

Amber Gosser: So, just to start out again, my name is Amber. I am here with Savannah. We are – it is Marty, right?

James Martin Higgins: Yes, it's Marty.

AG: We are here with Marty in his office as part of this Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures Oral History Project. I have already received informed consent and permission to record you, but I just want to get on the tape you just letting us know that that is okay.

JMH: Yes, ma'am.

AG: Thank you. So, the first question that we have for you is, can you just tell us a little bit about where you grew up and what your childhood was like with your family and community and everything?

JMH: Well, I grew up here in Brunswick. My daddy always fished too, shrimp fish. All of his side of the family, that was what they did.

AG: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got into fishing?

JMH: I just started when I was young and going with him. Then I quit a time or two. I went to work doing other stuff and came back, and shrimping would be good. Then I came to work with East Peace with the university.

AG: What was fishing like when you first started? Can you tell us about some of the experiences you had?

JMH: Well, it was better. You made more money, seemed like back then. It went further too, back then. Everything cost more now. That was back in the [19]70s and early [19]80s. I believe the industry was in way better shape than it is now.

AG: What type of fishing did you and your family do? Did you do shrimping, crabbing?

JMH: Yes, mostly shrimping.

AG: Did you have your own boat, or did your family have a boat?

JMH: Daddy didn't ever have his own boat. He was probably 60 years old. He was always working on other people's boats. He would always work on other people's boats.

AG: What impacted your decision to get into fishing? Was it just a family thing, or did you just decide that was what you wanted to do? Tell me a little bit about how you got into it.

JMH: Well, that's what I said. I'd do this. I had to know if the money was better. Then I could always kind of fall back on that if I had to. How it worked. I'd go shrimp a year or two. Then go off and do something else and then wind back up there. It's just something that my dad

always did, my family, his side of the family, all of them did. They still do what's left.

AG: So, can you tell me a little bit about what your day was like when you were out shrimping? What time did you get up? What exactly did you all do throughout the day?

JMH: Get early start, got to be dragging at daylight or whenever the legal time was, according to where you were at. I don't know, hope you catch something. It is a full day. Most of the time, me and him just working, me and him on a boat. But if you've got time, you might clean some fish to cook for breakfast or something. But a lot of days, it's just, you don't get according to what you're catching, and how much, buy catch and all that. It just, with jelly balls, a lot of days, you don't drag over. I've seen where you didn't drag probably 20 minutes and pick back up. You don't get much done that day, picking up shrimp.

AG: How has your personal involvement with shrimping changed over the years? I know you said you used to work on a boat and then you have been working here.

JMH: Well, that was kind of we never made no bunch of money here. It was regular. But then you're still involved with the industry too. A lot of times, trying new stuff and riding shrimp boats, commercial boats, trying stuff and stuff like that. So, you're still heavily involved in. That's a good thing about it. That's got benefits too. When you're young like you all, you're not worried about it. When you're getting on up but then you get to thinking.

AG: You mentioned that there were benefits to shrimping. What types of benefits are you talking about?

JMH: Yes, I was talking about the benefits here, but with shrimping you're just kind of doing your own thing. Ain't nobody standing over your shoulder, wanting you to get this done. Or you get something in your mind. You want to do it. You can go on and do it. You don't have to check with nobody else, what needs doing, kind of telling you what to do. You know what I'm saying?

AG: Do you have any interesting memories about growing up on the water or just from fishing industry in general? Is there anything that really just stands out to you as a good memory?

JMH: It has been a bunch of fun at times. That's good. But a lot of stuff's happened over the years. I just hate to see the industry go the route it's went. It's kind of pitiful in a way. I don't know. I tell people that back in the early [19]80s, just everybody been trying to put them out of business. You wonder who, because they started with turtle shooters and all. That weeded some of them out. Then right after turtle shooters got started, they always lose a bunch of boats in the northeast, in the North Pacific. Then all kinds of safety and Coast Guard rules and regulations come along. A bunch of them get aggravated and quit, but some of them keep on trying. Fisheyes, we called them. Bycatch reduction devices, that started up. Some more of them got mad and quit. With these shrimp price, when you start, you can make it as hard on somebody as you can. Try to get them to get out of business. When you stop paying them, ain't much choice. Yu know what I'm saying? Like somebody is behind the price business. If you can't get paid, it don't matter how tough you've tried and fought and clawed to try to stay in business or make a

living, but when they cut your money out, that's it. When I was a young one, there were about six of these shrimp houses like you all went to today. This whole river was shrimp boats. I don't know how many when I was young, probably seventy, eighty, it might've even been a hundred. I don't know. People's tough, but that's what I say. When I quit paying them, that winds it up. It doesn't matter what you can put up with or adapt to, if you ain't making money, you can't do it. That's about what price has done to them.

