

Erin Scooler: My name is Erin Scooler. I am accompanied by Danielle. I am a student at Georgia Southern University. I am here with Captain Truck conducting an oral history interview as 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 Captain Truck, but could you please confirm that out loud?

Herbert McIiver, Jr: Yes.

ES: Thank you. I have some questions to guide us. But we do want to encourage you to tell the stories that you think we should hear. So, I am going to start with where you grew up and how you got into fishing.

HMJ: I grew up in McIntosh County, a place called Crescent, Georgia, which was a big fishing industry area. How I got started, when I was 8 or 9 years old, my dad was a fisherman so I started out at a young age going out with him during the summer months. It just grew and grew until I got a little older and I started getting paid. I had that as a trade going into the military. When I got out, business was very good still. That was one of my ambitions, to be a shrimp boat captain, always was. I traveled to Mexico and all after I got out of the service fishing as a crewman. In Texas, I finally got a chance to run a shrimp boat. I did that for a couple of years and then an opportunity came that I could have been part owner in one, which was always my ambition. Things were good when I first started and then the economy went bad and things started going south, in other words downhill. It picked back up eventually and I finally bought *The Babe*. The *Mr. Magoo* was my first boat, if everybody familiar with that. You all know anything about the *Mr. Magoo*? I worked there for eight years. Me and my partner we parted ways and I got the chance to go back as a crewman for a few years. Then I got the opportunity to buy a better boat, a bigger boat, which was called *The Babe*. Me and another guy went and partnered with that one, me and another guy named (Red Hagen?) who I had worked with in the Gulf for many years. He saw fit to bring me aboard and I worked it out with him and I wound up owning it. I worked it until about I guess six or seven years ago. Things went bad again. The economy went bad, fuel went off the chain, shrimping went down, imports took over, and everybody was getting a check but me. So, I went back as a crewman on the boat where I can get a check. [laughter] Eventually, I sold it. I sold it about two years ago, a nice, fiberglass boat, and I came to work here. I was working here part-time to start with and now I'm still here.

ES: So, how would you describe your experience working here on the *Bulldog* as a commercial fisherman?

HMJ: Well, first and foremost, I get a steady check. I know what I'm getting, when I'm getting it, and it is always the same all the time. That's what I like about here. I enjoy the people I work around. It's a good environment. Everybody's got everybody back and it's a good experience. It's something different altogether. When I came here, I had to deprogram and reprogram compared to what I used to do. The things were done a little different. Taking care of equipment was a little different. I learned a lot from the guys that were here all the time, the way they do things. A lot more safety issues also, because you're looking out for more besides yourself. You have other people you got to look out for. So, it was a different ball game.

ES: How would you describe your daily routine with the *Bulldog* or just at your work?

HMJ: Oh, well, when we working, more or less like you all saw what we did yesterday, that's just the norm. But then you got maintenance. You got to keep the boat up. You got to keep all chain in the boat. You got to take care of all equipment. You got to paint. There's more to it than just a boat ride because you got to keep all the safety stuff up-to-date at all times. We got an eight-man life (folding?) boat. Every year, you got to take in and get it recertified for safety purposes of that man eight people in case something happens where you have to get overboard. You got to make sure all the pump's working at all times. You got to make sure your generator running. You got to keep the oil change in it because that's all one day away from the dock. All your electronics have to be working. You got to keep your radar up. You got to keep your radios up to par, especially when you're getting way offshore. Other than that, when we're not doing that, then there's other stuff to do on campus. For me and my guy out there, Marty, we like the maintenance crew in the building and on the *Bulldog*.

ES: So, what would you describe as some positive and negative changes in the fishing community over your lifetime?

HMJ: I start with the negative. Well, in the first place as of now in the last few years, the imports been really been a hardship to the fishermen. They drive the prices down and been dumping shrimp in places they shouldn't and then they still get here. There wasn't no TAF at that time. They were paying very little TAF, I'll put it like that. Fuel prices went up off the chain. You had to catch a hell of a lot more shrimp in order to be able to pay for your fuel and your ice. Crew, because of the way things been going and a lot of people going out, been as hard to find a crewman to help maintain the boat and even to work the boat, somebody to work steady. You might get somebody for a week, but after they get paid then you don't see them no more until they get paid as well. It's nothing like it was when I first started. Everybody wanted to do it because things were good. Things were very good. I seen my uncle bought and paid for three boats. But after a while as time went on, as I told you before, everything just went downhill. It began to be less boats, boats disappeared. Say back in the [19]70s, it was maybe close to a thousand boat licenses. In the past year or two, probably fishing, shrimping license in Georgia, probably two hundred and something, maybe three hundred. Some of those are out of state boats. Positive, I'll have to think on that.

