

Savannah Bell: My name is Savannah Bell. I am here with Amber Gosser. We are both students at Georgia Southern University. I am here with Mr. Hughey Bryant conducting an oral history interview as a part of the project, Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures, Oral Histories of Commercial Fishing in Georgia. I have already received informed consent and permission to record from Mr. Hughey Bryant. Could I just please get that confirmation in recording?

Hughey Dean Bryant: Yes. You have my permission.

SB: Thank you so much. I do have some questions to guide this interview. But I really want to hear what you have to say.

HDB: Yes.

SB: So, feel free to talk as long as you want. We are going to go ahead and get into our questions. So, we are going to start kind of towards the beginning. So, can you tell me about when and where you grew up?

HDB: I grew up in Engelhard, North Carolina. I was there until my early 20s. I moved to Florida. I've been working the Florida and Georgia coast ever since. So, now, I'm basically working out of Darien [inaudible]. So, it's a change. One thing I do know that I see is the City of Darien, as far as for the state, they're very concerned about the fishing industry around here. That's a big plus to find a community where they're trying to help them work along with the fishermen. So, that makes a big difference. In all actuality, it really does so. I was trying to get away from the water years ago, but you can't. [laughter]

SB: I do not think you could.

HDB: Yes.

SB: Since you grew up in...

HDB: North Carolina.

SB: North Carolina.

HDB: Yes.

SB: Did you grow up inland, or did you grow up on the coast?

HDB: On the coast. On the outer banks.

SB: So, you grew up around the water?

HDB: Yes. I came up fishing. My father, he owned boats and worked different boats. As a young boy, I had to be on the boat with him. So, I grew up doing this. This is a lifetime thing with me.

SB: Did you grow up shrimping, or did you do something else?

HDB: Basically, I was shrimping. But I have done work in the different areas at the commercial fishing. I've crabbed. I've sea scalloped. I've flounder fished. So, I've done pretty much all of it.

SB: You are a seasoned veteran around here. [laughter] Did you learn everything from your father? Is that something that has been passed down through your family?

HDB: I learned a lot. Most of what I know are some things that I've started doing here in the last ten years that I did. Well, he tried to teach me. I wasn't wanting to learn it at that time. It was like sewing and mending on the nets. I never cared for that. But I got to the point now that I do it with a breeze. The more you stay in the industry, the more you learn, especially when you have to do it.

SB: So, can you just walk me through your average day as a kid growing up shrimping and then kind of your average day now, grownup, shrimping? Has it changed?

HDB: Well, average day as a kid growing up, a young boy, is basically the same if I was a grown man. You've got to be up early mornings, ready to work at daybreak. This is basically still the same, just I'm a little bigger and older. It's a job for anyone. I don't care what the age of. But it's a job working on a vessel. You've got your safety precautions of the job that you have to keep in mind at all times. Then you're trying to get your product off the deck and cooled and taking care of process to where it's still good for when you hit the market with it. So, it's all about getting the job done. You go ahead and do what you've got to do, the same thing now. They have different ways of keeping it now. You've got your own freezer boats which does a big help to an extent, as far as keeping your product. Compared to icing, icing is the best though, because freezing is dehydration of the product. They're drawing the moisture out of that freezer. Icing, it keeps the moisture in it. It's more fresher tasting. A lot of people don't care for the freezer product. What else is there to say about it? [laughter]

SB: What are some changes, positive or negative, that you have seen over the years besides – you have mentioned the freezer boats?

HDB: As far as in a positive sense, like with freezer, well, they're able to stay out longer. As far as your time of travel back and forth to the dark, there's fuel saved on that aspect, which a lot of the freezer boats work a longer time span than most ice boats. I don't know what to say about the negative. As far as the negative into the industry, I will say, our expense. Our upkeep on the vessels is such a greater price-wise nowadays than what it used to be. But we still aren't getting as much for the product. It's staying within the average range that has been for the last twenty years. That's why it hurts us. You can have a great kit. But when you look at it in all actuality, as far as your expense and your upkeeps, the material and all, this is way more expensive. That's why it's so hard for commercial fishermen. What they've done for the turtle, I'd say that's a good deal, as far as with the turtle shooters and all. It's just you have to learn those shooters learn how to determine whether you got a bad one, or whether it's not working properly and all like that.

Like I said, different aspects that change from time to time, you've got to be able to recognize and know how to go about to correct them. Commercial fishing, a lot of people think that it's easy, fast money thing. But it's really not. I wanted to speak about it. As far as my experience, it is a really tough job. They always say it takes a special type of person to work in the sea. You've got to know. You've got to know what you're doing to be out there.