AG: So, going along to, I guess, right now in the present, is fishing important to this community still? How so, and how have you seen that change over time?

JMH: Yes. Well, ain't the money ain't involved in it no more. The money, hell out I don't know how long ago it was, I went and was going to buy a different house. When my wife filled out all the papers and all, that man told me, he said, "Well, I've just glanced over your application." He said, "You didn't have much income last year. You did the year before, but you didn't have much last year." He said, "What is it you do?" I said, "I shrimp fish." He is, "Oh, that's been forty years ago that happened." They weren't even worried about it because used to, you'd make it back up. That don't ever happen. It seemed like even with the black gill and all too, now, it's just the price if they could get a good decent price. When I came in [19]85, we were getting about \$7 for a few years, 6.50, 6.25 for the same shrimp. Now they get like 4.84, 4.50 a pound. It's just hard to make it.

AG: So, you talked a little bit about the negative changes as far as prices and stuff. Have you seen any positive changes happen in the past few years?

JMH: No, I don't know. It ain't near as many boats, so that gives you more air. You don't have to compete as much as it used to be. So, if you are working, that's a little advantage to it. But if you ain't making no money, it ain't no difference. These little areas where I know everything changes, but there's a place that down there what we call the bottom of St. Andrew's sound in there. I know I have seen like twenty-five or thirty boats in there getting a low water before and there ain't no bigger this sound down here. Everybody kind of worked together. Now it might go by a week before anybody even goes and tries them. It just ain't no boat to do it. With fuel and the price, you don't go do much looking around to find them. You just have to go where you for sure thing more or less.

AG: What do you think are some of the causes of these changes?

JMH: Like I say, it could be the environment. The price is the main thing, that shrimp price. If that was up like it used to be, you could look around more. You could work longer with fewer shrimp if there were fewer. Then I reckon that black gill is what's done away with a bunch of it in the fall of the year. We don't hardly have no fall season no more. That used to be the biggest time of the year. Everybody worked on the fall shrimp. That's when most of the money was made. That ain't happening in three or four years.

AG: So, can you tell me some of the rewarding aspects of your career?

JMH: I reckon most people tell you being on the water. That's a good thing too. All the people

you meet, most of these people in the shrimping industry, I know them when I was a little young. The university is trying to help them stay in business. That's kind of what we've done, more of than anything else, the last six, eight years, ten years, is trying make sure that all their equipment's legal and help them with safety stuff and whatever. Help them try to be competitive in the business. If I tell you he appreciates it and all that's kind of rewarding, it ain't nothing. You ain't going to get, ain't no monetary value to it, but that's what you get rewarded with. That's a good thing.

AG: Can you tell me a little more about being on the water as far as being a reward? What is it you personally like about being on the water?

JMH: I reckon just this pretty sight. I reckon it's just better than being in a building.

AG: You talked a little bit about the community and how it is affected by the shrimping industry. Is there anything you'd like to tell younger people or people who are not necessarily from this community about the industry? What knowledge do you have that you wish people had?

JMH: Well, it's kind of hard to – I've got three boys. They used to go till they got grown because I was working here. My daddy had a boat. They'd go with him. But they branched out into other stuff because you don't know. It's just so way more unpredictable than it used to be. I don't know. That's one thing too, hard to reckon, is the youngest person you all talk to today, how old was they? Fifty-five?

AG: Not even older than that.

JMH: It was hard business to make a living in. You take a young fellow, and seem like everybody wants to do good, to start with. There are a few young fellows in the business still, but it ain't like it used to be. Somebody grew up working on a boat with their daddy. Then they'd have to work back. Like people my age, that's before we had plotters and all that on there, didn't have all that. Mostly, where you're dragging, you'd have to line something up on a hill and all to be in a slew, like a water tower in the base of a clump of trees or something. You had to learn all that. Keep from hanging up and tearing your nets up. Now you can go down there and turn that all those electronics on and just go. But a fellow worked with his daddy for years, or with an uncle or something, start running his own boat, get good at it, and then he'd end up buying him a boat. That's few and far between now. I don't know what could bring it back.