ES: Tell me when your mind is not [inaudible] of all the time you need. What do you think the people who do not live on the coast or know about fishing? What do you think that they should know about it to understand what is going on here right now?

HMJ: What's happening right now? A big part of it with the shrimping industry is the price of the shrimp. With the way production is, you have to be able to get paid for what you catch in order to maintain. That's always the bottom line in any business. You have to get paid for your product. Farmers have to get paid. Shrimpers have to be paid. People who do orders or whatever, they got to get paid. If you cannot get the right amount of money, you cannot stay. That's why the sales licenses are down. This couldn't maintain. That's the bottom line on that.

ES: So, when you were a commercial fisherman, what did you fish? What did you focus on?

HMJ: Shrimp.

ES: Shrimp. You are a shrimper?

HMJ: Strictly shrimp.

ES: What are your thoughts on the future of your fishing community and the fishing industry as a whole? Where do you think that is going?

HMJ: Right now, I think it's a dying business. I think it's a dying breed. I think it's going out fast. There's nobody coming in. Only people left doing it now are private owners and there aren't none of their kids or grandkids getting into the business like it used to be a long time ago, like I did with my dad and my brothers and all like that did. Once they die out, that's going to be it. Most of them getting to be seniors.

ES: I am sorry.

HMJ: There's nobody new coming in the business. Once these people that's left, that's going to be the end. It's three guys I'm looking at next door, they're older than I am and they've been in the business a long time and they still got a boat. But if anything happened to them, that'll be it. There won't be nobody taking their place, not in the family. It won't. Like I said, there isn't nobody new coming into the business. The young people don't want to be bothered with it. I know we did it when we were young, but it was good. You could buy new cars, new trucks, send kids to college. It's hard to do that now in the shrimping industry.

ES: What do you think are some of the things that could be done to help prevent the industry from dying out, help the fishing industry into the future?

HMJ: Well, me and Brian went up to MC at McIntosh Academy with (Alameda County, LB and Damont?). We were talking to the superintendent and principal and different ones. We're going to try to get a vocation in schools on shrimping, marine work, fishing and crabbing and have a class like that in high school for kids who not going to college, some kids who not going to finish high school, you got them out there. If you can get them into some of these areas, some of them might pick it up and see the top side of it. Some of them might not do the shrimping pot, but they might do the other side of it. Like do a market or something or market the shrimp, stuff like that. That could bring other people in doing different things. Something like that is what it's going to take.

ES: So, you see is educating the younger generation.

HMJ: Yes.

ES: Industry, making sure that you have – how did you learn how to shrimp?

HMJ: My dad. Young like 9 or 10, I started going out with him, just riding with him in the

summer. As I got older, he started letting me do things, training me to do it, and I wanted to do it. That's something I wanted to do, (cuddling?) the shrimp, running the rigs. A couple of summers were just me and him after I got a little older, 15, 16 like that. It was just me being with him during the summer. He paid me well and when you got money coming, you don't mind working. That's how I got started. Like I said, you looked around, you saw guys older than I am, 20 or so buying new cars or new trucks because they were shrimping. They had a good income and that's what I wanted. So, when I got out of service I said, "Well, that's what I'm going to do." Then it worked for a while. I had the new car, this and that, money put it in the bank and this and that. It went well for a while.

ES: What was your favorite part of learning the process when you were a child?

HMJ: Favorite part about it, probably was getting paid. [laughter]

ES: [laughter]

HMJ: A little humor, but I just liked getting up in the mornings early, seeing the sunrise, riding out. When you're a kid, it's new to you. It's just to get you going. So, I enjoyed that. But when I got where I had to really perform, well, I was a little bit more laid back then. [laughter] But I did what I needed to do. My dad made sure of that. But yes.

ES: What would you say your favorite part is now?

HMJ: About shrimping?

ES: Yes, as well being a part of the business, being in this industry.

HMJ: My favorite part now is eating fresh Georgia shrimp. So, you asked. [laughter] I go around and talk with the guys and give them the input that we have here and let them know what's going on basically and what's being passed on to us. I'm not a Trumper now but I don't burn bridges. I don't slam the door. Any way I can help the guy, that's what I do. So, I enjoy doing that basically. I don't get too much involved in it anymore. Even now when somebody on the weekends, if somebody needs somebody to go in – and that happens a lot – they know I'm off on weekends, they come get me and go. I enjoy going out for a couple of days.

ES: Do you do that often, go shopping and stuff?

HMJ: Usually, in the fall of the year when things fall back here. Maybe it's a couple of weekends out of the month, some guy might come and get me for Saturday and might come and – I don't go that much on Sundays because I go to church on Sundays. But either a holiday I'm off or something, they need somebody, they'll come call me up, say, "Hey, Truck, come and ride with me tomorrow." I enjoy that.

