

Matthew Barr: Sheriff, I appreciate you taking the time from a very busy schedule to do this interview. This documentary will be on UNC Television. It is an hour documentary called – the title at this point is called *Sneads Ferry, A Portrait of a Fishing Town*. That is what it is about. We will open up with a blessing of the fishing fleet, which I just filmed two Saturdays ago or last Saturday. We will kind of culminate, essentially like a year later, with the shrimp festival or even the celebration of the height of the shrimp season and all that. Maybe this is a kind of way to get things going. Can you talk a little bit about, as a sheriff, what are some of the responsibilities of the Sheriff's Department for an area like, say, Sneads Ferry in terms of patrolling the town and so forth?

Ed Brown: Well, Sneads Ferry is like a lot of communities in Onslow County. We still share communities that are family communities if you know where I'm coming from. People live in certain segments that are part of the family that started there if you can follow me. Sneads Ferry has still a strong element of family, good people, and hardworking people. Sometimes, they can be strong headed in times past, in their invasion of what is considered to be their community. We have what is called area men. These are officers that are assigned to work specific areas and that is their continual assignment. They don't rotate back and forth to other places. Not only do we have that in Sneads Ferry, we have that in other communities like Swansboro, Richlands because it allows the officers the unique relationship to understand the people in that area and the people understand the officers. We share a good relationship because we have people – try to hire people who are down-to-earth. We look for people who serve from the heart and not from the head. That allows us to be able to communicate with people from all walks of life. A person assigned particularly to that area allows for that officer to be able to communicate. Communications is more than just talking. It's exchanging feelings along with words, if you know what I'm saying. So, yes, we patrol it in the law enforcement area. But good community, hardworking people, trustworthy people have had a relationship with Sneads Ferry over my whole childhood. I reckon you may say my family. Some of my family is from down there in what they call Turkey Creek in Folkston, which is out of (Portia?). It would be called Sneads Ferry. Plus, I had spent a lot of my time down there on the bow of a boat, flounder fishing, and under the bridge there at Sneads Ferry when it was a small crossover trying to catch a drum when I'm flounder fishing at night. That's where I spent most of my weekends at as a young boy. It offers a lot of tranquility in life when you're standing on the bow of that boat and there's no one but you and the boat and the water moving and nature itself and you're not aggravated by a whole lot of anything else.

MB: It is interesting what you are touching on right there because this documentary is looking at fishermen, shrimpers mainly, and the crabbers and clammers and people. A lot of them talk about it is a way of life, and they love being on the water. It is a sense of freedom.

EB: It is a sense of freedom. Now, I do fear the water. When I say fear the water, I was nearly drowned twice in the ocean out there myself. I think it goes farther than the respect. I think you could call it adamant fear of the water. I think one of the things that really impressed me about what I saw during the rescue efforts for those two young men that were drowned out there in Sneads Ferry in the river, the young people, as well as the older folks seemed to be at total peace on the water. In other words, it seemed that that was home. It's kind of like, I'm a farm boy. Land is my home. But those guys, I watched them with very observing eyes, as you may say,

because they intrigued me to see how at home they were as they worked that day in the rescue of the guy that was still missing. It was totally awesome. Not only did I see what Sneads Ferry is made of, and that is when there is a cause to bring people together. It happened that morning. I mean, they forgot about making a living. They forgot about everything outside of trying to locate the missing fisherman who was a Sneads Ferry resident, and his family has been for years. I wish many a time I had a camera and could have captured some of the acts that I saw that are burned in my mind. If I was an artist, I could draw you a pretty picture. When you see these guys climbing on outriggers, hanging over the water, running around on the water with the boats, just like you would run around out on land with a tractor or something else. It was just awesome to see and have been a part of that rescue effort because it was just something that I'll always cherish. I mean, I'm scared of the water. These guys that can just about walk on it, at home on it, at peace on it. I can swim, but I don't have to.

MB: So, the community, when that tragedy happened back in December 17th – I told you I have interviewed about a month ago the parents of what they called Hot Dog Norris. Luther Norris, I believe (his name was?).