AG: So, based on everything that you have just talked about, what do you see being the future of the fishing industry in this community?

JMH: I think we need to try something different because we got a lot of inside waters too. We don't have nothing like the panel coast sound up, but whole Georgia coasts got what we call sounds separate ones. Back in the [19]70s, there was a push to shut them, to close them. You all know about that. You all heard about that? Yes.

All the fishermen and everybody was far because you've got so many people would come from other states when the sounds was open. So, they pushed and got it closed. It seemed like this

just went downhill ever since that happened. A lot of these boys will tell you that because back then when they closed them sounds, we probably didn't have a tenth as many people living right there in the edge of the marsh like they are now and all these golf course. They think there's a lot of chemicals settling in the sand, and these rivers are causing it. But I don't know what the answer is. That could be an idea. Then a fellow could get him a smaller boat and put a limit on it in the sound. Just try it for a few years and see. Let's say, two 25-foot nets or something, and just open one or two, and let it just see if staring it back up and letting the tide might carry some of them contaminants out. So, about the whole industry feels that way, I'm pretty sure. Try something.

AG: So, other than what you already mentioned, what other things do you think could happen in the next five years to, I guess, revive the industry a little bit?

JM: That'd be one of the main things right there. Because you could take a smaller boat and wouldn't burn near as much fuel. You could go there. I think if they just tried it, that you might want two down at the center of Georgia, maybe one or two at the other end around Savannah, all that development and all around there. Just see if that could help. Just sound here, but all we got up going on here just try to do something about that price. Everybody likes to come to the coast and go to the beach and all eat shrimp. The price is what's the worst thing I believe.

AG: So, we talked a bit about your experiences out on the fishing boat. Could you tell me a little more about your experiences working here?

JMH: It's been good. I've enjoyed. Over the years, we got it. When I first came here, the shrimping was starting to get bad then. They were starting to do a bunch of work, trying to find shrimp boats, something to do. In the off-season, maybe you want to call it that, when there wasn't no shrimp around, a lot of boats would go to Gulf certain times of the year. Some of them will go to North Carolina, up and down the beach to Florida and South Carolina. But they were trying to more diversify food longline and offshore and fish trawling offshore. All that got stopped. The government brought all that to a hold. That's what these people was doing a lot of work, trying to develop offshore fisheries, something you could do with the shrimp boats when shrimping season wasn't in. They just did bottom longline. That's what the sand fish dragging a fish trawl, like in the wintertime. . . Everybody complained about it. We went all up and down the coast. They were having hearings we'd go to. First thing they wanted to start was the fish trawling, bottom trawling for grouper. We'd be in there for public hearings and talking to people. You didn't have it, maybe three boats in Georgia and maybe three or four in South Carolina and nine in Florida. Then boys in North Carolina, they still got a trawl fisher up there, and all the people would be in hearings, to snap a boat, the hook fishermen and the longline fishermen. Oh, you all need to stop that fish trawling. I remember, they stopped. Captain Dave Hadden used to work there. He was a big spokesman as far as helping fishermen all up and down in the whole southeast. So, they stopped that. About a year or two later, they were having meetings with him and the longline fishermen. They were fixing [inaudible]. That was part of stopping it. Because we did it on a commercial basis because they were competing with the shrimp fishing industry. They put the money back to the projects, see. I remember one of the public hearings, he told them. He said, "You all are laying together now." He said, "But once they get the foot in the door, that's it." Sure enough, once he told that to one of the public

hearings, I see him in there having a meeting with him. They run them off too. So, he just picked out one group at a time. That's what I say there didn't many shrimp boats do it, but it was outlets and fish trapping. They stopped all of that, I'm pretty sure. I ain't really sure. That's one of the most selective fisheries you got. It's been a change since I was young.

AG: So, what do you hope to see in the next generation of commercial fishermen?

JM: I hope it gets better where you ain't got to work and work and work and still worrying about if you're going lose your boat or your house. It's just easing people's mind when it gets like that. They always just make ends meet without having to work, as long as you're making a little bit of improvements, getting caught up a little bit. So, a lot of boats they still do good, but as far as just the bunch of us around here, like the ones that always made a good living around here, you can hardly make a living, to live yearlong, out, two or three months out of the year. I don't know what would change.