SB: Can you tell me about any of your favorite memories? Anytime being on a shrimping?

HDB: Big drags.

SB: Big drag?

HDB: Yes. Big hauls. You get a nice big haul. That brightens everybody's day because you later had a good day, and getting paid. Big drag as far as shrimping. Now, as far as commercial fishing, my most memorable moment on that was flounder fishing up north, back when before they had their limit. They've got a quota nowadays. I'll say up until about the mid and the late-[19]80s, that's when they started giving them quotas. But before then, it was catch all you can, catch while you can in the flounder industry. I used to love that because that was nice work in flounder fishing. They might be a little rough and cold during the winter months. But other than that, I enjoyed it. I used to love flounder fishing. That was nice.

SB: Do you ever go back up and do flounder fishing?

HDB: No. I have no love for the cold no more. [laughter] So, I tried to avoid being up north. [laughter] Yes. I've gotten out here and got hooked on this southern weather, and I love it. [laughter] I really do.

SB: What would you say is the most rewarding part of your career?

HDB: It's experiencing things in the ocean that a lot of people don't get that experience and get to see. I've seen different species where most of them, I would say, 85 percent of the population don't even know it exists or get to experience that thrill of just the amazement of seeing something different, how it moves, some type of sea life or something. To me, that's the most memorable I've experienced through this, as far as me in this industry. I like to be able to see and learn about the different species. That makes me feel like, well, I know something that a lot of people don't know, or I've seen something that a lot of people haven't seen, which it comes with it. In order to experience something like that, it comes with its ups and downs. Like I said, to be out on that ocean is a tremendous impact on the body physically. You've got to have the mind to deal with it mentally. That's a good thing though. I would say, the water gives you a sense of solitude and peace of mind. There's calmness. Even though it can be deadly, there's a calmness about it.

SB: We have heard about some rough seas. Have you ever experienced that, out shrimping, like the rough seas?

HDB: Well, yes. I can say I've been seeing some 10- to 15-foot seas. When I worked in all the

big steel slab boats, the sea was so bad. It sounds like the whole bottom been busted out when the boat comes [laughter] down on the sea. I have seen seas roughened up. I couldn't work in it that all we could do is either lay on the hook or keep the boat hidden to the sea to try to avoid from being tossed around so bad. I have seen sometimes out there. [inaudible] [laughter]

SB: You said a slab boat?

HDB: That's steel. That's what they called most of the steel boats. There's a slab. That's why they called it the slab. Yes. Just little fisherman terminologies.

SB: That is what we want to hear. [laughter] I have learned a lot. [laughter]

HDB: That's just like, a lot of people don't realize, if you're ever watching any old TV program that's got sailing boats on it back when they had those sailors and all, if you notice most of those guys wore a hatchet on the side. That's for when they had a sail or something up. The wind was to pick up. They got them tied and all. There's such a strain on it that you can't untie them. They used to reach over with a hatchet. It chopped the rope instead of trying to untie it. Because once you untie it and this got pressure, it's going to snatch it. If you're trying to hold it, that's going to give you a rope burn in your hands. [inaudible] To get slapped with that rope, that's just like getting hit with a bullwhip. [laughter] It is. It really is. A lot of people don't realize that. It has been taught on modern fishing nowadays, where you get a strain on something, a line or something. Nowadays, they want to reach over and try to cut it with a knife. That's too close. That's why the hatchet came into play back in the day. You reach over and just hit it and step back.

SB: You learn to swing on that too. [laughter]

HDB: Yes. Right. A lot of people don't realize they do when they see stuff like that. I pay attention to things, to detail. [laughter]

SB: Have you ever been hit with one of those ropes?

HDB: No. Not really myself per...

SB: You stay away from that. [laughter]

HDB: Because like I said, to have a rope snapped with a strain on it and if he was to get hit with it, it will cut you open, just like being hit with a bullwhip. There're all kinds of danger out there. You've just got know where to recognize it and determine what you need to do to avoid being hurt. I've seen a lot of guys try to be safe and still get hurt. It's a dangerous job. People don't realize that. Like I said, they think it's all easy and fast money. But they don't realize what we have to get through to make that money. Like I said, it's hectic. But then when you love it, what can you say? [laughter]

SB: What do you think the people who do not live on the coast should know about what you do here and your life here?