ES: Do you have any kids that come with you?

HMJ: No. I'm the only one that stays shrimping out of my siblings. My brothers, they didn't

ever stay with that. I guess that was a starting trend right there.

ES: Well, would you say that shrimping was a big part of your community as a child?

HMJ: Yes, very much. That's what basically everybody did over in McIntosh. That's where the money was when I was a kid coming up and right on up until I finished school and right on for a while longer, big businesses. Like when I was a kid, Jennifer – she knows who I'm talking about, Charlie Phillips and all around in that area. I don't know if you all have been out there yet or planning to go. It was one, two, three. It was four docks down in Bellville where she talking about, where Pelican Point at, we used to be a fish dock now. Each one of those dock had eight or nine shrimp boat to them, eight or nine each one of them. Now, three of them haven't got no shrimp boats, not near one. Down in Valona where some of you all are probably going to go tomorrow down to the shedding place where the crabs at, I think she plan on taking some of you all out. You all going to change up going down there, if you're not too busy. Down there it was like fifteen, twenty, to the particular dock you guys go into, and the next dock it'll probably be six or seven. Now it's probably three or four to the dock. We had the fifteen and two to the dock next door. They were right next door. It's like from here to that dock over there, that's how far apart they were. Darien probably had forty boats, might have twenty now, maybe. I don't know if it's twenty. Probably more like fifteen. That's how I done appreciate. I done forgot how many have been here in Bellville but there were quite a few.

ES: So, you mentioned that the economy was bad. Can you explain that?

HMJ: The economy?

ES: Yes.

HMJ: How it changed things?

ES: Yes.

HMJ: Can you elaborate that down a little bit more?

ES: Was there one thing that hit you guys the hardest?

HMJ: Fuel.

ES: Fuel?

HMJ: Fuel. The fuel got to be three-sixty a gallon. That was hard to do. Especially working on a boat like what I have and you burning 200 gallons a day. So, you see where I'm coming from. Shrimp isn't even about \$3 a box, a little over three thousand. When I say a box, it's 100 pounds. You got to really be, let's go, and one box a day or 100 pound a day isn't going to get it not when you got to pay the fuel bill, the ice bill, the crew getting a third of that catch for the day. Say you burn 200 gallons of fuel a day, that's \$700. Roughly, that's a seven hundred, that three-fifty. That's an even number. \$700 a day for fuel. You probably won't use a block ice if you don't

catch nothing. But let's say a block ice at \$15 and you don't catch but 200 pounds of shrimp. Let's just say the shrimp is three-fifty a box. When I keep saying box, I mean, 100 pounds. So, what you got \$700 for 200 pounds of shrimp and what we started out with for fuel, \$700. Let's look. You see what I'm saying, right?

ES: Yes.

HMJ: You got \$700, you're paying the crew a third of that, of the \$700 for your shrimp. So, you know what that leaves. But you done burned \$700 with the fuel now. You done took a third of the \$700 for the shrimp. So, what'd that leave? That'd leave what? Four hundred and something, not quite \$500 maybe. Now you didn't hold \$200 on the fuel already. You lost \$200 that day. You can't do that too many days. So, you just go and try for three days. You done lost your ass. [laughter] Then that make you where you don't have the ambition to want to try another day because you know you're steady backing up. That affects you mentally as well. You say, "Well, do I need to go today or don't I need to go today? Or should somebody else go today and let me know whether or not I need to go tomorrow?" That's what put a lot of people out of business, no profit. It's just simple math. That's the way it is. Then you could go out there and catch \$3,000 worth of shrimp. But if keep going, going, and going for a week, the next three days or four days you don't catch nothing. You done messed up the profit you made the first day. So, it got to be where you had to fish smart. You heard of that? That's what it wound up being, you had to fish smart. That's what it is now, you have to fish smart. When fuel was in 60 in the upper part of the nineties coming up to ninety, I think fuel was 60 or 70 cents a gallon. See, that what guys were used to. You put \$3 to that. You all bought gas back then, now you all might not have a car. You all were kids but you understand what I'm saying?

ES: Yes.

