

Rachel Dolhanczyk: Hi. Today is July 2, 2013. My name is Rachel Dolhanczyk, and I'm the museum curator here at the Bayshore Center. I'm sitting here with Jode Hillman, who's come down to talk to us about all sorts of things pertaining to the bay and duck hunting and being out in the marshes and so forth. So, we're just going to record our conversation as we continue to chit-chat here. Welcome, and thanks for coming.

Jode Hillman: Thanks.

RD: Let's just put that there.

JH: Yeah, absolutely.

RD: Maybe just for the record, just a little bit about yourself; we'll do the formal part and then keep chit-chatting.

JH: My name's Jode Hillman. I'm forty-one. I'm a decoy carver by profession, make mostly cedar decoys. They're made to be used. A lot of people just collect them and put them on the shelf. But I've been carving for about seventeen years and doing it professionally for the past six. I love duck hunting and talking about it and everything, really, that pertains to life on the bay. That's why I'm here.

RD: You started talking about it earlier, but how did you actually get into – you said your grandfather – or you had family that got you into –

JH: Yeah. My dad's family, the Hillmans – he used to come down and fish down at Fortescue, so he would come down on the weekends, and either they would rent a little rowboat and then go out, and they would fish. This was during the years of the weakfish fish boom and all that. So if you went out there, you were going to catch fish.

RD: Where'd they actually live?

JH: They lived in Woodbury. So they would come down from Woodbury. He owned a service station, a gas station. So he would get some time off on the weekends. My dad is one of six children, so he would bring the boys down, and they would fish out there and usually bring something home for dinner. But my grandfather's nickname was Sea Robin, so I guess he had a penchant for catching some of the not-better-eating fish. But he used to come down and enjoy it. So, I would hear the stories from my dad. My father was a cabinet maker, so he owned his own business. He worked a lot. My dad wasn't a big fisherman – didn't really like it that much. My grandfather liked to fish [and] liked to work on cars. I kind of was the same way. My dad always said it looks like that stuff skipped a generation because my dad loved it, I hate it, and

you like to do it. But my dad would tell me about it, and he did take me out fishing a couple times as a kid down to Fortescue and stuff like that. So I kind of had in my back of my mind – I knew the area but didn't really become very familiar with it until later on in my life. Some friends from high school were going to go fishing, and we went out to Fortescue and into Dividing Creek. And the next year, we started duck hunting in the area. It's always interesting when you first start going out there because invariably, you're going to get stuck in the mud and lost. That's just the way it's going to happen. This is really back in the days before you had Google Earth and all that stuff, so you have really bad topographic maps. Well, the channels change a lot, and especially in the area where I hunt a lot, around Dividing Creek, Turkey Point, Beaver Dam. You have one route to access an area at high tide and a totally different route to access the area at low tide. When you first start going there, you don't realize that, and you're like, "Oh, crap, I'm stuck. I can't get back." It's just experience from time to time to know how to navigate these different areas. Every year, usually –

RD: Like if it changes?

JH: Well, it doesn't change drastically, but it changes – especially after the hurricane. I'm going to have to check out some new routes because I was out crabbing about, I don't know, maybe two weeks ago. And the one area where I usually crab was totally covered with sand. It was a mud bottom for as long as I've ever been there.

RD: Was that Hurricane Sandy?

JH: Yes. Yeah, and I don't know where –

RD: Did Irene cause – I know there was Irene and Tropical Storm Lee.

JH: Really, Irene was okay. It stayed mud and all that. But after Sandy, Sandy just had such a tidal surge. Friends of mine have a duck camp right in Dividing Creek. The duck camp sits right off of 553, and they had eighteen to twenty inches of water actually wash right through the camp, blow the windows and doors out, and then sand all the way up there. The closest sand from there is on the bay, the sand dunes on the bay. So how they got sand up there is beyond me. But yeah, it changes a lot. Every year, usually, come September, October, when duck season first starts – actually October. Railbird starts in September. You'll have guys come down from Philadelphia or different places, and they'll get out there, and they'll be stuck. You'll hear a shot, and then you'll hear somebody call on the VHF – where am I at? I can see this tree and a house. I don't know. So every year, guys – you have to go out there. You try to help them out and show them how to get back to the ramp and do that, but that's just kind of the learning curve that comes with spending time out in these marshes.

RD: So when you started, was that in the '80s, then? I would imagine.

JH: Yeah, probably. I guess I really made a conscious effort to start learning the bay and spending a lot of time down here, probably when I was a senior in high school, like '89, '90, when I could drive. You could drive, so you could come down and spend a lot of time out there.

RD: Yeah, because otherwise, you'd probably get a ride down here.

JH: Yeah, it's like you're then relying on other people. I ruined so many vehicles driving through salt water. My lifespan of trucks is not real long when you spend time on the bay. They go through pretty quick.

RD: So you'd go out in the bay and the marshes year-round, then, it sounds like?

JH: Yeah, exactly.

RD: What are the cycles or the seasons?

JH: Let's just start at the beginning of the year – start in January. January, there's not a whole lot going on. Your duck season is starting to wind down in – this is considered New Jersey South Zone. So, the South Zone duck season ends right around the first to second week of January. Duck season will end, but then snow goose season really gets wound up. And they have in this area, I guess, such a large wintering population of greater snow geese, and they really do a lot of damage to the marsh. They go down, and they actually pluck out the spartina grass from the root. They don't actually eat the top of it. So there's great duck marshes where ducks would winter, and they would hide, and they would get food that you see a flock of snow geese, if they're on it for a week or two, it's nothing left. It looked like someone went through there with a post-hole digger. And then if you get a big tidal surge, that whole chunk of meadow's going to wash away.

RD: I think swans do that, too, don't they? Or certain swans.

JH: Yeah, swans do that. No, the mute swans, which don't migrate, become a problem because they never leave. So the mute swans, they'll rip up a whole area. Now, we get our native tundra swans, which come back and forth. They have the black bills. They stay here in the winter, and then they'll go back to the tundra to nest. The mutes are a problem because they never leave, and they basically run the habitat into the ground. Matter of fact, I'm friends with a couple of biologists from the state. About five years ago, they trapped and killed almost sixty mute swans from Mannington Meadow, also Maple Creek, up the road, just to try to keep their numbers down. Because they usually have two young every year. Those young will go off and fly as

close as they can to find their own habitat and then do the same thing. Mute swans are very territorial. They'll run out any Canada geese. Once swans are in a pond, they'll keep the native waterfowl away. They're bigger.

RD: They have the orange –

JH: Yeah, they have the big orange lobes. They're the mute swans. They're not native. They're imported from China. And they don't really migrate.

RD: Is that where they're from?

JH: China, Japan – yeah, Europe, that area over there.

RD: Is that like a decorative, a domestic –?

JH: They escaped from aviaries. People used to keep them in fountain ponds.

RD: Like a Victorian type of thing.

JH: Exactly. And they've become a problem really up and down the Eastern Seaboard – Maryland, Virginia, New York.

RD: And on the Chesapeake.

JH: Chesapeake. Yeah, they're really trying to get rid of them. But yeah, so they'll do a lot of damage to aquatic vegetation, like that subsurface, because their necks are so long, and they'll rip out the plants, and they pretty much degrade the habitat for other animals. But the snow geese, actually – they feed mainly above the surface. So they feed a lot in grain fields and things like that. But if there's not a lot of crops or there's heavy snow on the ground where they can't get to the crop fields, they'll feed right in the marsh, and they prefer the roots of the spartina grass. So they'll rip it out. There was a great duck marsh right at the mouth of the Oranoaken Creek and Fishing Creek that got hit hard by snow geese about four years ago, and you won't find a duck anywhere near that place now because there's no cover for them. They can't hide from predators. There's no food for them. So snow geese season really gets going after duck season stops, so, say, around February. And the state now – they have what they call a conservation order. They're trying to really increase the bag limit of snow geese. To go hunt snow geese for a day is a major undertaking. I just can't grab my duck boat and go out by myself. Because you're dealing with such large flocks of birds, you're going to have to put out a minimum of seventy-five to hundred decoys. So, that is going to necessitate a bigger boat than what you usually use for duck hunting. And you're going to need more people to transport these

things around. The way I would usually hunt snow geese on the Delaware Bay shore is you wait for a dropping tide. The lower the tide, the better. So you navigate out to a nice sandy beach where the tide has dropped, and I usually like to have at least four or five guys, at least three boats – because at this time of year, too, the weather can get bad fast. So if somebody has engine problems or if somebody's motor won't start or if it gets frozen up, you have enough boats to transport everybody back if there's an issue. So, I'd like to get four or five guys, and we'll set up on the exposed bayfront. Usually, you'll get two or three big flocks of snow geese that winter. There's a big flock that stays right off in the Maurice River Cove, and there's another big flock that's up by Dividing Creek. If you can get between these two big flocks – and you're probably talking five to six thousand birds a flock. If you can get between them and set up a spread of decoys, maybe like a hundred, it'll look like maybe just a little group of snow geese have broken off and are feeding in an area. Because that's what they'll do. They'll come in and feed on the exposed flats, on the duckweed. They'll eat whatever they can eat. So you'll hunt them on those flats.

RD: So, the live snow geese will see this other little grouping, and they'll be like, "Oh, what are they doing?" Just like humans. "What are they doing over there?"