HDB: People that don't live on the coast, me, personally, I feel if it was possible to where more of the population could just go spend two days just to see how this operation goes and all like that, they might have more appreciation for the commercial fishing. Just to see what we have to go through to catch and market the seafood for the public consumption. I've always thought if they were able to see that, they will appreciate us and maybe support us a little bit more than what they normally do. I'm not saying that we don't get support. But for the hardship that we have to deal with, it will be more acceptable and appreciated to know that we are being appreciated. That's just the way I feel about it.

SB: Do you have any thoughts on the future of your community here and the fishing industry, really as a whole on this coast?

HDB: As far as the future, it's hard to say what would happen. Right now, basically, it's ports. You have so many places that are going out of business – excuse me, and thus eliminating the port areas. Places for vessels to port and all is diminishing real bad, just like in Fernandina. We used to have all kinds of packing houses and all in Fernandina. Now, you've only got one. Same thing in Mayport, same thing in St. Augustine. As you move down to the coast, around here, Brunswick, you only got one in Brunswick. That's our city market, which there used to be what, three or four places there in Brunswick. It's hard to find places to pack out and what not for your catch, all up and down the coast. Not just right here, but right all up the coast, right all up North Carolina and all that. It's getting less and less places to pack out. That kind of causes a lot of people to back out of the business. If you noticed, it's been diminishing for years now, less vessel, less people into the industry, the cost of upkeep and all. I understand farmers contribute a lot to the economy as far as the country as a whole, so does the commercial fishermen. So, when the farmers have a bad season, they get relief funds. When the commercial fishermen have a bad season, if they get in a relief fund, this is such an aggravation of trying to get it, to be being approved or whatever for it. Really, every now and then, it may be some type of relief that comes through for the commercial fishermen, which why we can't be put on the same status as a land farmer. We're farming. Our product comes in a seasonal routine. I mean, when the farmers on land gets really a bad year and gets relief, why can't a commercial fishermen get relief from the government? I mean, we're getting taxed on everything [laughter], so, hey. I mean, I can't see the difference. Like I said, we're farming. It's hard. I would say it's harder to keep tabs on the sea life because dealing with water, it's hard to monitor the different sea life, the migrations, and whatnot of it. I know that place, a big part of it, trying to determine where your species is going to be, the highest one to reproduce, and the elements, and all the place that they consider all part of that. I mean, to help the fishermen, yes, I think it needs some assistance. I'm not saying all the time, but when it's something that nature's created and throwback in our industry, help us out. That means a lot to us, just to know that we can get some assistance. You've got a lot of them saying, "We're shy. I'm worrying about it no more. I ain't going to be stressed, deal with higher returns or whatever." That's a big dilemma.

SB: What things do you want to see happen within the next five years, or really just in the near future, change, in order to help you?

HDB: What I would like to see changed is some of the fines or penalties that we have to face for

certain things. I mean, I'm not saying to not penalize us totally. But some of the penalties, even those fines for certain things, I think, is a little outrageous. Like I said, I can understand being penalized if you're inside a line, or even if you're a shooter. That turtle shooter is not shooting the right angle. I can see they penalized for this. As far as the fee for this, some of the fine is outrageous. It costs a lot to get those devices made and built to have on your vessel. Like I said, it's just so much that we've tried – [inaudible] All right. You have your device built. Okay. That costs me a lot. Then yes, you've got to maintain the regulations for that device. You're still working. You're trying to work. So, there's a lot of times you may bind it down more into your job, trying to do your job, and you might overlook some things or just forget about things, slip your mind. Before you know it, you're being checked. "Okay. Well, I checked the metal wall. It's got off and all." But like I said, I think some of the regulations, if it was a little different, not so stiff for this industry. It really hurts us a lot. I mean, I know when they set up laws and whatnot, it has to be enforced. Like I said, the aspect of it is really bad, to me. I would like to see that change. I would like to see market prices a little better, which everybody speaks of that. All of the fisherman speaks of that. I remember some of the prices we get for our product now, we're getting back in the early [19]80s. Like I said, the cost of the upkeep and the prices of the materials and all is a whole lot higher than what it used to be. The more for your product, how can a person make it? That's why, like I said, you're getting less and less boat owners than what it used to be. There are still quite a few boats around, commercial fishing vessel, but a lot of them has gone out of it for sure.

SB: Do you have any advice for the next generation of shrimpers or commercial fishers?

HDB: The only advice that I can give is if you're going to be into this industry, you've got to take pride in it, in your job. Just to be doing it, just say that you're doing something, that's all good and well. But if you aren't taking pride in your work, you aren't going to enjoy it. You're not going to enjoy it.

SB: If you could go back in time, would you change anything about your career choices, or would you still do it?

