

Carrie Kline: Okay. Today is the 9th of June, 2005. We are at the Calvert Marine Museum. Can you say, "My name is," and introduce yourself?

Adrian Coulby: I'm Adrian Coulby.

CK: And your date of birth

AC: And born October 30, 1933.

CK: Great. Tell us a little bit about your people and where you were raised.

AC: Well, I was born and raised at Newburg, and I guess I lived there most of my life. My father had the oyster house. He built the oyster house at Rock Point. I spent a little bit of time there when I was very young, so I don't really remember a whole lot about it. But I can probably answer a few of your questions.

CK: The oyster house at Rock Point, was there a name for that?

AC: That was the Potomac Fishing Oyster Company.

CK: What about your dad's name?

AC: Edgar Coulby.

CK: You say you remember a little bit about it. So, talk about what you do remember – your earliest recollections.

AC: I guess the most I remember about it, I was just a little kid and I just hung around down there a lot. I knew most of the crab pickers and oyster shoppers and most of the fellows that came in on the boats that brought the seafood in. I guess I was there for the fun of it more than anything else.

CK: So, it was a fun place?

AC: For me, it was. Probably not for anybody else.

CK: What was it like through the eyes of a boy then? Paint us a picture. Who was there? What were they doing?

AC: Well, I just liked to see the boats coming in with their oysters and crabs and so forth. I helped around there some. The things that the men didn't want to do, well, they put on me, like cleaning up and that sort of thing.

CK: Cleaning up?

AC: The oyster house. Sweeping the floors and hosing down things. When I wasn't doing that,

I'd be in the office aggravating Mary until she ran me out.

CK: What was going on in the office?

AC: Well, I'm not sure. [laughter] Now, Mary was the secretary at the time. So, when I had no place else to go, I'd go in there and just hang around and be in her way. So, I guess that's pretty much what I remember about it.

CK: What did these boats look like that you were talking about? If you remember any of the names or...

AC: I don't know that any of them had names. If they did, I don't remember it. But there were all sizes and very few came in that didn't have a full load of oysters. There were plentiful at the time. I would say that most of them had maybe forty to fifty bushel every day when they came in. I have no idea what the price of them was or anything at that time. I wasn't interested in that. But it was just a place to be for me.

CK: What was the whole process from the time you sighted these boats?

AC: I guess just watch them come in and tie up at the dock. Then we would take the oysters off of the boat and wheel them into the oyster house in wheelbarrows and put them in stockpiles. Some of them came out of the Potomac River and some out of the Yeocomico. They were, I think, kept separate. There was just a different type of oyster. Then from there, they went to the oyster shucker. Every now and then when they were shucking, they'd give me one to eat. They were very good at that time.

CK: Straight up?

AC: Straight up, the only way to eat oyster. I guess that's about the most that I can remember about it right now.

CK: Do you remember the faces of the people or names or any of the personalities?

AC: I remember some of the names. Not too many. A lot of them were relatives. As far as personalities, they were all the same, as far as I'm concerned. They were all good people. A lot of fun to be around.

CK: Fun?

AC: Yes. Well, we were always joking. Every now and then, they'd pick on me in the summertime and maybe push me overboard or something. But it was no big deal.

CK: Talk more about these people. That sounds like there must have been a little bit of a weight to those wheelbarrows.

AC: Yes. The best I can remember, I think they would put three bushel in a wheelbarrow and

I'd have the pleasure of reeling them into the house. Every now and then, I'd upset one. No big deal. Nobody got excited about it. I don't know what else there is.

CK: You would be surprised how little I know about this. I cannot even picture it. Were these white people working in there?

AC: No. A lot of the people that oystered were white, but I'd say probably the majority were colored. I think all of the oyster shuckers were colored and they came from different parts of the country. I say country, but different parts of the state, maybe I should say. Maybe a few out of Virginia, but a lot came from the Eastern Shore. A lot out of Calvert and St. Mary's counties. They'd come there and stay during the season. Then we had shanties for them to live in. I think it was maybe twenty or thirty shanties that they stayed in. They had it pretty nice there.

CK: Families?

AC: Families, yes. Most of them had families.

CK: Kids came?