EB: Right. Yes. Well, being from Onslow County, being born here in Onslow County and having started my law enforcement career thirty-four years ago, having gone to school here, and interacting with the folks from Sneads Ferry, sometimes as boys from different schools, we were rivalries at different times. It still gives you a lot of comfort to see that we haven't lost. When I say we haven't because I picture myself part of Onslow County – Sneads Ferry as part of Onslow County. I picture myself as part of them. When I say we haven't lost, that thing in us that will cause us to come to a common cause for getting everything else except survival or taking care of the matter at hand that is important to one of our individuals. That is what I saw that day. The issue was not about fishing. The issue was not about anything worldly. The issue was totally about bringing to resolution something that was stressing a family out because they had a member missing. When I received a call that morning that the missing young man had been taken up in the net, it gave me a great relief because it gave resolution to the situation at hand. You can only imagine what life would have been like for these folks had that not happened. I do place myself in their position because, like I said again, I know the family, I know the people. There are not many people that's been in Onslow County long that I don't know. There are not any people that are in Onslow County that their tragedy doesn't become a tragedy of mine, not because I'm law enforcement, but because I'm part of them and they are part of me. We have something in common. I'm not a transplant. [laughter] I grew up here. So, we have something in common.

MB: Well, that is well put. I mean, that is one thing that I want to come up (documenting?). When people, well, such as yourself and your family and some of the families in Sneads Ferry, I mean, this – I think that is unusual maybe in society today. We live in a country where people move. In average, every five, six years, people move state. I think part of the problems we have or some of the problems we have where people feel rootless.

EB: I think you're right. We lose a common bond, and a common bond is important. Without a common bond, you lose feelings when someone has a tragedy. That tragedy is not part of my job. It's part of my nature. In other words, you don't go and do what we did that day. Those

people didn't go and do what they did that day except for one thing. That is to bring resolution and bring some type of peace to the family who was suffering and hurting because of the tragedy. You can't buy that. You can't buy that. You can't teach that to people, except it'd be taught from childhood up. It's something that is part of you rather than something that you go off to school to learn. It's kind of like (Brother Mac?) who works here with me. He's from Sneads Ferry. It's a part of you. I mean, it's nothing else can be said about it. It's just part of you.

MB: Well, sheriff, can you talk a little bit about – I mean, growing up here in Onslow County and a little of the culture of this area that, I think, is wonderful. I grew up in California. I love my home state, but some of the unique qualities of North Carolina and an area like Onslow County, I mean, you have been at the parade at the Sneads Ferry Shrimp Festival. I remember seeing you there two years ago.

EB: Yes.

MB: That is when I first started researching this story. Like, I saw you at the Clam Digger Restaurant when you were going around, meeting some of the people there that morning before the parade. Here it is. It is America in terms of hardworking people. Could you talk a little bit about your impressions of the fishermen and their lives?

EB: Well, I was raised on the inland as a farm boy on a tenant farm. As I think about what we did to make a living and that's in the tobacco patch, we lived back in the woods. Life was hard, extremely hard. But it was five [inaudible] boys. What we raised on the farm and what we got there was what you lived off of. When I look at what was the life-supporting activity of the fishermen, I can see them going to the river with their boats and nets and things. Like, we went to the field with our hoes and shovels and carts and mules and stuff like that. They were making a living in their environment from nature. We were making a living from our environment from nature, so to speak. Sometimes those young guys back in them days may have gone there because daddy said, "You got to go," and was reluctant about going. That was the same situation in my coming up. There were times that I didn't want to go to the field, but I didn't have much of a choice. I didn't have any choice, to be honest with you. As I have grown older, there is nothing any more relaxing than for me to get on the tractor or get out with an axe or do something out. I still live on a farm. I still live in the country. I still live where you can walk out your back door and holler without somebody calling and complaining. So, I would imagine some of these older guys now, who were young kids when I was young, probably can go out and get on a boat and ride down the water or go out there and just look across the water and bring back that peace and tranquility of memories, what we call precious memories. If you follow where I'm coming from, we haven't gotten out of our environment – don't want to get out of my environment. I'm satisfied where I'm at. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world. I mean, I think one of the things that makes me happy here is I can go to any segment of this county that if anybody's been here for any period of time and can sit down in their house and can carry on a conversation – believing I'm carrying on a conversation with a friend and also with someone who knows where I'm coming from. That's the same way with Sneads Ferry. That morning when I was down there with the Norris family and the other people, I was at home. I would want them to feel the same way if they came to my house. I have people come to my house with situations that they feel just as comfortable coming to my house. I'd be in the back of

the house and hear someone knock at the front door. I tell them, "Come on in. I'll be out there in a minute." I don't need to know who they are. When you live in that kind of environment with those kind of people, it takes a lot of stress out of living.