JH: Yeah, hopefully. Is that a buffet? What's going on? But snow geese – they're one of the harder birds to hunt because they're pretty smart, and they live a long time. We've shot snow geese that have been banded over twenty years ago. So if you get a snow goose that's twenty years old, they've seen it all. They know. And it seems mostly they're the ones that lead the flocks. If you get lucky, out of a big flock, maybe you'll break off fifteen birds. But usually, the ones they're following are these older geese or gander. Man, I can't tell you how many times they get in within that – to really get a good killing shot on a goose with steel shot because you can't use lead anymore – so you use steel, or you use some of the other nontoxic substitutes. You really need those birds forty yards or less. That's pretty close when you're talking these big expanses of the bay. So many times, we'll get to like seventy yards, eighty yards, and somebody will move, or they'll see something that's just not right, and then they're gone. So a lot of times, you might get out, and you'll get one or two, but if you get a really good day – that's why so many people like to duck – a day like today, crappy weather, rain, cold, it's better because it decreases their visibility. So they're not as liable to pick out the fact that you're sitting down there with a bunch of fakes with boats all around it. Some of the better days we've had has been really a day where it's blowing, if you've had snow or rain, and the visibility's down. So they'll fly lower, and they're going to get a little bit closer. But the state, the past couple years, if you would get the conservation permit, there's no limit on snow geese. You can shoot as many as you want. But most days, if you come back with ten or twelve, that's an average. There's days where we've gotten eighty, but that's highly unusual, and the conditions have to be just right.

RD: When you go out for anything that you're hunting – I guess maybe it depends, but it's all day or mornings?

JH: When waterfowl and ducks wake up, there's always what they call the first flight. So they wake up, they want to stretch their wings, they'll get up and fly around. So, at first light in the morning, you're always going to have a flurry of duck activity. Depending on the day, if it's a bright, sunny, bluebird day, that may last twenty minutes, and then they're done. They're going to go sit on some little pond, and they're not going to fly again. Those days, your hunting is going to be relatively short. But what I really key most of my hunting on is rather than just that twenty minutes of shooting, I like to base my hunting on the tide because the ducks and the shorebirds and the geese – they're going to feed based on the tidal cycles. What they're going to do mostly is as your tide is dropping, it's going to expose mud flat. There's tons of different ducks in here, but most of the ones I like to eat are what are known as puddle ducks. They mainly feed on grasses and seeds, and they feed right at the surface or just as far below the surface as they can reach. They're not actually going to dive under and swim down. You have ducks like bluebills and scaups and buffleheads. They're diving ducks. They'll dive down fifteen, twenty feet, eat clams and snails and fish.

RD: That's most of the ones [inaudible].

JH: Yeah, that's what we call them – a dabbling. Yeah, they have their butt sticking up. That's what I like to hunt because they're mainly eating spartina seed, grass seed. They'll eat some invertebrates. But they're mainly eating more of a vegetarian diet, so they taste a whole lot better. If you get buffleheads or your scaup or things like that that are eating fish, they taste more like fish. There's only a couple of guys I know that like those kinds of ducks, but usually when they cook them, they cook them in some type of recipe that's more suited for fish or crab. Like my one friend makes broiled bufflehead, like crab cakes, but it's not crab. It's bufflehead. But they taste so much like fish that you think you're eating fish, but it's not. I don't know. I don't really like it. He likes them. I'm like, no, I prefer the ones that are a little bit gentler on the palate like your green-winged teal you see a lot. That's probably my favorite duck to hunt and carve. You get big flocks out here. But they're a small duck, and they'll feed right on that edge of the dropping tide. They'll just skim the spartina seeds right along that edge. So what I like to do is get up into an area as the tide's dropping, set up the decoys in whatever little bit of water you have left, and as the tide drops, the puddle ducks will leave basically their resting ponds, and they'll come in to feed into the mud. But you have to commit at least to hunt for five or six hours – at least until the tide swings back around so you can get back out again. Because you can't get back out; here you are in the mud for the next six hours or four hours, whatever it is.

RD: Yeah, I guess that's probably a mistake amateurs make that they get stuck or not thinking about the tides or not being aware of the tides.

JH: Oh, yeah, it happens all the time. Yeah, and I've gotten stuck. You'll get a blowout tide, and you think, "I'll have just enough water to get in here, and then the water will be back by dark," and it's not back by dark. It's the great thing about a cell phone. You can call your wife – "Yeah, I'm stuck. I'm fine. I'll be home by 10:30. It's not that cold out. We're okay." That doesn't happen often, but still, it happens to the most experienced of guys because either number one, you're having a great shoot, you're getting greedy, you want to stay and shoot your limit. Or you just misjudge what's going on because tide charts can only do so much, and the wind influences a lot and different things like that. But yeah, I'll usually duck hunt all based on the tide. That's when I do best. A lot of guys hunt just strictly early morning; they'll get one or two ducks in that first flight, and then they're done. But I like to make a day of it. We have, of course, the duck camp right in Dividing Creek. So when we're done hunting, we'll go back to – we call it the duck shack. Go back to the shack and have a beer, just sit there, have some dinner. There's bunks there and everything. You go over how the different parties of guys did because some guys will go to completely different places and see where the ducks are moving. Some guys maybe will do great, and then other guys might not have shot anything.

RD: Is that something you're a member of, or is it informal?

JH: Yeah, it's really just a loose-knit – it's an informal association of guys. I guess there were ten guys that started it. It's called the Oldman's Creek Sportsmen's Association. They used to have leases and things like that up on Oldman's Creek, like in Gloucester County and Salem County. Then I started selling decoys – I guess he's the unofficial president of the club. Not really. It's more of an honorary title than it is a real title. But I started selling him decoys, I guess, ten years ago, and I duck hunted down here a lot, and he made mention to me that they were looking someplace to have a clubhouse to get together, to chit-chat, just to really bolster the camaraderie of it. A lot of those guys – they're a little bit further north, from Mauricetown, Burlington County. There are some from Maryland. There's one or two from Virginia. But the core group of guys, the five or six that I hang out with, they're within the local South Jersey area – Mullica Hill. One's in Mays Landing. Different things like that. I said, "Well, I hunt down in the Delaware Bay shore." At the time – this was like the late '90s – the duck hunting was phenomenal at the time. There were so many green-wing teal and black ducks and pintails. Really, I began to take it for granted. You'd just go out, shoot your six ducks, and you're done. Like now, the past couple years have been a lot slower. There's probably habitat change, but there's probably more gunning pressure than what there was. The birds just moved. In the past few years, if you get two or three, that's a good day. But anyway, when I had talked to them, like late '90s, I said, "Look, maybe you ought to come look around like the Dividing Creek, Fortescue, Bivalve area. There's a lot of public land. There's a lot of good duck hunting."

Maybe you guys will be ...". They wanted to buy a piece of property. So they met up, I guess, one Sunday, four or five of them, and they were driving all around, like five different trucks. They thought, "This is kind of pointless driving with five different trucks." They saw a little parking area right off of 553. There was a guy out there working on his minnow traps. They pulled in, and they got to talking to him, and they said, "Hey, look, can we give a couple of vehicles in your parking lot here while we drive around?" The guy's name was Harry. I think his last name was Leavenworth or Leavenwood. Anyway, he's one of the local guys here. He works for the road department, and he traps – he's a great guy to talk to, too, because he spends every day pretty much on the bay, and he's right –

RD: I think I heard that.

JH: You probably have. I believe he lives right in Port Norris. But anyway, his dad had this old crab rental business that's basically right next to Dividing Creek Boat Rental. Dividing Creek Boat Rental is kind of like the Cadillac place to rent a boat from. Harry's place was like the next step down. So anyway, him and his sister ran the rental business for quite a few years after his father passed away, as far as I know. He's not the kind of guy that wants to sit behind a cash register and rent people boats. He wants to be out there. So anyway, my friend Greg and Tom and Roger got talking to him and explained to him what they were doing, that they were looking for someplace to have a duck camp. He said, "Hey, look, if you don't find a place, I'd be happy to rent you the crab shack in the off-season." I guess that's almost ten years ago now that they've had that. And they've done a lot of work to it over the years. They fixed it up. They painted it. They redid the inside. Some of the guys are tradesmen. One of the guys has his own construction business. So they've really fixed it and made it nice. They put bunks in there, a big-screen TV, some heat – all this stuff in a crab shack that, from the outside, looks like it's about to fall over. But that became our unofficial duck club. And then, since I always hunted in the area, it kind of became, well, all right, we got this place here. Can you show us around a little bit? Because now, we don't know where to go. So I would show them around and different things like that. Now, they've learned a lot of the area on their own. They go places where I don't even know where to go at now. So, it's kind of fun. It's an informal group of guys. It makes it really nice. It adds to the camaraderie of it. There's not a whole lot of those places left. Matter of fact, I only know one or two duck clubs like that down this way. I know [inaudible] have one out of (Mauricetown?), and they have their hunt. But that's mostly family-related. That's not really like an association of just friends. It's always open. We have strangers. They drop in. They'll be like, "Hey, I've seen all the duck boats out there, and I was out snow goose hunting," and yada-yada-yada. You'll give them a cup of coffee and kind of pick their brain and see what they're doing. I actually had Mike there a couple times, and he thought it was great. It was like it was kind of back in time. He's like, "Oh, this is awesome." We're having fun and hanging out with the guys. So it's pretty neat. But generally, when we snow goose hunt, the guys from the shack have the majority of the decoys, so I'll either go along