AC: I don't remember it being too many kids. Mostly older, but they all worked. If they didn't work, they didn't stay there. There was a few within ten, fifteen miles of the oyster house that came and stayed during the oyster season. But they probably didn't have a way of traveling back and forth every day. So, they just stayed down there.

CK: What would their transportation have been?

AC: It wasn't horse and buggy [laughter]. A few of them had old cars, but the majority of them just caught a ride with whoever they could. I think that was pretty much it.

CK: Were these people who stayed year round?

AC: I don't know that any of them stayed year round. Just during the season.

CK: The season?

AC: Oyster season or the crab pickers stayed during crab season.

CK: Different folks for the two seasons?

AC: Not always, no. A lot of times, it was the same ones that came back when there was work there for them.

CK: Does it take a different set of skills to work in the different seasons?

AC: Well, it's two different jobs, picking crabs and shucking oysters. But I think most of the local people knew how to do it. I mean, it wasn't any big deal for them. I still don't do very well

at either one, but these people grew up with it and it was nothing to it for them.

CK: Men and women have different kinds?

AC: Men and women, yes. It was really nice to watch them shuck. There was probably anywhere from twenty to maybe fifty working at a time. They would sing and get that rhythm going. They'd just rock back and forth and sing and shuck all day long. It was a pleasure just to watch them and listen to them.

CK: What would they sing?

AC: I really don't know. Hymns, I guess. They had a nice rhythm and they just worked by that rhythm. They all stayed with it all day long like that.

CK: It sounded like the kind of place you would want to be in your non-school hours.

AC: It really was. I spent as much time as I could there. I really enjoyed it.

CK: Where was your dad in all this then?

AC: He was there buying oysters and so forth. Then he also hauled the stuff to Baltimore at night or different places. I think a lot of the oysters – and maybe the crabs, I can't remember. But I know a lot of the oysters, they packed them in barrels, most of them in gallon containers and they were shipped all over the country by railroad. We'd take them to Washington, I think, and put them on the railroad.

CK: Paint me a picture of your father. What kind of a man was he?

AC: Well, I guess you would say he was a very gentle man. Always joking, a little fun to be around. If anybody needed anything, they always came to him. He was ready to help anybody that he could at any time. That's probably one of the reasons that he had as much help as he did because they all knew they could count on him.

CK: Where was he from? What was his background?

AC: Well, he, I think, was probably born right in Newburg where I was or right close by. My grandfather had a farm there. He grew up on the farm. He was a commercial fisherman and seafood dealer. In the early [19]40s, he built the oyster house and worked more with that.

CK: This is your grandfather?

AC: No, my father. My grandfather stayed on the farm.

CK: And your grandfather's name?

AC: William Coulby.

CK: So, you were located actually across from Cobb Island Road on the other side?

AC: Well, we were maybe ten miles from Cobb Island. The farm – Rock Point's right across from Cobb Island, if that's what you're asking.

CK: No, the farm.

AC: The farm, maybe ten miles up the road from Rock Point and Cobb Island.

CK: What gave him the idea to set up shop that distance from home, and why the seafood industry? Why a shucking house?

AC: I really don't know. He was in the seafood business before my time. I mean, that's all I can remember him ever doing, is working with the seafood rather than – even though he grew up on the farm, I can't remember him ever spending much time there. We lived there and he spent most of his time either on the road hauling seafood or fishing or whatever with haul seines and so forth.

CK: With what?

AC: Haul seines. Nets.

CK: What would you fish with them?

AC: What do you mean?

CK: What kind of fish?

AC: Oh, mainly he was after catfish and carp. We kept those alive. The tanker trucks would come out of Philadelphia and New York and come down and get them whenever we had a truckload. They were all shipped to New York and Philadelphia.

CK: Where was he fishing for them?

AC: Mostly in the Yeocomico River. He fished a little different from most people. We lived up on the hill and we could look down over the river. When he'd get up in the morning, he knew where we were going. He could see the schools of fish. He'd either say where we're going or, "There's nothing out there today, boys. We're not going to go." When we went out, we hardly ever came back with less than a boat load.

CK: A boat load?

AC: A boat load.

CK: What kind of a boat?

AC: I think at that time, mostly we had maybe an eighteen foot. I don't really know what type of boat you would call it. It was just a boat as far as [laughter] I knew.