HMJ: You got cars now. So, you all understand what I'm saying. You watch the gas pump all the time. I know you look for the cheapest one. So, that's what put a lot of people out of business. That's putting them all in. Then see, you got upkeep. You got to have money to keep the boat up. You got to have money for equipment. Nets costing you \$1,800 apiece. You got cable you got to buy. You got rope you got to have. You got mechanic you got to have if something goes wrong to work on your motor. You got to have a welder every now and then. You already going in the hole with the fuel, so where's the money coming from to do those things, have good equipment? That's what did it. When the economy went crazy and the fuel went high, you couldn't maintain. A lot of fellows couldn't fix things on the boat so they could go to work because they weren't making no money. Even if they had some, you keep going and they getting something out and they aren't putting nothing back in there, you'll be in the soup line. [laughter] If you aren't putting nothing in there, you can't go get nothing out. That was the bottom line to most of it, that was it. If you don't go regular enough, you can't expect to keep a crew because they got to feed their family. So, I'm not making no money here, that's just like you getting on a job and they aren't paying you right, you're going to go someplace else and find work. So, that's where the crew problem come in at. They have to move on to something else.

ES: So, earlier you were telling me about how you started and what you went throughout your career as a fisherman. So, you owned the boat and you decided to go back to being a crew

member.

HMJ: Yes.

ES: Is that one of those reasons why?

HMJ: Everybody was better than I was in business, that's when the economy went like it was. I went almost bankrupt. So, I went fishing with somebody that I knew I could get a paycheck. I was right on the edge of that. I was paying everybody else and when it all boiled down, I didn't have anything. I had to do something different, like I just said. I came here. I got a paycheck every week. [laughter]

ES: Do you have any favorite stories from when you were partial owner or when you were a crew member?

HMJ: Stories, well I've had some good times on the back of a boat. I've made some good money when things were good going to a place called (Condo and nine?) in Mexico. We've caught on an eighteen-day trip or something like that, as much as one-sixty boxes that's 100 pounds. When I say boxes, I'm talking about 100-pound boxes. We did that good and the Texas the same way. It's been some good times. A lot of times we got paid good for them and a lot of times we didn't. Lot of times you come and you think you can get one thing and the price drop. So, you don't ever know when the price drops, it's never the same. Most of the time in this business, if you go to catching some, a good bid and buy as hell about it, they back off the prices. You never know what you're going to get.

ES: Are there any changes that are happening in the community right now? Like efforts that make you hopeful for the future of fishing?

HMJ: Well, I'll tell you I don't know because they come up with so many different regulations, putting different things in the net. Like you got to put the starters in here, then you want to put a fish out here, and then they want you to do this and the coastguard wants you to do that. Buy more safety gear and this and that and the other. That's aggravating to the guys too. It's all good now. It's all for the good but I'm all for safety. But sometime it's a little bit too much over the hill with some of it. But there isn't anything we can do there to bureaucracy, that's just government.

ES: Do you plan on doing this until you retire?

HMJ: Yes. But I don't think I'll go back shrimping for myself. No, I don't think I'll buy another boat, not if I want to stay married, if you understand that. [laughter] She isn't going to let me do that no more. See, when you going up and down, they go up and down with you. Your family is involved also with the stress and everything else go along with it.

ES: What is that like having family involvement with fishing?

HMJ: Pardon?

ES: So, what is that like with having family involvement with fishing?

HMJ: Oh, it's just like I just said, when it's good, it's good and when it's bad, it's bad. If your wife sees you not doing good, she's not doing good. That's just the way it is in any marriage.

ES: You guys had to move?

HMJ: Yes. They went with me to Texas a couple of times. We'd go over there just seasonal during the summer, yes, I'd bring them over when the kids were young. She'd been to Key West but not permanently, just visiting basically while I'm away from home. But I was born and raised in McIntosh County and I hope to die there. [laughter]

ES: Well, do you have anything you would like to ask us or tell us anything that you want to have recorded?

HMJ: Well, I just hope whatever you are doing, the word gets out to the public and they can get involved and might be more concerned about the shrimpers and the fishermen and all that and see what all they go through to keep fresh shrimps on the market. Because there's nothing better than fresh Georgia wild-caught shrimp, always remember that. I know you all can't be fooled. You all are from Savannah; you all know what's good. [laughter] You all know farm-raised shrimp from regular Georgia wild-shrimp, I think, don't you? Yes, there's a difference. There's a big difference. Matter of fact, I don't even eat shrimp when I go out to a restaurant. I don't order shrimp. I don't because I know I can get me some fresh shrimp anytime I get ready almost and I know what I'm getting. But you go some restaurants today, supposed to tell you nowadays but some of them don't. Even when you go to the market, they got to tell you. They got to have the label of what you're getting. Now, either you ask them. You're allowed to ask what you're buying. That's the law now. But you get to see where they're selling fresh, wild Georgia shrimp. It's the best. It costs a little more but it's better to get those because you don't know what you're getting from Thailand and Belize and all those places and China. That's a long way to bring them and keep them in condition. You aren't getting nothing. Picture time.

ES: [laughter]

Danielle Sayre: Thank you for your time today.

ES: Thank you.

DS: Really appreciate it.

HMJ: I appreciate you all. Glad I can help.

[end of transcript]