on a hunt with them, or I'll orchestrate a hunt together, and we'll go out. So, it's pretty interesting. And then it's good to have those extra boats there because mechanical trouble's not that uncommon, especially when it's that cold out. Sometimes, motors don't want to run. They get iced up, or they get covered with mud – just a whole host of different things. There's been many different problems we've had over the years. But the snow goose will pretty much take you right on through – the season runs into April. I can't say I've ever really hunted them much past the middle of March because once the middle of March comes in, I'll shift over. I like to clam in the wintertime behind Ocean City – get the hard clams. That'll be fun. So I'll clam pretty much from March through April on into May. And then in the summertime, when it gets real hot, I kind of avoid those areas because you get a lot of heavy boat traffic. But then that's when the crabbing starts to pick up. In a good year, I've caught crabs as early as the beginning of April. This year has been the slowest year I've ever had. Most guys are feeling the same way. I have the boat out there now. I'm going to go try to catch a couple dozen for the Fourth of July. But if I get a couple dozen, that's really all I have hopes for. I don't know whether it's the hurricane and the bottom's been rearranged, so the crabs just move their areas, or whether they had a lot of dead loss from being scoured out of the mud with the storm. I don't really know. But all I can say is this time last year, I was bringing back bushels, and this time this year, if you're bringing back two dozen, you're doing good. So I think it's probably a little bit of a bunch of different factors. We've had a lot of rain, so you have a ton of freshwater influx, which pushes them further out into the bay. But then also my friend Harry, he catches minnows, and he says this year has been the hardest year to get minnows. That's what he does all summer long. He just runs minnow traps. He sells them for bait. And he said the minnow takedown this year has been down dramatically. Again, who really knows why?

RD: And you said crab April through the summer?

JH: Yeah, all through the summer, and I'll even crab up through duck season. But you crab all through the summer, and then also now that the water's warming up, once you hit like June, you're perch fishing, weakfish. Like my boat today, it's outfitted with some hand lines, some crab cages, but also my fishing stuff. In the creeks, there's a lot of your small striped bass, your twenty-four, twenty-five-inchers. But the white perch really is what I'll target when I'm crabbing. You get a mess of twelve-inch, fourteen-inch perch that's real good eating to go with the crabs. So I'll do that all through the summer. But the crabbing is – the kids like it. I enjoy it. You try to get the day to have a little breeze, and the greenheads aren't so bad. There are just some things that shouldn't be on Earth, and greenheads are one of them. I know they all have their place. Ducks eat the larvae. But oh my gosh, talk about a rotten day if they're swarming.

RD: What do you use to crab? How do you crab?

JH: I like to use hand lines – just keep it simple, just some drop lines. You can use up to two commercial pots in New Jersey, but most of the creeks in this area, Delaware Bay, are off-limits to any kind of commercial traps. That’s mainly because, number one, you’re supposed to have turtle excluders, but there’s still a lot of turtle bycatch. You only have to tend a commercial pot once – I think it’s every twenty-four to thirty-six hours. So you’ll get a turtle that will go down – especially the small ones. The turtle excluders will keep out a full-grown terrapin, but it won’t keep out the babies. So a lot of the creeks, which are breeding areas for them –

RD: Which you wanted –

JH: Yeah. You’ll pull a trap if you have a commercial trap –

RD: – for a TED. And then you have a dead baby turtle in there.

JH: It’s usually not one. It’s usually like five or six or ten. Yeah, it’s horrible. So yeah, I don’t run any commercial traps down here. Once you clear the mouth of the creeks in the bay, you can, but then your turtle bycatch in the bays are really, really low because that’s just not where – they’re not hanging out in the big water. So, I mainly crab with hand lines. Also, like at low tide, I’ll just walk, and they call – you’ll [inaudible] them, just scoop them right in the bucket. But then I’ll also use just some regular four-inch collapsible box traps. You pull up, and you drop them. You put them on a little buoy, and you run your line of ten or fifteen traps and see what you have. Yeah, it’s fun. It’s enjoyable. I use the same boat that I use to duck hunt with. It’s a shallow-draft boat that’s built by a local South Jersey guy out of Pennsville. He’s been building these boats for probably thirty years.

RD: Who’s that?

JH: Roy Schellinger. Yeah. He’s got a cabin out in the meadow. He’s got one of the cabins. It was kept pretty well, and Roy’s been building these boats for a long time. It was basically a design that he came up with. He wanted a very shallow draft but maneuverable boat that you could take in shallow water. But if you had to run from, say, the mouth of Dividing Creek back to the boat ramp, which could be a six- to seven-mile run, it’s a boat that you can get up on plane and move pretty fast with. It’s basically an upgraded version of what your traditional sneakbox would be. Your traditional sneakbox is a displacement hull craft meant to be rowed or pulled. You can use a motor on them, but they just will get the hull speed. They’ll get to five or eight knots, and that’s it. Roy pretty much put a planing hull on the sneakbox where you can get up on plane using the outboard motor and cover a lot of ground, and then he also took to making them out of fiberglass. It’s all hand-laid fiberglass, which is going to last a lot longer than usually a wooden boat. I’ve built several sneakboxes myself and a couple fishing boats, usually cedar with fiberglass over them, and they’re great, but there’s always upkeep. It’s just constant

maintenance. That's just the nature of the beast. And a lot of times, if you want to get out and you want to hunt, you don't have to be working on the boat – or as little as possible. Every boat takes maintenance. But the fiberglass boats, especially in the salt environment and the environment out here, seem to last a little bit longer with less maintenance than the wooden boats do. But yeah, so I'll use that boat. It's not a big boat. Probably for hunting, you can hunt two people out of it comfortably. You can fit the dog in there and maybe a couple dozen decoys. But it's nice because you need to be somewhat concealable. Ducks are pretty good. They can see well. You can have the best spread of decoys out there, and if you're sitting out wide open, especially if you move, they're not getting anywhere near you. They're not dumb animals. I always said all the dumb ones are dead. Somebody already got them. So the ones left are smart ones. You don't want to be out there in a huge yacht that they're just going to see out there. A lot of times, even the small twelve-foot boats are too much. Like at the end of the season, you'll get out, and you'll ditch the boat a hundred yards away, and you'll just sit in the grass and try to get some shots. But yeah, it's a good boat for using out there. It's multipurpose. I use it all year long. Yeah, it's great. But yeah, summertime, it's fishing and crabbing time. You go out on the bay. Of course, weakfish are starting to come back a little bit. There have been a lot of small ones caught the past year or two. I don't know if that's going to be a good long-term trend or if it's just an anomaly. It's not enough, really, evidence to know yet. But yeah, we'll do that. And then September, railbird season starts. Railbird hunting – it's usually a hot, pretty sweaty affair, usually wet. [laughter] But it's more like the fact that you can pick up a shotgun again and get back out in the marsh, just to kind of do it. So maybe you'll have one or two good railbird trips a year – me. There's other guys that do it more often. But you have to hunt railbirds on a flood tide because, basically, they hide in the grass islands. We have three main types of rail that we hunt in New Jersey. We have a sora rail, which is a smaller bird, maybe a little bit bigger than a sparrow, but not quite as big as a robin. And then you have the clapper rail, which you hear all through the marsh [demonstrates sound] – all summer long. and then the Virginia rail. The Virginia rail's probably the least common. I think I've only ever killed one. But the clappers are very common, and the soras are very common. The clappers – like more of your regular salt spartina marsh that you have in this area, and once you come up the marsh a little bit further towards Mauricetown, and you get some of the rice beds is where you get the sora rails. That's where Camps and some of the other guys still take parties out for the soras because the soras are – again, they're eating a little bit – they're in fresher water. They eat rice. So they're a little bit better flavor, a little bit better tasting. They're the ones that most guys like to shoot. But you'll get your flood tide, and you'll push your railbird boat through these grass islands. And railbirds – they have funny feet. They're kind of lobed. They're not webbed, exactly, like a duck, but they're not like a regular shorebird foot. So they can swim and run equally well. They'll basically paddle or run through the flooded grass, and then when they get to the end of the grass island, flying is like their last resort. So then you pull through, and then when you get to the end, you may have two railbirds flush, or you may have ten railbirds flush. The clappers fly a lot better than the soras. Soras kind of have this undulating, up-and-down flight. So, it takes a little

while to get the hang of shooting them. A duck's pretty much a linear flight, whereas the railbirds are like up and down. But yeah, you usually get one or two good railbird hunts in September.

RD: And that season's September until early January?

JH: I want to say – no, no.

RD: Not that far?

