (Wildes?) up in [inaudible]. When the oysters died back in the '30s, them dying is not the first time. The '30s when they died, he committed suicide and hung himself. My grandfather bought the boat [inaudible] "As soon as that boat becomes available, I'm going to buy that boat," and he did. So, we had her for years.

RD: Wow.

PM: But the gentleman, Blew in Connecticut, is it B-L-E-W?

HB: B-L-O-O-M, Bloom.

RD: Bloom.

PM: Bloom.

RD: And it's Hillard.

HB: Hillard Bloom.

PM: Okay. Now I got you.

HB: He was crippled, but the nicest man. He realized that to be accepted in this area takes about two generations. There he was coming in, and my dad was a front person for it. After he got associated with my father, people began to like him. He's such a nice man, a nice man. But my father, he worked up until – if he got operated on the first of April, he worked the 30<sup>th</sup> of March. So, he never really retired.

PM: What happened to some of the other boats, like the *Doris* and the *Helen*?

HB: 1935 there was a flood up in Bridgeton. There was a flood that came through here. The boats were tied up there, the *CJ*, the *Doris*, and the *Helen*. A boat broke loose and it came down and it broke my grandfather's boats loose too. They went under the bridge. The *Doris*, I think, sank and she stayed there. The *Helen* they raised. I don't know what happened to her. But the *CJ*, raised her, we used her and she's still being used. But whenever we put her up at the shipyard, we always had to shore up her stern because always figured it was weak from having the bridge laying on them.

RD: You're retired now or you've been retired.

HB: Well, I had a strange career. I left here and I went to work in Trenton for a fisheries development commission.

RD: This was in the '80s at this point?

HB: Yes, late '80s, under (Tom Kane's?) administration. I was a political appointee.

PM: I won't ask who you knew. [laughter]

HB: [laughter] Then I lost that job. I started a program up at the County College, the agriculture program up there. Chip [inaudible] and I started that. Then, we consulted to PSE&G. While I was doing the consulting work with the County College, I worked at Sheppard Farms for two years, a year, and then I got another political appointment. You asked. I'm going to tell you. One year, they came to me and they said, "Hal, we want you to run for freeholder." I said, "I don't want to be a freeholder." I said, "It's a thankless job." They said, "We got to get somebody to run and you're very popular in your area. You got a good chance of winning." I said, "Look, if Christie Whitman wins, I expect to get something out of it, if I run." They county chairman said, "You will." So, I ran and I lost, which – my ex-wife, I remember, we were [inaudible]. She says, "I'm sorry you lost." I said, "I'm not." I said, "I didn't want to be [a freeholder]." It wasn't a week later I was in Larry [inaudible], "Okay, now you got to deliver." I



was in on the transition team. Then, the motor vehicles position opened up in Bridgeton. I took that. I had that for eight years. Then, I worked out at South Jersey Water for ten years. Two years ago, there was a movement afoot to get younger people in there at lower cost and I left. So, I thought, "Well, I'll try retirement." I like it.

RD: So, it's been two years of retirement.

HB: Yes. Two years this February.

RD: You have had children and grandchildren.

HB: I've got four children; (Mary Anne's?) two and my two.

PM: That's your second wife.

HB: That's my second wife. She was a school nurse at [inaudible] Regional for years. Her first husband was deceased and I was divorced. She came into Motor Vehicles and she was doing a lot of the work with the transfer and things for her deceased husband. I was very unhappily married at the time. I thought, "Boy, if I ever ..." [laughter] Then, I started divorce proceedings. It was not a very nice divorce. I started February and I started dating her in September. A year later, we were married.

RD: How long have you been married for to (Mary Anne?)?

HB: Twelve or thirteen years. We never fight, never argue.

PM: She's a sweet lady. I know her.

HB: She is the sweetest lady you ever want to meet. She does get on me though. What does she get on me? We had a couple cleaning women come in yesterday and cleaned. In our bathroom we have her sink and my sink. This morning, after I'd gone back out in the kitchen and one of our grandsons was over, she said to me, "It looks like Loretta didn't even clean the sink." [laughter] She's right. I am a slob. I am a slob.

PM: So, you had two children with your first wife.

HB: I had Leah and Hal, the third. He's in Charlotte and she's a school teacher up at the middle school.

PM: And then –

HB: (Mary Anne?) has two. There's Pete. He's a mason. Lauren works over at Christiana; she does [inaudible].

PM: How many grandkids?

HB: We've got seven. The eighth will be here in May.

PM: How wonderful.

HB: Little [inaudible]. She's due for another one. They came this year, not too long ago, couple months probably. [inaudible] something about her family. I've been after her [inaudible] two children's not enough. She has two. Why don't you give us another grandchild? They told us – they were sort of down in the mouth. "Here we got a third one coming." After they saw how excited we were, they got really excited too.

PM: That's nice.

HB: My oldest grandson is twenty-two. Then the other one is twelve and nine. So, they're older. Pete and Leah's, which are (Mary Anne's?) grandchildren, they're still my grandchildren. Peter is four and Bella is a year, year and a half. They're over all the time, so we've really got close to them.

PM: Hal, this has been wonderful. We appreciate your coming in and helping us fill in a lot of information that will absolutely be advantageous to our archives. Thank you again, very much.

HB: It was my pleasure. I know we talked about – people love to talk about themselves. You guys have given me the opportunity to do that, without bragging.

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

Transcribed by Molly Graham 4/7/2018

Reviewed by Molly Graham