AG: I have just a little question. I have fond memories, growing up, of the summers fishing with my granddaddy. So, I do kind of understand the whole fishing with your dad or shrimping with your dad. Do you have any fond memories of you going out shrimping with your dad and everything?

JMH: Yes, he used to. I remember standing on a stool so I could see the steer. [laughter] I enjoyed it. That's what I say, back then, there was more money involved. It made it more fun. So, it wasn't about, if you were going to catch enough today to pay for the fuel. Back in them days, fuel was cheap too. Well, I remember one time I was on a boat with him. We bogged up. When he come back to help me take up, he didn't take the pilot out of gear. Just forgot. It broke the steering gear up the stern. We got everything up and put on deck. It was the tide. We were drifting with the tide. I said, "What we going to do now?" He said, "Well, we'll get it." He came back there with the compass. We've all seen it, I guess. I got down in that hatchet, the back. I just sat. There's a quadrant in there. It's got chains going to it. It tore all that up when it tore one of the blocks up going to the cop quadrant. He just gave me the compass. He said, "Set that down there on the horn to him." I just sat, and he stood over at the thing. I couldn't even see him. He said, "I'm going to go speed up". He went in there and fed the motor up. He just stood at the hatch, and I was sitting. I was watching that compass and holding that quadrant. That's a big old thing, like a half of a circle. He tells me, he said, "Go five more degrees to the left and hold it there, ten degrees to the right." I have gotten lost perception of time just sitting there looking at that. He'd walk off every now and then. He'd come back, swing a little bit this way or that way. He said, "Because you all can hear that water down there, that water's rushing by because you're sitting right behind the propeller sitting there, see?" He said, "You going to know when I slow down what you would because it'll slow up." He said, "If I go back up, you can hear the shaft kind of turn." He said, "If I put it neutral, you just turn it loose because I'm going to back up if I have to." We've been coming like that about an hour and a half probably. I said, "Odd." He walked off again, and I could tell he slowed way down. Then I heard the shaft quit turning, and I knew he took it out gear. So, I turned the quadrant loose. He backed up. It's because that wheel, when you back up, it'll suck it one way or the other. He backed up. I didn't know if we had a bridge and all to go through to get to the dock. When I went over there and climbed up the ladder, stuck my head out the hole, he was catching a line on the dock right there like we just tied

up yesterday. He just eased right in there, told we've come through the bridge. I didn't even know what when went through the bridge. He was just telling me which way to go. Stuff like that you remember that. Most people just quit and call somebody to come, and he wasn't going to do that.

AG: Did you learn everything from your dad?

JMH: A lot of it was from his daddy too. My granddaddy on the other side of the family, he used to run a steamboat from Macon to Augusta. He did that one with him and my grandmother. They hauled whatever people, or they haul people on it. It's a three-store just like you see years ago, and hauled product down the river. Then they go to Savannah. They stop. I think they stopped like Macon, and Lumber City was a big stop for the steamboat back then. Then they stop there and then go up the coast and go up to Savannah River, all the way to Augusta, just a regular route. People rode it back in the railroads. Railroads put most of that out of business. They got more tracks laid and carried people more places. Learned a lot from him too.

AG: You showed us that picture earlier of your great-grandfather who was a wheelman.

JMH: Yes, my great-grandfather.

AG: How exactly did your family get from, I guess, there to here, and how did they switch industry from whaling to shrimping?

JMH: I don't know. He just made his home down here because he was working here in the wintertime. I don't know. My granddaddy just took up shrimp and all that. He was young. I got a postcard at the house because everybody, they always say that Fern is the birthplace of the shrimping industry. That's to say, and I got a postcard that's from like 1916. It showed a bunch of younger boys sitting there on the dock. It says, "The Shrimping Fleet of Fern Florida." But my granddaddy's sitting there with them. He said, "They were just the down that way shrimping, and the people took the picture out there." He said, "They didn't hardly have no boats down there. They'd go from here down there and shrimp." Because I reckon, he just started shrimping. Wayland, I think, it was on the way out by then.

AG: So, I know we talked a little bit about it, but the title of this whole project is Fishing Traditions and Fishing Futures. So, what do you think is the future of the fishing industry, and where do you see it going?