JH: Railbirds probably go – I don't know anybody that hunts them much after September, but I think the season probably goes until the end of October or very early November. But usually, once duck season starts, people forget about the railbirds, and they start hunting the more desirable –

RD: So that's October, then, the –

JH: Yeah, railbirds start September 1st. So, it starts September 1st and probably runs just, say, until the end of October, like October 31st. But duck season generally starts for this zone about October 14th or 15th, so about the second week of October. Once duck season starts, then everybody is gung-ho for that and tries to hit it pretty hard because you have a large area – the ducks will start to migrate down here – like the blue-winged teal will start to come in August and September. So you'll see the blue-winged teal during railbird season. But they're a very – I say they're a thin-skinned duck. They don't like cold weather. So the blue-winged teal will leave a lot of times even before duck season starts, where you may have a straggler, one or two, left during duck season. But then the green-winged teal come, and they'll stay clean all the way through April. They can stand the cold weather, even though they're a much smaller duck. The green-winged teal will stay all season long unless you get a really, really hard freeze, where you get ice on the mud. Then they can't feed. Then they'll hopscotch as far south as they need to just to get away from the ice. They'll go to Delaware, or they'll go to Virginia. But then they usually come back again once the ice breaks up. But duck season starts in October, and it'll run for – usually right until about Veterans Day, and then there's a two-week break. There's what's called a split in the season. The federal government gives you sixty days to hunt ducks. So to try to extend it – because you get an early flight of ducks that come right when the season first starts, and then right around November, it's getting cold for some of those. Those ducks move on. But then the really, really cold-weather ducks haven't shown up yet. So, generally, all New Jersey seasons have a split. It's either a ten-day – or I think this year, it's going to be a fourteen-day split. So the season closes from right around – I want to say the last week of October up until about November 7th or 8th. The south zone season will close. But it's nice because then the coastal season will open. Like at Ocean City – that'll open up, and you can hunt there for like a

week or two. So, there's generally some hunting opportunities almost all fall and winter long. You just have to figure out where you're going to go, what season's open, [and] what season's closed.

RD: How many zones – did you call them zones?

JH: There's three zones in New Jersey. We have the north zone, which is basically from Trenton north to New York. We have the south zone, which is roughly from Trenton south. And they list them all, but that's just a general split. It's right around Burlington County somewhere. But then you have the third zone, which is the coastal zone. The coastal zone, for all intents and purposes, is the strip of land that's all east of the Garden State Parkway. So just that small strip that's right along the coast, say, from Sandy Hook all the way down to Cape May. That's managed because you get a lot of birds that will only use the coastal zone, like brant. Brant are a – they're a seafaring goose. New Jersey probably harbors eighty percent of the world's brant population in the wintertime. So the coastal zone – they really tailor that to – you get a lot of different ducks that will strictly only go in that marine environment that won't even really come over to the Delaware Bay. Last year, I know there was a flock of brant on the Cohansey, but I think they were blown off course by the hurricane. They stayed there all winter long. Maybe they'll come back next year. I don't know. But a friend of mine lives – oh, he's right outside Greenwich, and he said there's a flock of like twenty-five brant in this corn field with the snow geese that he's never seen in his whole life. But mainly, yeah, the coastal zone is right along the shore, and they manage that. They set up the different zones to manage it for the different birds that use those zones. It gives them more flexibility. But yeah, so ducks will run clean on through the end of the year, back into January. But also, in that time, I like to do some deer hunting. I'm not a huge deer-hunting fanatic, but a deer fills up the freezer a lot faster than a bunch of ducks do. So I'll go out and try to get one or two because my kids – they like venison. My wife enjoys it. Actually, I live right at the head of a farm in Mullica Hill, and my neighbor's a farmer. He's in his eighties. The deal goes, I can hunt his property as long as I get a deer or two for him. So that's how it goes. Yeah, that's kind of the agreement that we have. Yeah, a lot of times, I'll try to get my deer hunting in right during the split of the duck season because that's usually right around when the rut starts – when the deer start to breed. So they get a lot more – I guess the bucks get a lot dumber at that point in time if they're out there looking for a girlfriend, so they're not nearly as cautious as they normally are.

RD: And what time of year is that you said?

JH: That's right around the beginning of November. Yeah, right around when the split in duck season comes in is usually right around – matter of fact, I had a funny story last year. It was the last day before the split in the south zone, and it was a rainy, crappy, really drizzly day, and I had a friend that wanted to go out duck hunting. I said, "Yeah, we'll go out." But I said, "The deer

have really been moving.” I said, “I bet you there’s a bunch of deer out this morning.” So we went duck hunting, and I think we shot two ducks. It wasn’t really that great. Nowadays, they have the trail cameras, the little cameras you can set up, and they’re infrared. You have a deer walk by [and] it takes its picture. Of course, I thought they were cool. I bought one a couple of years ago. So, I had the deer camera up by my deer stand. That morning at 8:11, the biggest buck I’ve probably seen in like – ever I’ve been hunting – walked within ten feet of my stand. I’m out here duck hunting. I’m like, “Oh, doesn’t that just figure?” I never saw that deer again the rest of the year. A neighbor ended up shooting it probably about three or four weeks later. It was a nice deer. That’s kind of the breaks.

RD: The one that got away?

JH: It’s like the old story – you should have been there yesterday. Yeah, I should have been deer hunting this morning, not duck hunting. But hey, it’s okay. That’s the way it goes.

RD: So, how many days a month do you go out?

JH: What I like to do – the way my work schedule is, I work for myself, so I’m pretty flexible. But I like to really put in a lot of time, say, from after duck is done and whatever – from January up to September. I like to put in as much time as I can and really try to build up – if I can get a backlog of decoys put together, I like to try to do that. And then again, I hunt over all my own wooden decoys, so every year, I usually make a rig of duck decoys I’ll hunt over – maybe like 12 or 18 birds. Every year, you try to keep the rig together, but when you’re making your living on it, and you got to feed the kids – mostly, every year, I end up selling my own hunting rig. Because a lot of guys that collect ducks – if I hunted over the bird and used it, I guess it’s more desirable to them than one that hasn’t been used. It’s been baptized, they say. I don’t know why. That’s just the way it is. It’s kind of like a feather in the cap of the decoy that it’s been used. I hunted over it. That’s predominantly a smaller percentage of what I make is stuff that I actually use. If I make a hundred decoys a year, I may only hunt over twelve or fifteen of them. So there’s our guys that wait every year, and like January, our phone starts to ring – “Hey, you got anything? What are you selling out of your rig this year? What have you got?” I try to get as much work done as I can in the spring, summer, on through the fall. Of course, the biggest decoy show we have in Jersey is in Tuckerton at the end of September. So I really try to build up a backlog for that because I work mainly off of commission, but at a show, people traveling from California that come to the show – from Florida. You may be able to snag a new customer if you have something for sale. Then, if everything’s sold, people will go, “I’ll just go to the next guy.”

RD: They can place an order or something?

JH: Right. They can place an order. Yeah, exactly. But it's always nice. You get an impulse buy once in a while. Somebody will see something they really like, and they have to have it and take it home. So, I try to put in a lot of time through the spring and the summer to build up enough of an inventory. Whereas, really, once duck season starts, I can get out two days a week, maybe. That's probably my average. I can duck hunt two days a week. There's some weeks, if it's been really good, I'll hunt five days a week. But you have to make that time up later somewhere else.

RD: Right. Because you have a lot of things you got to do – family stuff or whatever.

JH: Exactly. But yeah, on through the summer, like now, I might get out crabbing or fishing maybe twice a month, something like that. It's not nearly as much. But then again, I'm going today, and then I have a buddy from college that's coming into town for the 4th. He wants to go Friday. So I'll be back down there Friday.

RD: Oh, okay. Well, that works.

JH: It's a good ability to be able to kind of set your own schedule. I always worked in small business. Before I made decoys, I was a cabinetmaker, and I worked for my father. You have to be able to manage your time effectively to where you're going to be able to pay your bills every month, put some money away, put food on the table, pay all your insurance, and stuff like that. The same amount of time has to be put in. My dad used to have a running joke. He's like, "Oh, I can work any seventy hours a week I want to work." You know what I mean? "It could be at night, or I could have the day off. But whatever, I still got to put the same amount of time in."

RD: Yeah, or you know tomorrow's going to be – you want to take off, then you know that –

JH: Right. Like a lot of times, I will go to church on Sunday, and then I'll work the rest of the day Sunday if I know I'm going to take a day off during the week. So yeah, it's pretty good.

RD: Did you get into decoy-making after you got into hunting, or did it kind of happen at the same time?

JH: I did. No, I was into hunting before I got into making decoys, and I guess, like every hunter, you think, "Oh, man, if I would have just had a little bit better-looking decoy, that duck would have landed or would have come a little bit closer. I might have got a better shot. I would have done more." Really, when I started, when I was hunting a lot, beginning like in the '80s, the plastic decoys that they made were really pretty bad-looking. They didn't look much like a duck, and if they did, they only looked like a duck from fifty yards. Once you got close, their heads were really bulbous, and the paint schemes were all the wrong color. Now, they have some