MB: Having lived in L.A. for fifteen years and Miami and cities like that, it is a wonderful feeling if you come to – Greensboro is a nice city.

EB: Yes.

MB: But being down here and on the water, it is a special feeling to – and the people in Sneads Ferry over the last couple of years have really been incredibly good to me and have opened up their lives, interviewing them. I was just filming with a fish house yesterday with some few people who work there, sorting out the shrimp and all that. It is hardworking people. Again, these days, a lot of people have no idea how hard physical labor can be. Of course, as we know from the tragedy, it is a dangerous job, too.

EB: Well, I think, really, Southern hospitality means more to someone when they are beneficiary of it, if you know what I'm saying. We were raised in this county. We were raised to watch out for each other. I mean, if you were in need, then we'd go to your call. That's the same way that we were raised there. There's some folks who come here that don't understand that. There are some folks who don't understand that we don't mind speaking and shaking hands and smiling and accepting them as part of our family, so to speak. I believe I'm speaking for the, what I call, the natives of Onslow County. When I say that I believe you'll find people who are receptive to other people because they have that kind of attitude toward people. In other words, they don't dislike people right up front from what I'm talking about. I can't imagine living somewhere where you don't ride by and throw your hand up at your neighbor or working as a sheriff or a law enforcement officer in a community where you don't feel comfortable stopping your car on the shoulder road, getting out, and sitting down on the porch and talking with somebody. We still teach our officers who work here when time will permit it and calls don't prohibit it. If you go by a country store, stop in. If you [haven't] got enough money to buy your drink, bring your receipt. I want you to continue to have contact with the people. I go down to Sneads Ferry. I go down there to eat that seafood. When I go down there to eat seafood, I'm going to stop by a muck store out there at Four Corners. I'm going to look for muck. I'm going to go to other places where businesses can go in and eat and talk to people. That's why when I was a patrolman, I had to do a lot of exercise and keep from getting no weight because I would stop in four or five different places and get a drink and a cake just to stop and talk to people. This is about the county. It's the same way if I go to Richlands or if I go to Swansboro, anywhere. I think one of the things law enforcement has done that has caused us a lot of problems in serving the people, we have got our officers who would get in the cars, roll the windows up, turn the air conditioner on, and they don't contact someone unless they get a call. That is not the way I want this office to be run and the people who work here to be run. Don't wait until people need you to contact them. Go make the contact yourself. If you like people and you have to like people to be service to people, then there should be no stress for that. I don't look at the guys who look here that they think they are better than anyone we serve. I want you to see the people as just like you, people of equality, who have feelings. We serve them and they don't serve us, so to speak.

MB: That sounds excellent. Kind of proactive way of looking at law enforcement, not just when there is a problem, but maybe getting to know people before there might be a problem.

EB: A lot of times when you do that, I really believe it first has to be natural. I mean, it has to be something that you do because you want to do it. But I really believe when people can relate to their elected officials and to their government and they feel like they are a part of it, then I believe they have a tendency to be more self-disciplined about doing anything to disrupt it just because they may know it'd be my friend. In other words, I could name you someone that, before I became sheriff, had been to prison, had been in trouble every time you turned around. But since I've been elected sheriff, he may not be your high upstanding citizen, but he's welcome to come in that door and sit down and talk to me anytime he wants to. He has not been that troublemaker that he's been. People, I believe, when they feel like they are a part of something, have an inner obligation that they feel like they need to conduct themselves in a more disciplined manner rather than they're part of a bad name, so to speak.

MB: There was a news story, I believe it was last week, about somebody who was a –

EB: Yes, sir. That was (Verona?). Yes, sir.