CK: About eighteen feet.

AC: Yes.

CK: So, you would come back with a boat load?

AC: Yes. We had a big fish pond that we would put the carp in and catfish, I guess. Then we also had live boxes that we'd put them in out in the river. So, I guess these boxes would hold pretty close to a truckload. Whenever there was a load there and the market was right, he'd call them to come get them.

CK: That would be something to haul out of the river, a big box.

AC: Oh, we didn't take the box out of the river. We took the fish out of the box and transported it onto the – waded them and then put them in the tanker trucks. So, wherever they went, New York or Philadelphia or wherever, they were kept alive and sold alive.

CK: Who was going out? You and your dad?

AC: Well, yes. I was just real small. I went out more for pleasure of being there than anything else. But he had a couple of fellows that worked with him, fishing. They did most of the work.

CK: Were these folks white, the other people fishing?

AC: Were they what?

CK: Were they white people?

AC: Some of them were. We had one old colored fellow we called Uncle John. He lived maybe two or three miles away. He walked with a cane. He'd walk over every morning to come over and go fishing. Whether we were going or not, he'd be there. He never got wet. He fell down one time. The water came up over top of his boots. I remember my father asking him, "Did you get wet, Uncle John?" "Oh, no. No, I'm okay." [laughter]

CK: Did the men sing while they fished?

AC: No. No. The only ones that I remember singing were the oyster shuckers. I don't remember them singing when they picked crabs. It was just the oyster shuckers.

CK: You say those were men and women?

AC: Men and women, yes. All black. But the best I can remember, they were all nice people. I

never had a problem with any of them. Of course, there was one or two that made sure I had something to eat every day.

CK: So, you were the only kid around then?

AC: Pretty much. I didn't go down every day. So, there was times when one of my brothers would go and I'd stay home. But I think I probably spent more time there than any of the others.

CK: So, you had brothers. Who were your brothers and sisters? Who was in your family? And your mother too.

AC: There was so many brothers. I can't remember [laughter]. Not really that bad, but I think there was eleven of us altogether. I was next to the oldest. He would take one, one day, and another one the next day. But most of the time, me being next to the oldest, I got to go more than anybody else, probably as much as all the others put together.

CK: And your mother, what was her name?

AC: Irene. She was born and raised at Rock Point. So, the oyster house was within a mile of where she grew up.

CK: How did they meet then?

AC: Well, like I said, that was before my time. I don't really know [laughter].

CK: No stories? [laughter]

AC: No. None that I can remember.

CK: Would she come over to the shucking house?

AC: I don't remember her ever being there. She had a full-time job taking care of the kids.

CK: Talk a little more about your continued involvement with the shucking house then as the years went by.

AC: I guess my time at the shucking house was only maybe four years before my father got killed on the road.

CK: On the road?

AC: Yes. He was coming back from Baltimore one night, the truck turned over on him. So, after that, my oldest brother ran the truck for maybe a year. I think I was probably fourteen at that time.

CK: He ran the truck? You say your brother ran the truck?

AC: He drove the truck for about a year, and then at fifteen, I took over. About a year before I was old enough to even have a license. So, then I hauled seafood for two or three years until I moved on to other things.

CK: What was the destiny of the shucking house?

AC: My father had a partner with the shucking house who also had a stall on the market in Baltimore. A good bit of the crabs and oysters went to him. Then I guess after his death, he paid my mother for her part of the shucking house. I don't know what that may have amounted to. So, after that, we were pretty much out of it. I don't think he kept it long before he sold it.

CK: Did it continue as a shucking house then?

AC: Maybe just a few years. I can't remember just how long. Maybe three or four years.

CK: Can you say it continued for a few years?

AC: Yes.

CK: Would you say that? Just say that it continued?

AC: Yes. It did continue just for a few years after my father's death. Then like I said, maybe four or five years. Then after that, I don't think anybody did anything with it. The best I can remember is that he leased the property and built the shucking house on it. The ground actually belonged to someone else. So, after my mother sold her part in it, I really don't know what took place there. I had no more interest in it.

CK: I wonder whose land that was.

AC: Sherman Ferbush, a local fellow there on Rock Point. I think he lived real close by.

CK: What years are we talking about now when things came to a close?