plastic decoys that are very lifelike. They've taken molds off some professional carvers, and they really look good. But when I started, the decoys were really bad. Being a cabinetmaker, I thought, "Man, I could probably do better than that on my own." I think I had spent fifty dollars and bought a pair of Herter's cork decoys because everybody said, "Oh, cork decoys are great. They're the best you can use." So I saved up some money. I had just been married, so there wasn't a lot of extra. But at the time, I think I was making shadow boxes for brides. They would dry little bridal bouquets and put the invitation in there. There was a store up in Haddonfield that was buying these little shadow boxes from me, and they would buy ten or twelve a month. That would be kind of like my fun money. I saved up some money, and I bought these Herter's cork decoys. When they came, I was so disappointed because they looked like nothing other than a block of cork that they just knocked the edges off on, and they stuck a two-by-four on it for a head. I'm like, "They're getting fifty dollars for these things? These are horrible." That's when I proposed – I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to try making my own." So I started to try to make my own, and I didn't really know – I knew a little bit about the history of carving and duck hunting because I studied history all through school. I graduated from Brown with a history degree. That's kind of what I liked. So I knew a little bit about it, but I didn't really know a lot about it because I was just strictly from the utilitarian standpoint of decoys – how could they benefit me? I didn't know about guys that collected them or anything like that. So I basically just drew what I thought looked like a duck, and I started cutting these out of – at the time, I didn't even know the right type of wood to use. I was buying two-by-tens from Home Depot, gluing them together, and then using a two-by-four for the head. I painted them up, and I thought they looked okay. They definitely looked better than the one I bought from Herter's. It's funny, the chance meetings that change your life. I was getting ready to come crabbing one day, and I was coming down 553, and I saw a camouflaged duck boat, a sneakbox. There was a guy filling up with gas. I didn't know – it was one of Roy Schellinger's boats. I had never seen that before, and that was the first time I saw one. I had only just seen the old wooden sneakboxes, which is what I had. I stopped, and I talked to the guy, and he said, "Oh, yeah." Blah, blah, blah. Told me what it was. He said, "This is made by Roy Schellinger. We're actually doing a duck boat get-together" – this was like in July – "down on the Maurice River. Why don't you come on down and meet some of the guys?" I said, "No, you know what? I can't. I'm going fishing up the road. Blah, blah, blah. So I'd really like to go, but I can't." I said, "How did all you guys meet?" He said, "Oh, there's a duck hunting website." This might have been like the mid-to-late '90s, I guess. He said, "If you have a computer, check it out." So I checked it, and it was kind of cool. It was just all for local guys that duck hunted. This was really when the internet first started kind of getting going. By today's standards, it was a really crappy little message board, but it let a lot of guys meet each other that wouldn't have met otherwise. Maybe you see somebody in a marsh, but you might not talk to them. So I posted a couple pictures of my decoys on this website, and a lot of guys were like, "Oh, yeah, they're cool. You'll kill ducks with that. That looks good." And I got one response from a fellow – and pardon my French – he said, "They look like shit. They're horrible. They are the ugliest birds

I've ever seen." I'm like, "Who the heck is this guy?" I spent all this time, I made these, and I put my heart and soul into them, and he's just tearing them apart? I wanted to type back a really angry response, and I told my wife, "Look at this. He's like tearing my stuff apart. I spent all this time on it. They look pretty good." She said, "Well, either he's just some grumpy old guy, and whatever you say back to him isn't going to matter, or maybe he knows what he's talking about." So, he did send that message with a caveat. He said, "Look, if you really want to learn about ducks, this is my number. Give me a phone call."

RD: Who was that?

JH: This was Sean Sutton from Paulsboro. Mike's known him. He met him. He's a professional carver now, also. But I called him, and he said, "I live in Paulsboro." He said, "Buy a case of beer. Come up Tuesday night." I'm like, "Okay, whatever." So I buy a case of beer, and I'm driving in. I grew up in Deptford. In the area of Paulsboro – Paulsboro's not the greatest town, but it's not the worst, either. But you're driving in, and I'm looking – I'm like, "Man, I don't really know if I should be here." But I'm like, "All right." I parked down the road. I'm walking down the street in Paulsboro because his driveway was filled up. So, you have to walk like a block or two. I'm walking down the road with a case of beer on my shoulder, looking totally out of place. I knock on the door. He looks around, and he's like, "Where's your dad, kid?" I'm like, "No, I'm Jode. That's me." And he goes, "Oh, all right. You're old enough to buy beer?" I'm like, "Yeah. I'm twenty-something years old. I can buy beer. Absolutely." He goes, "All right, well, come in." So he brought me down into his basement, where he was carving at the time. As soon as I walked down there, I knew right away that he knew what he was talking about. I was just amazed. At the time, he probably wasn't carving a super-long time, but longer than I was – maybe ten years at the time. He had some really beautiful ducks and really nice decoys.

RD: Who had he learned from?

JH: He, largely at that point in time, was self-taught. Him and his dad had duck hunted for a long time together, and he started out carving. His dad was a big fisherman. I guess he started out carving little fishing lures. I don't know the whole story, but I know his dad had some health problems, and I think Sean wanted to make some decoys to hunt over. I think he had given some to his father before his dad passed away. Then he just kind of got into it, and he bought the book by Harry Shrouds and Tony Hillman, [*Carving Duck Decoys*]. So he did that for a little while. But really, he was largely self-taught at that point in time. He had had one other apprentice before me, who actually was – his neighbors were the Millers. This was the Millers' son, Ray Miller. He just had, I guess, retired as police chief. So Ray was in his fifties at the time, and Ray had apprenticed with him for – I say "apprenticeship." It's not really an apprenticeship. It's just a friendship that you go over and kind of hang out and drink beer and just learn through

osmosis. So Ray, at that point in time, was coming over once in a while but had pretty much carved long enough where he was mostly self-sufficient on his own. So, Sean and I became friends and man, I think I probably wore out my welcome there. I would come over every week and usually bring a case of beer. I'd tell people that was my tuition to learn to carve: a case of beer every week for like a year, two years. That was it. We became very good friends, and we're still friends, and we hunt together quite a few times a year. That's kind of how I got into it. But he really opened the door to me and said, "Look, you're a cabinetmaker. What are you messing around with cork for, number one? You should make decoys out of wood. That's what the Jersey tradition is." And then he said, "In New Jersey, we have decoys that are carved in the coastal tradition, which would be Barnegat Bay, Ocean City, areas like that, and then we have the Delaware River style, which is what we did on this side of the state, all around Philadelphia, Woodbury, Paulsboro, and even further north, up towards Trenton." He said, "Take a look at some of these old decoys. Research a little bit what you like, pick a style, and try to carve it like that." He said, "That way, you'll be keeping the legacy going." For me, being a historian or being trained in [history], that was great. I just delved into it. There was so much there that I never knew. That really got me hooked – doing research and reading about it, finding out about all the old different carvers, visiting museums, and then getting to meet some of these old guys before they died. Because when I first got into it, there were some of them that were around that were older and weren't carving but were still around, like Bill Cranmer. He was a guy that his decoys I collect, and he's been gone about maybe ten years ago now. So, it was a good time to kind of get into that. I would carve decoys, and I started my first wooden rig. Matter of fact, that's how I met one of the guys from the shack. My first wooden rig of teal, after I had hunted over it for like three or four years, I started to look at it, and I'm like, "Well, you know what? I can really do better than that now, so I'm going to sell these." I sold them to Greg. He bought them probably ten years ago now, and he hunts over them every day for ten years. So, they work. The paint hasn't fallen off. They haven't sunken yet, which is kind of like a badge of honor because I never really thought they would last that long. But they have.

RD: Right. Because how long do decoys last?

JH: You know what? I mean, there's old decoys that are a hundred years old, but most of the time, decoys that were – there was a friend of mine. His dad had one of these cabins out on the bay – (Lee Ayers?) from Roadstown. And (Lee?) said, "My dad had hundreds of them old decoys, and when they wore out, we just burned them." He said, "It would be like keeping a shovel. Why would you keep a shovel? When it's worn out and broken, get rid of it." And then he said, "When plastic decoys came out, we thought it was great because they were so much lighter. You could put them in the boat, and they weren't weighing the boat down."

RD: Oh, yeah. Didn't think about that.

JH: So, nobody ever really thought of it. But I mean, the lifespan of a decoy – it all depends on how it gets taken care of.

RD: It's like anything, yeah.

JH: Yeah, it's like anything. You could have one that lasts five years and gets destroyed and shot up, or you could have one if you take care of them that lasts for fifty or eighty or a hundred years, you know?

RD: So the decoys you're making today – who are your buyers? Do you have a mix of people that collect them and put them on the shelf somewhere, hunters, and –?

JH: Exactly. Yeah, I just got into carving decoys strictly for my own hunting rig, just as a utilitarian object. I didn't even really know that people bought them and collected them or did that.

RD: As art.

JH: As art. Right, exactly. I'd be at a boat ramp, and of course, you're done hunting. Everybody – they want to come over – “Oh, how'd you do? What'd you get?” And they would look in the boat, and they'd look at the ducks. Then guys would see the decoys, and they'd be like, “Hey, that's pretty neat.” Because you just don't – most guys that hunt nowadays – a very, very small percentage actually use wooden decoys or even cork decoys, for that matter. Like ninety-eight percent of the guys use your mass-produced plastic decoys. They're cheap. They're disposable. They're easy. They look pretty good. But guys would look in the boat, and they would see some of the decoys, and they'd be like, “Wow, that's pretty cool. Do you want to sell me one?” “Yeah, all right.” I didn't even really know what they're worth. I'm like, “Well, what do you want to give me?” “I'll give you forty bucks for it.” Well, crap, that's gas money for the way home. That's awesome. I sold a decoy for forty bucks.

RD: And make your wife happy.

JH: Yeah, right. She's like, “Great, now you're not burning your own money.” So it started out like that – a lot of guys, just strictly duck hunters, and you would donate to a Ducks Unlimited dinner, and maybe some guys would get your name, and maybe you'd sell one for seventy-five dollars. That'd be great. But the light never really clicked on until I was at a decoy show one time. I was walking by a table, and I saw a decoy that I had sold to a guy who was a hunter for probably fifty dollars or seventy-five dollars, and he had it on his table for two hundred dollars.

RD: Oh my god.

