

Erin Scooler: My name is Erin Scooler. I am accompanied by Scott. I am a student at Georgia Southern University. I am here with Marcus 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 Marcus McCall, but could you please confirm that out loud?

Marcus McCall: Yes.

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

MM: I was born in Savannah. My grandfather owned Morgan's Shrimp Packers. He had three packing houses: one in Liberty County, one in Key West Florida, and one in Freeport, Texas. Over the span of the years, he had – he probably had sixty boats. Both my mother and father owned boats. Mama had six or seven. Daddy had seven, eight, nine boats. I don't even know how many exactly. My brother had several. Uncles all had boats, dozens. So, I was just born into it pretty much. It wasn't something I chose to do. It was something [laughter] that I was born into and didn't venture anywhere else. In the beginning, it was real enjoyable. It still is. I don't know that I would do anything else at my age. I'm going to be 53 years old. I've been in it all my life pretty much. I've tried a few other things, school, certified to weld, and scuba diving and stuff, but I always came back to fishing.

ES: How did your involvement with the fishing industry change over the years? When did you get into commercial fishing? What did you do?

MM: I worked with my brother in the summers on his boat. I was always around the fish house growing up, helping around the fish house. But in the summers, I worked with him on his boat until I got out of school. I went to work with him for two years, and I started running boats. At, what was it, 27 years old, I got the first boat and had it for thirteen, fourteen years. It sank for some unknown reasons. I stopped here in Brunswick, Georgia in 1993 or something, yeah, something like that – 2003, excuse me. I've been running boats for other people ever since.

ES: So, on an average day, what is your routine like out on the water? What do you do?

MM: The average day? Up early, up late, long hours. From the time we start up in March, late March, which would be about – it's about now we'd start back fishing, working low waters in the daytime, row shrimp. From now until – middle of March until late January, stay fishing all the time. I work seven, eight days at the time, come home, unload, take a day off, and go back. I pretty much live in the – I do live in the ocean.

ES: What is it you focus on? Shrimp?

MM: Shrimp. I've had targeted other stuff, spiny whelks or conchs, as they're better known. I've been jelly balling, scallops. Went a couple years to Virginia and sea scalloped, but pretty much targeted mainly shrimp. I crabbed – when I was young, I crabbed, built crab traps, 10

years old until I graduated. It was a supplement for my play money when I was a pre-teen and teenager. It's what I bought my first vehicles with is pulling crab traps and pulling a shrimp net on the weekends, because you didn't have time during the week to do it. On the weekends, I'd take a little speedboat and go out and drag on the beach with shrimp net. From the time I was 13, I've just always been involved in some kind of fishery.

ES: Where would you say you learned your skills from, in fishing, shrimping? From your father, your grandfather?

MM: Mostly from my brother and father, and thirty-five years of hands-on running boats myself.

ES: Is fishing central to the community you live in now?

MM: Not like it used to be. From what I've – I moved down here to Brunswick in 1991. I'd been living in Liberty County. When my grandfather had the fish house in Liberty County to fish. His business grossed more, than the timber industry did back then. His fish house was the first million-dollar grossing industry. That was back in the early [19]40s. I've been in it quite some time. But as far as the community, no, it's not like it used to be. To my understanding, Brunswick used to be a very booming fishing port. It's been on a great decline ever since I moved here. Fish house after fish house after fish house have closed. There were two, three, four, five, I think seven fish houses in full operation when I moved down here. What is there, one left? There were probably eighty or a hundred boats in this port. I don't think there are twelve left now that actually work. So, it's definitely on the decline.

ES: What would you say would be the cause of that decline in the fishing community?

MM: [laughter] There is no one great cause. Lots of hard work, little gratification in comparison to other occupations today. Regulation has a lot do with it. The difference in the money for the effort is a great contributor to the decline. For the hours we put in, it's very minimal income for the hours, for the hours I work a year. I make good money, but the hours are unreal.

ES: What would you think would be the positive and negative changes to the fishing industry as you have been in it over the years?

MM: Positive changes. The negative changes that are going to happen or that have happened but a lot of it. The positive changes would be – the big thing that we're fighting right now is sharks. The biggest impact we have on the cause of excess work and loss of income is from shark damage to our gear, which has come from a regulation on the shark fishery in the over-abounding population of sharks today, which there's a great controversy between what they say there is, as sharks, and what we actually see. The amount of sharks is – I've been in it all my life. I've never seen this many sharks from Virginia to far as you want to go around the panhandle, in the Gulf, just everywhere. Damage to the gear and loss of product, downtime, repairing gear is the big thing that is a downside. Something that would help us tremendously is something to lessen the shark damage to our gear. I don't see them changing the regulations to allow harvest

to sharks.

Scott Clark: That is a recent thing?