JMH: I don't really know unless that's what I say, it's just look like this coast hand with that black guild ain't ever going to be nothing you can do about that. That's nature, that's cold that maybe if we get a few more of these cold winters like this year maybe that'll help do something, help with that. Then if they could try something that was like I was talking about maybe get another, I used to call them a mosquito fleet. All them little boats that worked in sound if they could and that maybe it could be an offspring part of the industry. Because like over in Louisiana, some of the Gulf states, they have an inshore fishery steel. They've always had it and still do pretty good with all their landings. You've just got to regulate it, and they got one in Florida, inshore. The fellows make money. They take the little, like a 30-foot boat, a little than

that, and pull two little nets, and see if I'd help clean the sounds up or maybe start another fishery. But you ain't never – because you get a lot of people, things. It's changed since I was even in high school, big time. You've got people around here. I'm making rules and regulations and pushing for laws. They don't even know what was here ten years ago or twenty years ago because they weren't here. They don't know what it was like. Pole fish regulations, that's a big thing. Recreational fishermen, they see shrimp boat dragging and, oh, hell, he's killing everything and is going to be hard to get something like that done. But we used to catch plenty of pole fishing when I was growing up too. Right there you'd be in the edge of the sound shrimp boats. I mean, big boats like that would be working in the sand and have like – that's before they started with four nets – they'd have like 270-to-80-foot nets. They'd be right at the back end. It was open to anybody. We still caught plenty of pole fish and all back in. So, I don't see why they wouldn't want to at least try it.

AG: Earlier you mentioned bogged up.

JMH: Yes.

AG: What exactly does that mean?

JMH: That means one that dug in the bottom, more or less stopped, you see. You pull the boat around. A lot of times, it'll do that, getting that right, how them sand riffles are, or maybe the bottom will be a little muddier. It'll dig in. Then you've got to be easy and try to keep them tearing your net up and pull back and just be real easy taking up. That's what it caused us to tear the steer up.

AG: Then pole fish.

JMH: Recreational fishing, that's pole fishing.

AG: I didn't know if it was just a really tiny fish [laughter]. I didn't know if it was just like a tiny skinny fish.

JMH: No, pole fishing, with a fishing pole.

AG: Okay, I got you now

JMH: Shrimp fishing and pole fishing.

AG: Nice. Something new. Then you said 78 feet net. So, is that how long the net is?

JMH: No, across the mouth?

AG: Is It from like door to door?

JMH: From door to door, and you take the net. Generally, you'll get like 60 percent spread out of however it measures. It won't be that wide on the bottom. I was just using that for instance,



like that little trawl net in like ten foot that we had yesterday across the mouth. See it probably, but a lot of fellows pull four nets, two on each side.

AG: At the same time?

JMH: Yes.

AG: How did he not get tangled?

JMH: It does sometimes, but it works. They caught on over on the East Coast. I was in about the tenth grade of school probably. My daddy quit fishing for a while and worked for these people. I went with him to Texas, and we rode on a boat that the man had kind of perfected it. He started it, doing it itself. It still wasn't maybe a third of the boat in the Gulf was doing it, not many. Me and daddy went over there and made a trip out of freeport with him, took pictures and watched them and then come back here. Then through the University of Georgia, him and Captain Dave, they kind of got it started on East Coast. You take maybe two boats, comparative horsepower and with configuration. You can get more spread with the same power is what it amounts to. Because pulling them doors is fighting, and if you got even like I'll show you all the thing in on the wall, which you're holding up on everything from the middle of both the nets on each and then the doors, maybe having to work as hard to hold it open. So that's helps you and you get a little more spread out, add the nets and that way you might save a little fuel and you might cover just a little bit more ground. I'll show you when we walk back in there.

AG: We would love to see those pictures you all took.

JMH: What pictures of those?

AG: You said you took those pictures, and you all brought them back to show how he was fishing in Texas.

JMH: Yes, I don't know if [inaudible].

AG: I do not think we have any more questions for you, but if there is anything that we did not ask that you want to talk about or is important for you to.

JMH: No, I think you all pretty much covered it.

AG: Thank you so much. Did you have any questions for us?

JMH: No, ma'am.

AG: Thank you so much for –

JMH: Yes, ma'am.

AG: – letting us talk to you.

[end of transcript]