JH: I thought, “Oh my gosh, did you see that? I made that. He’s asking two hundred dollars for it. That’s crazy.” And I’d come back later, and it was gone. Somebody bought it. Then something started to click. I realized, all right, there’s a whole other cadre of people here that just aren’t buying these to use. They’re actually buying them to collect them. So I got introduced to – there’s different societies, collecting associations. I got to meet some people like that and then realized there’s guys that are willing to spend a little bit more money for a nicer decoy that they may never hunt it. Most collectors that I know, even if they’re never going to hunt the decoy, they still float it a couple times to make sure it flips over right, to make sure it sits right, just to test you and make sure it’s what it should be. Because basically what I do – they’re considered working decoys, although they’re painted up much fancier than what an old-fashioned working decoy is. You still want them to float right and look good and things like that. So yeah, it’s a pretty neat thing.

RD: So now, you primarily make your living off of –?

JH: Yeah, I make the large majority, probably ninety-five percent of my living, off carving duck decoys. But not just ducks. I just finished like hummingbirds and flowers, like frilly things. People like that stuff, too. I’ve done everything from woodpeckers to blue herons. One of my customers this summer asked me if I would carve a miniature Lucy the Elephant. I’m like, “Okay, I’ll carve whatever you want me to carve. That’s fine. Yeah, as long as you’re going to pay me.” He goes, “Oh, yeah.”

RD: Are there some guys, though, that buy them to hunt with, or is it for collectors? It’s a mix?

JH: Probably fifteen percent of my clientele will actually buy them and hunt with them. And of that fifteen percent, there are some guys, like the guys from the duck shack – that’s his go-to rig day in and day out. That’s all he uses. He doesn’t use anything else. Then you have other guys that may take out the wood decoys on opening day or on a special occasion. If they want to impress their buddy, they’ll bring it out. But it’s not day in and day out, just beating them up, throwing them around type of thing. It’s a badge of honor. I like to hunt over my own wood decoys all the time. And for me, it’s a little different because if I break one or mess one up, I’m not out a couple hundred bucks. It’s just whatever my time is into it. So that’s pretty neat. Then, as far as carving, there’s a lot of carvers out there, and to get a name for yourself, it’s a lot of time, and you need to have a lot of breaks go your way. One of my ducks was on the New Jersey duck stamp in 2006. I carved a wood duck decoy, and on a whim, they had a little contest and were like, “Hey, if anybody wants to send it in” – they were doing a run of duck stamps for five years, which was going to feature a puppy and then a decoy by a local carver. I was lucky enough to have one of my wood ducks chosen for 2006, and they put it on, I don’t know, however many million duck stamps they made. So that was kind of a good thing. Some people

noticed me. And then through that, I've had a couple magazine articles done over the years. That really opens, basically, the collectors' eyes because they want to know that you're just not a flash in the pan. "All right. Why should I pay you X amount of dollars for a decoy? Are you going to be gone tomorrow, and it's going to be worthless? Or are you going to build a track record of making a decoy that I can be proud of and then give to my kids one day?" There's only a handful of guys, I guess, in Jersey that actually make their living on it.

RD: Who would some of those be?

JH: It would be Sean Sutton, I know, carves full time that I learned from – Rick Brown, George Strunk. Mike knows all these guys.

RD: Yeah, I think I've heard some of these.

JH: Jamie Hand would be one. And myself. There may be a couple others. Like anything, you have to augment your income wherever you can. I know Jamie does – he guides for railbirds. He guides for duck hunting. He does stuff like that to make extra money.

RD: Yeah, I know Jamie. A few years back, I worked at the Cape May County Historical Society, and he's been involved there and on the board. He lives down the road, basically, too, from me. But yeah, I know he does – I think he's always been proud he's never had, as he says, like a real job.

JH: Yeah, exactly. It's funny. That's what I tell my wife now. I'm like, you know, maybe one day, I'll have to go back and get a real job. But hey, as long as this lasts –

RD: But he'll guide, or he'll sell some ducks or do this or do that and set your own schedule like you were saying, and you have the ultimate – enjoy life, probably more so than –

JH: Absolutely. You know what? People ask me – they're like, "What do you do for a living?" I'm like, "I live for a living." You know what I mean? I just want to do what I can do. We're only on this side of the grass for so long, and I want to make the best of it. But coming from the cabinetmaker's background, I'll do some cabinet work for existing clients. There's people that we worked for for years where we did their whole house, and they'll call me a couple times a year – "Oh, I really – I know you're doing the ducks now. I know you're doing the ducks now, but we need a new TV cabinet. Can you make some time for me?" "Okay." But yeah, you just have to be – and you can't live extravagantly. I don't have a large house. Your wife has to be very understanding, too, because you can't get new stuff all the time. And there's times when you can. There's times when you're busy, and you're doing really well, and there's other times

where you have to stretch out the income coming in. Because it's like any small business. It's not always –

RD: Consistent, yeah.

JH: – a cyclical thing, right? You don't get a weekly check. There's times of feast, and there's times of famine.

RD: What's your wife's name?

JH: Lois. Yeah, she originally was Lois McCann, and now, she's Lois Hillman. Like I was saying before, her great-grandfather was the Methodist minister in Mauricetown for quite a few years. Yeah, (Milton McCann?) was his name. And then, he eventually got transferred up to Camden County, which is where she grew up and where she was from. I like spending time out on the bay. Like I was saying, I took Mike out to look at those shacks out there. That's kind of a whole neat thing –

RD: Oh, yeah. In fact, I made a note about the shacks.

JH: – in and of itself, because we wanted to talk a little about recreation on Delaware Bay, and that's how really these little shacks came about is – the one fellow whose diary that I read, Jonathan Kirchoff – his diary started around 1918, and he grew up hunting around Tuckahoe – around the Tuckahoe River, in that area. As far as I understand, I guess his parents died, and he was raised by an aunt who had a boarding house in Tuckahoe. So he grew up in Tuckahoe, hunting the marshes around there, hunting Beesley's Point, places like that, which I thought was cool for me because I spent a lot of time there when I was younger myself. As he got older, he ended up, I guess, moving to Bridgeton and getting a job in Bridgeton. He served in World War I. When he came back from World War I, he got married and moved to Bridgeton, and he hunted a lot on the Cohansey. Right around the time – before World War II, the Cohansey being the river – it's pretty much one-dimensional. Your ducks come from one spot, and they go to another spot. He began to hear of the greener pastures down the road in Delaware Bay, around Fortescue, Egg Island, different things like that, and he began taking trips hunting down into this area. The early trips, they didn't have outboard motors. They would start out from Beaver Dam, and they would row out on like an outgoing tide on maybe a Thursday afternoon, and it may take them five or six hours to row down to where they were going to hunt out of at King Pond. It's probably – I don't know exactly how far it is by a straight line, but I would say it's at least four or five miles, probably further because the creek winds around. So it would take them a long time to get out there. So they would go out there and hunt, and they would do well, but they would generally either spend the night in their sneakbox or a couple nights. If they got stuck out there, they spent time in the old Egg Island Lighthouse before it burnt down. But they got the

idea after that – they're like, "This is for the birds." They got some bad weather. They're getting snowed on and rained on. So, then they started to – a couple hunts, they would contract an oyster schooner either out of Port Norris or Bivalve to take them, and they would anchor up there at the mouth of, say, Straight Creek, and they would row their sneakboxes up into the creek, and they would come back, and they would spend the nights in the oyster boat. They might do that for a week. And they're like, "Well, this is great. We could do that." But I guess it was all timing on whether the oyster boats were working or not, whether it was off-season or not. So there was times where they couldn't get someone to take them out there. So they got the bright idea – I think the one year, they towed a barge down, and they just anchored it there permanently all year long, and they built like a little cabin house on it, and they stayed there. That kind of became the beginnings of building shacks out there.

RD: Around what time period, do you think?

JH: I would say they first started really gunning in that area and making the first inroads into that in like the late '30s, like '39 or '40, I want to say. But then you had intervening – you had World War II. The fellow who wrote the diary was old enough, having already served in World War I – he didn't get drafted. But the whole area got locked down around World War II because they would use King Pond as a bombing range coming out of Dover, Delaware. When you read these articles – it was pretty neat. They were out there hunting one day, and they'd say, "We knew right around 8:30, the whole squadron would come over and drop these big water bombs and not to hunt that side of the pond." Well, they almost got – not blown up, but they almost got squashed by these bombs out there on the side of the pond because the gunning was so good, they didn't get out in time. A lot of that area was off-limits and was posted then, but they still hunted there anyway. But after World War II, you had a lot of your GIs returning. The economy was booming. Number one, they had more money, and number two, they had more time to pursue recreation. That's when you really see it go from like one or two little cabins to – I think at the height, there was fifteen or sixteen of these hunting cabins out there scattered all over the area. This was right in the years after World War II. At that point in time now, outboard motors came out. You could get an Evinrude outboard for a price that a working man could afford. So now, they thought it was great. They had the outboard motors. They can go down there. There was three or four duck clubs. There was one duck club right at Turkey Point. There was another one that was, I believe, further down at the mouth of Fishing Creek and the Oranoaken Creek. So that really was the heyday of this recreation for Delaware. And that's when you would start to see the rush of fishing boats to Fortescue; the party boats, all that stuff, really starts.

RD: How many of the cabins did you say there were?

JH: The cabins? There was probably at the heyday – I'd have to go back and count, but I want to say there was over a dozen. There was probably closer to fifteen or sixteen. Still standing now, there's eight or nine, depending on whether Walker's Cabin is still there. Yeah, there's at least eight. Some of them are in states of disrepair. But I know the owners that have them now are working very hard to keep them up to snuff. It's hard on the bay. One year, you may have ice come through and take your dock out.