MB: I was struck by that news story. Maybe this ties a little bit of what I talked with you that the community center was [inaudible] about six weeks ago when that new church was starting up. I guess what I am getting at here is the aspect of spirituality, which I think is a very important part of the story. Showing that Sneads Ferry, like all the communities around here, there are many churches and people are very committed to the Lord. In other words, what I was struck by that piece was that you were able to defuse a very dangerous situation [inaudible].

EB: Right. People can see hope. When people can see hope, it seems to relieve the focus of what happens to people who have no hope. Hope is something, I believe, if you don't have it, you can really lose sight of where you're going. Give you a good example, that situation that morning, starting out about 3:00 a.m., I got there. It was still dark. The next-door neighbor was up, asked him about coming in and using his house to call the man next door to see if we could talk with him. "Open up, come on in." [laughter] I mean, I come in. His house becomes open to us to go and come in as we want to. I mean, totally that free to do that. [laughter] It's kind of unusual to have that. In other words, walk right into someone's house at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. Come on in and make yourself at home. Other officers come in. Here we are disrupting their night, and yet it's just like that we're part of family. I could have gone to the neighbor next door and done the same thing. So, it takes a lot of stress out when you don't have to fight the community and the criminal, if you know what I'm talking about. When all of you work together, you can overcome a lot of conflicts. That's why I think you check the criminal elements in Onslow County, you'll find that we probably share one of the lowest crime rates that there are anywhere around. Because we do have a quality of people here that – well, you know as well as I do, quality of people is society. The better quality of people you have in society, the better society you're going to have.

MB: Well, it is kind of a wrap-up kind of area. It strikes me that Sneads Ferry, like other towns,

but Sneads Ferry is the focus of our documentary. But there is a real sense of community in Sneads Ferry.

EB: You could probably know where I'm coming from. When you're riding in this parade at the shrimp festival and you can holler at people and call them a name and you know who they are, you know who their families are, it makes the event much more rewarding than if you don't know who you're talking to and who you're hollering at. That's why if you notice me in these parade things, I'm going to have some fun. I'm going to get on that mic and I'm going to talk to people and call them a name. Because the only difference than them and me in that parade is I'm in that car and they're out there on the side. Other than that, we're family. If we are not blood family, we're still family. We are also county people. Sneads Ferry is just that kind of people. That morning when I talked to Ms. Norris and the family out there, I think one of the things that impressed me so much about that morning is this lady should have been stressed out because of her son being missing. But what brought so much pleasant memories to me is that this young man had committed his life to the Lord about three, four weeks before that. She was at peace that whether he was alive, he was well, or whether he was gone, he was still well if you understand where I'm coming from. That accepting the Lord as his savior three or four weeks before that gave her a peace that nothing else could give her, a hope that nothing else could give her. When that young man's body was caught, was brought up in a net by his uncle, that gave her resolution. Now, he is in a better place than we are, and she knows it. While all of it was a tragedy – and if you don't mind me saying, people talk about that's a horrible way to go. But I'm going to say this, "That's a horrible way to go if you don't know the Lord." If you know the Lord, there's no horrible way to go because both are going to give you the same results. Whether you die a long, drawn-out death, or at old age, or whether you die instantly, if you know the Lord, both give you the same results. That's in the presence of the Lord. That's my belief and that was her belief and that was her peace. If you know the Bible, it says, "Nothing can separate you from me." Death can't do it. Famine can't do it. Nothing can do it. So, I hate to see it happen, but I'm glad that the lady and the family was resolved that this young man is with his Lord at this time.

MB: That was one of the most moving interviews I have ever done with her and her husband, (Carol and then Angie?), the sister of Mr. Norris and Scott, the brother. But that is exactly what Mrs. Norris talked about, exactly what you just said and how unbelievably important that was.

EB: Yes. I was raised by a Christian family. We were poor, but we were raised believing in God and understanding that he is and holds us accountable for what we do and takes care of us when we can't take care of our self and provides for us when we can't take care of our self. Public contact was something we didn't have much of. We didn't come out in the public very much. So, that belief is very deeply embedded into the fibers of my life. Older I get, the more it means because – I mean, we have to be fooling our self if we don't believe one day we're going to meet that day called death and how we meet it. We don't know when we'll meet it. We don't know, but we do know we're going to meet it. So, as we march on, we march on in peace, knowing that we're marching to Zion, so to speak. Not marching to a tragedy of death. We're marching to a victory of death. That's the difference in those people who believe and those who don't believe.