MM: The last ten years, I used to – didn't even have chafing gear on my tail's bags, on my nets. It got to where we had to put chafing gear on the tail bags, keep sharks from biting them. Now, we've had to put chafing gear on the nets to keep them from eating the nets. I've got some video on the phone that it was – God, I don't know if I got. I don't think I have any on there. But it would absolutely scare you to see the shark population in real life. It's scary. I don't know why they have increased in numbers the way they have, other than there's no fishery on them now, very little effort on the harvest of sharks. Back, years ago I know there wasn't a whole lot of effort on it. So, I don't know why today, they're so much more prone to eating our nets. If it's the lack of boats there, and to fish availability, from our bag of catch being discarded, it's not enough for the population, so they started biting nets or...

SC: Several different types of sharks?

MM: A bunch of – I mean, I've caught sharks this year that I generally do not see around here. A lot of thrasher sharks, bull sharks. I've caught seven or eight Great Whites here this year. Blacktips, lemon sharks, bonnets, hammerhead, every species of shark you can imagine. The big problem with the biting is the Blacktips. I don't know about the rest of them, but you can see the Blacktips just eat – they'll chew on the nets all the way to the boat, right until you pull the bags up, gnawing on the nets, the bags. That's what I've been doing all day, is mending nets people have brought me that got eat up over the year and putting heavy webbing over the net itself to help curtail the shark bites on the nets. That's what I do in the wintertime when we're not fishing, is repair nets and build nets for people. I could stay busy year-round just doing shark bite repairs. It was never like that when I was growing up. I don't even like to think about going swimming anymore. I used to jump off the boat anytime, anywhere. Not today. Right here in this river last year, they caught countless big 8-, 10-, 12-foot bull sharks right here in this river, right off the dock.

ES: What do you think people, the younger generation that do not live on the coast, that do not know about what is happening in the fishing community or the heritage, what do you think is the most important thing that they should understand about what is happening here?

MM: They would have to first have an understanding of what the fishery used to be like. I believe to even know – to see the difference in what it was like and what it is like now, to have a comparison. Because if they don't know what it used to be like, the input of the fishery into the community, the decline of it, and the decline of the money into the community today, without a knowledge of the past, they would have no knowledge of what the impact – the decline it has today. So, you'd have to have a knowledge of the past and what it used to be. Most of them don't have a clue of what the fishery used to be to the communities around here.

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

MM: You going to have diehards like me that's going to fish until the end. I don't see a lot of young people going into the industry that weren't, like me, born into it. The only people that really get involved in the industry are people's children who were born into it. Most of the people try to go shrimping or think they might like it. A couple of days of it is usually enough for them. The long hours and the work pretty much ends it for most of them. I don't see a whole lot of young people being interested in it. With the amount of work involved and the way the newer generation wants everything given to them, I just don't see it. It's more work – it's more a way of life than the way to make a living for most of us now.

ES: How do you think the fishing community and the industry should go about trying to get young people to come and be a part of it? What are some ways that you think work?

MM: Sure, there's some people – there's some that would probably enjoy it. Like I said, the work involved in it, most people don't want anything to do with that amount of work for – you have to really love your job to want to work that daggone hard for the little payoff as we get from it. I made more, in perspective, when I was 17, as far as the dollar, shrimping, than I do today. I make more money. But the money in comparison, economy-wise, is – I don't see any lure for younger generation to the industry. Nobody wants to work that hard.

ES: What is it that draws you to this industry and keeps you here even though there is so little payment for all the work you put in? What is it that you love about being a fisherman?

MM: For me, it's freedom, being my own boss. I don't have to listen to a whole bunch of – other than the little bit of time at the – coming and going. The time on the ocean, to me, is – you can't buy that kind of freedom, peace. I'm not in it for the money anymore. [laughter] I ain't going to get rich in it. So, I'm here.

ES: What would you say rewarding part being a fisherman?

MM: Like I said, the freedom, the peace of mind, the tranquility of being in the ocean, nothing like the sunset, the sunrise, and Mother Nature.

ES: What kind of things could happen in the next five years that would help the fishing industry flourish or just improve?

MM: Oh, mercy. The imports were a big crunch on the dollar for us, having to compete with shrimp produced at half the price or half the cost, being flooded in the market, and regulations. As I said earlier, the impact of the sharks is the big thing. That's a problem for us today. That's more costly than anything, recently, is the impact of the sharks on us. The regulations on the gear, we've pretty much gotten used to, learn how to deal with the TEDs, and make them work efficiently. That's no big deal. Actually, they've helped improve the quality of the catch because they don't get mutilated by all the bycatch, the heavy stuff, crabs and horseshoe crabs and big fishes and just trash in general. It has improved the quality of the shrimp. I don't know that you could tow out there today without turtle shooters, with the change and the amount of stuff that's – the horseshoe crab are way more plentiful now than I've seen in previous years when I was growing up, which I don't – there was times that they were real thick, but the horseshoe crabs

would be unreal. It would mutilate your shrimp, that, and just dead shells and stuff that you would catch in the net today with other fishes, big fishes, and stuff that we can't sell.