RD: Or, like you said, the hurricane.

JH: Yeah, and then the hurricane, which pushes them sideways and heaves them. Yeah, it's a lot of work to keep those things going.

RD: And you had said earlier when we were chatting that because it's on state land, and the cabins are grandfathered in, that once they fall into disrepair, that's it.

JH: Yeah, the cabins are on state land. Exactly. I guess it's kind of a discretionary call what is disrepair. But usually, once they fall off their foundation and are in the water for usually a length – amount of time. They might not tell you to demo it like the first season. But definitely, if it's off its pilings and foundation for a season or two, and you don't look like you're making any attempts to fix it up, then it's gone. There was one not far from where I duck hunt a lot, just south of Turkey Point, that fell off its foundation, I would say, in 2006 or 2007, and then by 2010, there was no trace of it left. It was just gone. That was probably a hunting camp for the better part of forty or fifty years. People originally built them because to go out all this way and hunt, it was more than just a one-day proposition. Even the early outboard motors, you were still only going to travel about as fast as you could row. You just didn't have to row. You weren't going any faster. Just, it wasn't muscle power. So they would go out there, and they would hunt, and they would spend time in the cabins, and then they would come back like on a Saturday. I don't know exactly when –

RD: How many guys would stay in a cabin?

JH: Usually, in a cabin, they are built mostly to accommodate four. Most of them have like four bunks. I don't know of any ones that are – well, there's one, the Snow Goose Cabin, which is at Lone Tree Point – that probably could bunk closer to six or seven guys. But nobody's used it for a while, and I do know the guys that are working on fixing it up; they're trying to bring it back, and it sustained a lot of damage in the hurricane. It'd be a miracle if it was ready for this season. That's one of the bigger ones. But most of the time, they're just maybe like fifteen by fifteen, something like that, just enough to get out of the storm. And a lot of times, most of the guys, being that they're on state land, they don't lock anything. They leave it open.

RD: That's what Mike (Schirripa?) said.

JH: Yeah, that way, if you're trouble and you're out there, you can make use of it if you can get to one because –

RD: That's cool. Yeah.

JH: You may be able to make a cell phone call and say, "Hey, look, I'm broke down. My motor won't start." But that doesn't mean that – unless you're in actual dire physical straits, like you're hurt or having a heart attack, they're not going to send a helicopter for you just because you're stuck. They'll say, "Well, wait until the tide comes up, and we'll send a boat down from the fire company to come get you." But that might not be until the next day.

RD: Right. So, if you want to get out of the weather –

JH: Yeah, so you can get out of the weather, and it's generally – there's some people that, unfortunately, over the years have ransacked them and stolen stuff, which is crappy. But most of the time, people respect the property of everybody because, hey, if I get stuck, I can go in here and use this. If they lock it, then it's not good for anybody. Yeah, so it's pretty neat. I guess the recreation, the duck hunting, people always did it here for years and years. But if you go back to the late 1800s to early 1900s, they might have enjoyed it, but it was for sustenance. It was for food. It was [to] put meat on the table. Things like that. And then, as time went on, it was really a lot tied to the economy. If you had time to do that, and you could take a day off from work to go out and shoot ducks for fun, then that's when it really started to take off.

RD: So that's really like after World War II.

JH: Yeah, there was guys that did that in the interwar period between World War I and World War II, but then the Depression took a big chunk out of that. Nobody was really – when this guy who wrote *The Memoirs of a Duck Hunter* – when he really started gunning this area, like as the Depression started to lift in the mid-to-late '30s, he said it was unbelievable. There were so many ducks. Nobody had really hunted there for ten years. So, that was really the heyday of it. Then, World War II definitely put a damper on it. There were some of the guys that still did it – some of the local guys. But after World War II, you had the big rush of guys that came in. They had the big – I guess they called it the hurricane that came up the bay like in '52 or '51. There was quite a few duck hunters that died out there in the marsh, and one of them was a GI, had been back from – I guess he probably came back from Korea by that point, by '52, but may have been in the service then.

RD: Probably in the war.

JH: But was out in one of those cabins, and the tidal surge actually floated some of those cabins right off of their pilings and just took them out.

RD: So after the war, you start seeing people from out of town?

JH: That's when you start seeing people travel.

RD: And then the local guys being the guides or –

JH: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, they'll guide. And a lot of times when you say out of town, it may only be the next town up – Bridgeton, Cedarville, maybe as far up as where I'm at, like around Pole Tavern. They would maybe start out a guide, but they would become friends. They would hang out, and they would enjoy the camaraderie and different things like that. That continued even on up through the present day. But you get into the '60s and '70s, when duck numbers got real low, you saw a dip in duck hunting. You could go out then – now, this was before my time, but I remember my uncles telling me nobody duck hunted because you could shoot two ducks. You're going to go out there and do all that, and you get two ducks for all that work? But of course, as the ducks rebounded – especially I saw through the mid-to-late '90s, as duck numbers were at an all-time high, duck hunter numbers were at an all-time high. You might go to the ramp and see fifteen or twenty trucks there. It's moderated a little bit, where the past years, now duck numbers have kind of stabilized. Some numbers are real high, but then other numbers are just medium. You see there's some guys that would come out just because it was great to go out and shoot two boxes of shells and have fun. Well, they're not going to do that if there's no targets out there anymore. You know what I mean? They're going to be like, well, I'll just go to the casino or do something else.

RD: Yeah, so there are options.

JH: Exactly. It's cyclical, for sure. But then you always have the guys like me – it's part of my life. It's what I do. I enjoy doing it. My kids are getting to the age now where they're starting to be able to come with me.

RD: I was going to ask about – you mentioned your kids. Like are they interested in it?

JH: Yeah, my daughter's ten, and she really loves the marsh. She wanted to go today. I'm like, "Yeah, I'm going to be down there all day. I don't know. It might just be a long day for you." But she likes to – it's funny. She's got such an artistic streak. She'll take all my cutoffs off duck decoys, and she'll just arrange them in different ways, and she'll make like a Labrador retriever

or a moose or different things like that. She likes carving ducks and painting, too. But she really
—

RD: What's her name?

JH: Allison. Yeah, she really likes that. She just turned ten. And my son, Ethan, he's eight, and he's more into video games right now and that whole thing. Once he gets out here, he likes it. But to actually get him out here, you have to pry him away from the television and the computer. I don't try to push anything on them. I figure, hey, if they like it and they want to go with it, that's fine. If not, I'm not going to make them do it just because I do it. That's kind of how I was. My dad, when I was growing up, he was working a lot, running the cabinet shop, and it was my mom's family who really were into the hunting. My Uncle (Kicky?) — now, I don't even know his real name. His last name was (Abate?). It was my great uncle. He came back — basically, he's a perfect example. He was in World War II. He landed in North Africa, fought all the way up through Sicily, through on into Germany, and basically before the war ended, he pretty much got what they know now as post-traumatic stress disorder. He got to the point where he had been in service for two and a half years, had seen some brutal, really bloody, horrible combat, lost good friends, and finally got to the point where he's like, you know what? My time's coming. I can't take it anymore. He was shot, so they put him on what they called combat leave. It was maybe just like the last six months of the war. He was stationed behind the front lines in France, and he boarded with a French family, a farmer's family, and as part of their sustenance during the war — I mean, the economy was bad — this guy would go out and hunt every day. My Uncle (Kicky?) would go with him. They would shoot rabbits, or they would shoot whatever type of upland birds they have over there. My uncle, having grown up in south Philadelphia, never saw anything like it. He thought it was great. He's like, this is great. He had only used firearms to kill people, and now, he could use firearms to go out and provide food for this guy and his family and things like that. So he came back from World War II totally in love with hunting. The first thing that he did when he got back is he ordered a matched set of Browning A5 shotguns. For him, at that point in time, coming back, didn't have a lot of money, was just getting ready to get a job, that was like a huge investment. But he kept those guns his whole life. So, he got my mother's brothers, my Uncle Tony and my Uncle Ray, into hunting, and my Uncle Gerard, and they're the ones that introduced me to it. My dad liked to fish and clam, crab, things like that, but he wasn't really a hunter. And my uncles on my mom's side were the hunters, and they kind of got me into it, and then they introduced me into a lot of this area and things like that. So, it was pretty neat. But my Great-Uncle (Kicky?), that was like the perfect time for him. He came back from World War II, got a job, started a family, had a little bit of money, and then he passed on his love of hunting to my uncles, and then they passed it on to me. So, yeah, it's pretty cool. It's a good example of how things just kind of continue on down the line.

RD: Do you find that in other families, like guys that you know, who you're buddies with now, like their love of hunting and being out there – has that been from their families, too, or friends, or [inaudible]?