MB: Well, is there anything else you would like to add? It has been a great interview. I appreciate it very much.

EB: Well, I think if there's anything that probably, besides the people that I think of when I think of Sneads Ferry, is to think of a good plate of fried shrimp. [laughter] I mean, you can't help but love seafood. Good shrimp is my priority when it comes to seafood. I do remember the first time I've ever tried to eat a clam. I was fishing with a clam under the bridge down there for drum. I was hungry. I would break the clam open, and you hook him around. You put him around your hook. Then you drop it in the water and let that drum kind of catch him off there. They're so good at taking your bait and eating your bait off the hook. You better be right ready to put your hook in it. Well, it was past dinnertime, and I was hungry. So, I said, "I'm going to try to eat me one of these clams raw." I bust him right open and eat him raw. For the lack of me, I couldn't get him to stay down. I tried my best on two or three different occasions to swallow him. I swallowed him, he'd come back. I swallowed him, he'd come back. Finally, after three or four times, I just spit him out. I said, [laughter] "It won't work." But that was my first experience of trying to eat a raw clam to keep from having to quit. So, when you're out there fishing, you get so involved in it that you don't want to quit to go eat. You're afraid you're going to miss a bite or you're afraid when the drums are running that you are not going to catch a drum. So, you can get so intense in that stuff that even hunger won't make you stop.

MB: [laughter] So, that is where the clams are?

EB: Yes.

MB: I bumped into an old fisherman over there and he said, "Oh, go over here," in one of his truck. He opened it up. There it was. He is like, "Oh, damn." "Oh, well, here it goes. Blargh."

EB: [laughter] I can eat them now, matter of fact. But that was my first time to try them raw. I would steam that. I would eat them steamed. Oysters, I ate steamed. I ate oysters. Back then, you didn't think about pollution. Pollution was not an issue. You go out fishing and you pull up and pick up an oyster out there. You open them up and you eat it. You pick up a clam, you open them up and you eat them. It's like at home, out there on the farm. You'd be hunting in the woods. You lie down in the creek there on your belly and drink that water out of the creek. There wasn't no pollution back in them days. I mean, they had nothing contaminated in our society. It was still pure. To us, as boys, we didn't have all the publicity of polluted water and polluted streams. We lie down there and drink water out of the creek, eat the fish or crabs or oysters and clams out of the shell. Nobody ever got sick. Probably just as healthy today, but we've got it planted in our mind or not [laughter] if you know what I'm talking about. I wonder sometime how much you've been told the truth and how much you have not been told the truth.

MB: Well, I ate the clam, and I am still here. [laughter] It was raw, too.

EB: Yes. I love them. I love that good salty taste. I don't want them cooked like fish. I don't want fish cooked too much. If you cook them, you cook all the taste out of them. You might as well eat cardboard. But you warm them up enough that you think you've cooked them and eat them. They don't have to really be cooked that much. [laughter]

MB: I am starting to get hungry just talking about it. [laughter]

EB: [laughter] Well, I'll tell you what, man. There's nothing any better than oysters and clams and shrimp, scallops, particularly seafood.

MB: I was filming with (Dolphus Thompson?). He is an old-timer over in (City of Hesperia?). We were on the river. Down on the other side, [inaudible] is there. We pulled the nets up. We cooked up a pot of crab and shrimp right there on the boat. That was the best seafood I ever had.

EB: We used to go down there, my uncle did, before he passed away and get some spots and croakers and come back to the house. If they come at 5:00 p.m., this is how the community is. At 7:30 p.m., you would probably have as many as 150 people, 200 people gathered together. They brought their collards and their beans and their cornbread and cooking them fish and sat right there and ate them and talked and carry on. I mean, we weren't stressed out by other things of our society that separates today. Everybody got to go to different directions. Everybody would be there, like a funeral. Just about when you went down the road and see all the cars parked on the shoulder of the road and see people hanging around out there, cooking fish and eating fish. It was just amazing, just amazing.

MB: Great.

[end of transcript]