HDB: Well, maybe. Like I said, the early ages, I tried to get away from this because I didn't want working on the water as a livelihood. From what I see nowadays and from what I know of what I wanted to do and the way it's going today, since then, the early [19]80s, they're making a good money being mechanics. Diesel mechanics, they're getting paid great. If you work regular at that job, you bring home just as much as I do, or more, in a month's time fishing. You've got different wears and tears on the body for different types of job. It might not have been as much of a wear and tear on my body, but I dealt with it. [laughter]

SB: So, you do take pride in what you do?

HDB: Yes.

SB: You enjoy it.

HDB: Yes. I enjoy it. Yes. Every time I tried to get away from this, the mermaid calls me

back. [laughter] I've tried two, three different times throughout my life, to get away from the water. But like I said, once you get used to it and get it in your blood, it's hard to get away from it. I guess that's from the amazement of experiencing different things, sea life, or just the serenity of being on the water and the peace of mind that you get. I don't know what it is, but something keeps calling me back. Come to terms, I guess this has been what I'll be doing until I can't do it no longer, just being around the water, like my dad. Like I said, he owned boats and ran boats. He's done it up until he wasn't physically able to be just going out on the boat's work. So, he started doing network for the guys. When they come in, had a torn-up net or something, he would mend the net for him to make his little money. He stayed around the water. He rounded different guys that were into it. So, that's all I can say about that. I might have to deal with it and enjoy until I can't enjoy it no more.

SB: Earlier, you mentioned that there were a lot of physical but also mental challenges involved with fishing. Can you talk a little bit about the mental challenges?

HDB: Well, the mental challenge. Okay. Cellphones, and this is the worst thing in my days, out on the water. [laughter] Because if you're a family man or whatever, you're out there. You try to stay focused and keep your mind on your job so that you don't get hurt. Then you're getting calls coming out on your phones or whatever, things going on at home. So, that puts a lot of stress on you. You're concerned. You're worrying. You're thinking. You try to keep things on an even keel, and you get distracted. A lot of guys, if they aren't used to it, the fact of being away from land, certainly at the time, they aren't used to that or whatever. It is the captain. Now, that's a stressful job. I'm going to captain the boat that I've been on for the last two years, guiding the owners, been happening ever since I've been with them, about ready to boat for them. I've never really wanted to captain because that's a stressful job, to stay up at that wheel, maintain your course. You're responsible for everything and everyone on the boat. Everything, you're responsible. You're the law. Anything happened, they're coming to you to see what's the problem or what's going on. Then when you do make landfall, all right, it's up to you to see that all the preparations are made for you to make your next voyage, or whatever, your next trip. It is a lot of stress on the captain. Crewmen, they have stress. Like I said, they have enough issues to have to deal with and all. That's why I said that being on the water, the serenity of it, the peace of mind kind of helps. You do get the time to sit back, not being disturbed by someone or being called upon. You've got time to think and clear your head. So, it can be stressful. It really can. So, if you aren't a strong-minded person, then you find it hard to cope with it. That's why I mean it can be a mental stress on you, on the water. A lot of people don't realize it, but it is. It really is. Just like anything else, we've got a lot of stress here on land. [inaudible] to say not to have stress on the water.

SB: I think that was our last actual question. But is there anything that we did not go over that you want us to know or...

HDB: No. Not really. I feel like I've pretty much spoken over a little of everything. So, I'm content with what I've said and the statements I've given.

SB: You do not have any good stories for us? [laughter] I will stay here and listen.

HDB: Good story. I do not know a good story.

SB: I am sure you do.

HDB: Well, [laughter] My good stories, I don't know about them. I've really enjoyed the lifestyle I've lived. I've enjoyed the opportunities of traveling up and down the coast, going into different ports, going to different places. I've always enjoyed that. Getting a chance to go places where I probably wouldn't have gone if I wasn't on the water, especially on the coast. Like, 2012, when I went to Texas and worked a few months over there, that was my first time I ever went to Texas, being on – as far as stopping and spending time and working in the waters over there. That was a change. That was a different experience to see the oil rigs at night lit up like a city. Like I said, to travel the coastlines and work, it was a real experience. I can't grumble about it. I've enjoyed it.

SB: Thank you so much for talking with us today. We do not have any more questions for you.

HDB: All right, dear.

SB: Do you have any questions for us?

HDB: Not really. I'm just hoping that this interview will carry some weight somewhere, as far as to helping us. I don't mind trying to give if that's going to help.

SB: Thank you so much.

HDB: All right. You're welcome.

[end of transcript]