JH: Yeah, for the most part. For the most part, it is. A lot of times, their dad would do it. Like my good hunting buddy (Eric?), his father – I guess his dad hunted a little bit, but again, his dad worked a lot. He got introduced to it from buddies from high school. Then, it seems like once you get the bug, you just have it, and you're hooked. But (Eric?) with his son – his son Josh now is fourteen, and we've been taking Josh hunting – gosh, he was probably two years old. He'd be asleep in the front of the boat under a tarp, not to get rained on because it was like, "All right, you have to take the kid, or you can't go." So Josh now – I mean, he's a phenomenal hunter at fourteen years of age. He's won the New Jersey youth goose-calling championship, duck-calling championship. He's great with decoy – like duck ID. Like he'll notice – "Oh, Dad, you see that pintail?" Josh calls the pintail. Here it comes, and sure enough, it was. So that has been passed down from his dad and from [me]. So yeah, there's generally some connection to it, either through family or, if not through family, through a friend or a buddy. I have guys that I hunt with, and a lot of guys may like the outdoors and may be into hunting, but duck hunting is kind of strange because it's equipment-intensive, number one, and it's knowledge-intensive, number two. You just can't all of a sudden grab a shotgun and walk out – I mean, you could – and shoot a duck, but you're not really going to get the full experience, and you may not know where to go. So it takes somebody who knows the ropes to show you what to do. For me, it was my Uncle Gerard [who] showed me. He said, look, get your waders and your gun. I got the boat. I got all the decoys. I got all the other stuff. I'll kind of show you the things. That sets the wheel in motion, and then from there, it's a learning curve for years until you're confident enough really to do it on your own and not get stranded or killed or lost or whatever. Yeah. I envy a lot of the guys that grew up on the marsh. I have a friend that lives in Beesley's Point, Steve (A?) – Steve and Don (A?). They're both great experts about sneakboxes, all the boats like that. They grew up right there on the marsh, hunting with their dad from the time they were kids. It's like my friend's son Josh. By the time they're fourteen, they already know it all. They know how to navigate the creeks. They know what tide to hunt. They know how to set the decoys. I learned it a little bit later in life, as a teenager, and as a young adult. It's really neat. But you need somebody to kind of key you in on all the particulars of it.

RD: So, you think with the next generation, there's going to be enough being passed down that the interest will –?

JH: It's hard to say. There's so many things that vie for people's attention. My son loves video games. I loved video games, too, when I was a kid, and eventually, your horizons expand, and you do different things. I hope there will be. I know the duck hunters in New Jersey have been shrinking the past ten years. I think they have probably throughout the rest of the country, just

because it is something that you need somebody to teach you how to do. You have to kind of be mentored into it, not just go and do it.

RD: How many duck hunters are there? Because you have to get a license.

JH: You have to get a license, and you have to buy extra licenses in addition. You need to get your firearm license, which you need to hunt any small game, but then you need your state duck stamp, you need your federal duck stamp, you need your harvest information. Because every year, you fill out a survey – what you shoot, different things like that. So yeah, it's pretty equipment-intensive, and it's one of the more expensive forms of hunting. You've got to buy waders, which are a couple hundred dollars. You don't need a boat, but it's better if you have a boat. You have to spend money on your decoys or make decoys. So, to get fully outfitted to go duck hunting, you've probably got to spend a thousand dollars just to get out.

RD: I guess it's like a lot of things.

JH: Yeah, anything.

RD: Like skiing.

JH: Exactly.

RD: Because I grew up in Massachusetts, so everyone downhill skis. But yeah, it's like a thousand dollars to get outfitted with what you need.

JH: Yeah. There's organizations like Ducks Unlimited. They do a lot of good habitat restoration, but they also run programs called their Greenwing Program where they try to bring in young hunters, try to teach them a little bit, number one, about firearm safety, because that's paramount when you're out hunting. You don't want to get shot, or you don't want to shoot somebody. But then also about duck ID because I'm friends with a lot of birdwatchers, and it's always funny. I'll look and be like, "Oh, there's a glossy ibis, or there's a whatever," and they're like, "How do you know that?" You spend a lot of time outdoors, you see things, and it just gets ingrained. So as a duck hunter, you have to be able to – all right, you're allowed to shoot one black duck, but you're allowed four hen mallards. In the half-light of like 6:00 in the morning, they look pretty darn close. So you've got to know what is that hallmark of that bird to pick out – all right, black ducks are totally white under their wings, whereas mallards tend to be more grayish. You have to learn all these different nuances. Different ducks flap different speeds. You see something flapping really fast, you know it's a diving duck because they're fat, little chunky birds with proportionally smaller wings, so they can dive underwater. You just learn all these different things. But yeah, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl – they're trying to keep the

next generation of hunters going because really, through the Pittman-Robertson Act, that's where a lot of the money has become available through the state to purchase and preserve wetlands – Egg Island, a lot of land out here around the Maurice River and stuff – that's all through the federal excise taxes that were put in on fishing and hunting supplies. That's the single largest supplier of funding for habitat preservation in the entire government. That's how they bought the refuge down at Forsythe, at Barnegat Bay – all across the country, all these funds are paid for basically by hunters and fishermen.

RD: So actually, it worked, then, that program? That's great.

JH: Yeah, actually, it worked. Yeah, we pay our own way, and it's been that way for a long time. And in turn, we get opportunities with places to hunt. Most hunters I know, for the most part, are really conservationists more than they are just out there to go kill something and put it on their table.

RD: That's what I've always heard.

JH: If you're not – if you don't put back more than what you give, pretty soon, there won't be anything left. You know what I mean? I know I've put wood duck boxes out, different things like that, to try to keep them breeding and different things. Most people that I know they're into it for more than just the thrill of the kill. But it's pretty interesting, and it's something, I think, that I hope will continue for a lot longer – my lifetime and then hopefully leave a legacy to kids. I have a couple apprentices that will come down. The gift of carving was kind of given to me freely, other than what it cost me for a case of beer. I'm known as a guy – “Well, if you want to learn, go see Jode because he'll tell you. Some guys won't tell you anything, but Jode will tell you whatever you want to know.” Just because if you don't, it'll be gone. It'll die out just like so many other things have. So, I just try to do my part to keep it going. Like this. If I can pass on a little bit of the information that I have –

RD: Yeah, this has been great.

JH: To help you out or do anything like that, I'm more than welcome.

RD: That's great. Thank you so much for your time there. Yeah.

JH: Sure.

RD: Well, is there anything else? We covered a lot.

JH: I can blab on for as long as you want to record, but if you could glean through it. If you have any other questions, I can clarify through email or come back down.

RD: Yeah, I'll be in touch. Sure.

JH: Because I'm down this way a lot.

RD: Or as I learn more. It's like everything. You have one question, you get that answered, but then you get ten more questions.

JH: It leads to something else. Right. It's like a trail. It just always diverges.

RD: It's like when we have visitors come through here, and they might ask a really good question, and it just opens it up to even more. You end up having more questions than what you started with. But it's good because, like you said, being a history major, you just keep reading and learning and talking with people.

JH: Yeah, you just keep delving into it.

RD: It just keeps going and going. So I guess if you had all your questions answered, it'd be like, oh, we're done.

JH: Right. You'd be done. Yeah, there would be nothing else to strive for.

RD: There's nothing to –

JH: But yeah, what I can do – you can send me an email. I'll send you an email. It'll be an invitation – it'll say Jode's sending you an invitation to Dropbox or something like that.

RD: Okay, and then just log in.

JH: And then you can just, yeah, log in there. You don't have to log in. I think if you have to just enter your email address – you don't have to become a member. Just put your email address in. Then it'll let you in. And you'll be able to read – I think Virginia scanned maybe ten of these articles. I know Michael has all the full-resolution photos, too, of all these cabins.

RD: He mentioned that, yeah.

JH: He sent them to me, but I think he has them on CD and also has them on email.

RD: Yeah, I think I know that too.

JH: And I sent Mike – I met a guy whose family actually originally had one of these cabins. He came upon a whole stash of all the photos of these cabins from their heyday, like in the '50s. So it's cool to see some of the cabins that are gone, that aren't there now, and then also to see some of the ones that still are there, how great they looked like fifty years ago. You're like, "Oh my gosh, I could actually stay there, and it's not infested with muskrats or regular rats." Yeah, that's not uncommon. We were in the one, and I think Virginia was like, "Okay, we have rats, and something's running out of here." I'm like, "Yeah, that's the way it is."

RD: You just mentioned her going – is it mainly guys? All guys? You got some females?
[laughter]

JH: You have some females. Yeah, a lot of times, guys will bring their daughters out. I have a buddy – his wife likes to duck hunt. She doesn't go all the time, but she'll go a couple times a year. So, yeah, it's not strictly male, but it's largely male-dominated just because that's the way it is. But New Jersey has quite a few female carvers. I don't know that they do it full time, but they came out with a really good book, I guess, last year, that's called *From a Woman's Hand*. It's all the female carvers. I don't think it's just New Jersey. I think it's East Coast. That's a great book, and I think the Tuckerton Seaport has a copy of that. I'm friends with some of the ladies in there that carve. Very talented people. Of course, down a little bit further south, you have Joan Siebert. Joan's in there.

RD: Yeah, I met her. She was here – was that Bay Day or something?

JH: Probably for Bay Day; she's usually here. I usually see her around. Oh, Vince Giannetto's another guy who carves full-time. He's from Burlington, but he's usually down here at Bay Days, too. So there's more of us out there than what I remember sometimes. [laughter]

RD: Great. Thank you so much.

JH: You're welcome, Rachel.

RD: Like I said, we covered a lot of information. [laughter]

JH: Yeah, absolutely.

RD: I'm sure I'll think of other things to go on or –

JH: Yeah, I'm sure you can probably find some things in there that you might want to focus on or look at.

RD: Chatting with Mike.

JH: Yeah, exactly. So, yeah, I appreciate it.

RD: All right. Oh, good. Thank you so much.

JH: Yeah, you're welcome. It looks like the rain has stopped.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/12/2023