AC: Well, it was built in [19]44 and my father was killed in...

Mary Ridgeway: Before 1950.

AC: [19]48 maybe. It, maybe, operated until early [19]50s, [19]52 maybe, [19]53 at the latest. I don't think anyone did anything with it after that.

CK: I wonder where all those workers went.

AC: Wherever they went at the end of every season. Some of them worked in the river, and I guess some of them maybe were farmers, I really don't know. I don't know that I've seen many of them after that or where they were.



CK: Before we turn to Mary, can you talk a little bit about that community of Rock Point? Were there other buildings, stores, other shucking houses?

AC: There was one other shucking house there, a grocery store. Then there was a lady just within walking distance of the shuck house that had a rooming house. A lot of times, we'd go up there for dinner. But for the most part, there wasn't much going on there. I think years before my time, steamships used to come in there. That was the main road in Southern Maryland. But I think after the steamship days, it kind of died out. Maybe, possibly, a hundred houses there and probably seventy-five percent unemployment. I don't know.

CK: I wonder how long those steamship days lasted. Was that into your day?

AC: No. No. No. It was probably the turn of the century, maybe. I heard them talking about it, but I don't really remember when it was.

CK: Can you talk about what the name of that landing was for one thing – the steamboat landing or the wharf?

AC: I really don't know. They had a big hotel there at one time, but I have no idea what it was called. Just Rock Point, I guess.

CK: This woman who had the boarding house, talk about who she was and her name.

AC: Ms. (Mamie?) Simms.

CK: Sorry?

AC: Ms. Mamie Simms. Another nice little lady. Always wanted you to come to eat, whether you paid for it or not. Well, naturally, when I went with my father and others, they paid for the meals. But if I happened to be close by, "Come on in here, boy. Get something to eat." She also cut hair. That's the only place I got a haircut in the summertime, and whatever she could do to make a dollar. But she kept a pretty nice, clean place. I don't know whatever became of her. She was well up in the years when I knew her. That was in the [19]40s. So, I guess she didn't hang around much after that.

CK: What did you like to eat over there?

AC: I don't know [laughter]. It's been so long. Everything was good. I remember that. I can't really remember what we ate there. Chances are, a lot of catfish and chicken [laughter]. So, I guess that's about as much as I can remember about the old girl.

CK: Anything else we should be asking or talking about, about Rock Point or the shucking house?

AC: No. I'm surprised that I remembered as much about it as I did.

CK: You remembered it a lot. Richard, do you have any specific questions for Adrian?

Richard Dodds: Not really. I think you covered it, Adrian. Just to reiterate, you said they typically shucked into one gallon cans, and then those were packed in barrels?

AC: They had three cans that they shucked in. They graded them as they shucked them. I think they were standards, counts, and select. From the shucker, they took them to the window to a skimmer, where they were skimmed and counted. From there, they went into the – they called it a blower. I guess it pasteurized them. Then they were packed in ice. Then the – packed in gallon cans and they were packed in the ice and put in barrels and then shipped out on the truck to different markets.

RD: How were the crabs handled once they were picked? The crab meat?

AC: I was trying to think about that a while ago, and I just can't remember. I think as they picked them, they picked them into probably quart – not quart, pint cans. Then they also were packed into barrels in ice and shipped. I don't remember as much about the crabs as I do the oysters.

RD: I've never seen a can from the company. Was it just an embossed can or did they have a lithograph?

AC: They had lithograph can – gallon cans. I think the cans for the crab meat probably had their name on them.

MR: Actually, the oysters looked like gallon milk cans – the gallon cans sort of. Remember milk cans I talked about?

AC: Yes. Well, I think just about everybody used the same can – all your packing houses did. But I haven't seen any of them in years. I don't think there's any around anymore.

CK: You mentioned the three grading. Can you tell me what that means? Standard and –

AC: Well, it was graded mostly for size. The small ones were the standard, the middle size was the counts, and I think the larger ones were select. I think I'm right on that. I'm not sure.

CK: Okay. This was great. Like you say, you remembered a lot more than you expected.

AC: Yes. I wish I could remember more but it's been so long ago. We're talking about over fifty years.

CK: I appreciate you being willing to dredge it all up again for us.

AC: It was my pleasure.

[end of transcript]