ES: So, that has helped improve the quality of your catch. That is a positive.

MM: Yeah, that's a positive, yeah. We never thought that we'd – we never think they were a good thing, but they've deleted a lot of the unnecessary stuff that we catch. A lot of trash, dead wood, chunks of old rotten trees, and stuff that come down the river, all that goes out of the net, stuff that just crushes shrimp all up and make them – mutilate them.

ES: So, where do you think community is going in the future? What direction do you think it is going? Where do you see it being if nothing is done, if it just keeps going the way it is?

MM: I really don't know. Like I said, there's very few old diehards left. Without something to lure the younger generation into the business, I don't see it flourishing. I don't know. I really don't know what to think about the future of it. It's not looking good for the long-term as far as the thriving, rebounding industry.

SC: So, is there anything – I know she already asked you, but I'm just curious, anything that you can think of that we could do or everyone could do to get the younger generation involved? Other than regulations, we've heard that a lot. Is there something else to get them interested, to get everybody interested?

MM: The money would have to change. I don't know what it would take to offset. There's a great break in what we get for shrimp and what the shrimp retail for. There's a big gap in our price and retail. Without an increase in the bottom dollar, it'd be hard to lure anybody into – I don't know anybody that wants to work for \$30,000 a year for the kind of hours we put in, \$40,000 a year. There's a lot of easier ways to make a living than –

SC: Did you have trouble keeping help, getting deckhands?

MM: No, I go through them, 20 a year [laughter]. I know a lot of people. So, it's not really hard for me to get crew. It's just hard to keep them with the fluctuation of the catch. It's not consistent.

SC: They rarely stay long?

MM: I don't know how many hours it comes to, seven, eight days. It's sixteen, eighteen hours a day. That's a lot of hours. What's that come to? A hundred and twenty-something hours a week, almost 130 hours a week.

ES: Would you say that has affected the quality of the people that you get as crew members? Has their work gone down? Do they not know as much as they used to?

MM: No. Most of the crew that I get are very knowledgeable. I'd say that most people that are left are very experienced because they've been in it all their lives. That's mostly the ones you're

going to get for crew. It's hard to get somebody that's never been in the industry to stay. I've had several guys that the first time they went fishing was with me, and they've ended up staying in it, but talking about three or four guys out of the forty I've had over twenty, thirty-five years. So, it's not a real good average, four guys out of 40, over 35 years, that come into it that weren't already here to stick around. Most of the guys that work for me have a background in fishing. So, they're not somebody that came along, decided they wanted to fish, and hung out, stuck with it to – \$1,500, \$1,800 a week for 130 hours just doesn't compute for most people.

SC: You are going to stick it out, do it as long as you can?

MM: I am not going to do nothing else. I'm 53 years old. I'm not going anywhere. I'll make my little – which I make a little bit more than the crew does, 50,000, 60,000, \$70,000 dollars a year, eight months, eight and a half months.

ES: Do you have anything that you came in here, that you wanted to make sure you talked about?

MM: No. The big thing – that's the only thing I could – that's a big problem for me, like I said, is the impact of the sharks on us today. The long hours of fishing without the sharks is not that bad. You already work sixteen hours, and then towing, and then you've got three or four hours that night and get up a couple hours early in the next morning to sew some more before you can set out. It's the same thing every day because of the sharks. That's the only big thing that's just a real kick in the butt for me today, is the impact of the sharks on the gear and the loss of catch due to the sharks. Maybe something to offset the price between us and retail, and something to curb the competition with imports. Other than that, it's life as we know it. It's hard, but it's fair.

SC: Have you heard of anyone trying to do anything to help with the shark damage?

MM: There are some studies on magnets tied to the nets, different pingers, high frequency, different frequency stuff tied to the nets, rattles, and different colors of nets. The only big thing that's been any help is the skirting on the nets but it increases fuel consumption. So, that's another kick. I don't know anything else that would help it besides thin the population. Put a fishery back into existence. Harvest the sharks, which would be a big fishery. I don't know where the data comes from that there's a shortage or near-extinction of sharks, but that's far from the truth.

SC: I think that is it. Unless there is anything else you want to add for everybody else, for anybody, any of the lucky ones that get to hear this, any of the next generation. Anything else you want to add before we wrap it up?

MM: Not that I can think of. If anybody's interested, I'd be more than glad to give them a shot. Come on down. We'll put you to work.

SC: Sounds good.

MM: I'm going to give anybody a chance.

ES: Thank you.

[end of transcript]