

Wild Caught  
Buddy Davis Oral History  
Date of Interview: Unknown  
Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina  
Length of Interview: 25:58  
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Mathew Barr: Okay. Well, Mr. Davis, I appreciate you doing this. We filmed last week with Billy.

Buddy Davis: Yes.

MB: We went out on a run, and we filmed all that. We have been filming around town trying to do this documentary about the town. Can you talk a little bit about growing up here? Did you grow up around Sneads Ferry?

BD: I was eight years old when my daddy moved here. We'd just come from the bridge there. We didn't come far. That's as far as we came. I've been here ever since. My daddy was raised on Sneads Ferry and his daddy, too. His daddy came here when he was a young boy from Davis Shores. That's about 75 miles east of here. That's the way it was.

MB: Was your father a fisherman?

BD: Yes, sir. Yes. That's all he ever did.

MB: So, your family has been in the fishing business for a long time?

BD: Yes, as far back as I know. Far backs he knows, too. I mean, it's right on back.

MB: So, can you talk a little bit about your life and how old you were when you started fishing and stuff like that?

BD: Well, since I was probably six, seven years old, I'd go with him, I guess. I'm fifty-eight now and I've been going for fifty years or better, I imagine. But I was probably about fifteen or sixteen before I started running the boat. My daddy had a couple of small boats we'd use when we were young. We'd get home from school, we'd jump in and go. [laughter] That's what we liked to do. That's what we did.

MB: We were just talking a minute ago about – so fishing is not just a job. It is more like a way of life, would you say?

BD: Yes. It's something you grow to. It's hard to get it out of your system. If you are ever raised in it, it is hard to leave anything like that. I've never worked in a public job. I've never done anything else.

MB: All right. So, what are some of the things that you love about it? Being out there or?

BD: Being your boss. I mean, you do it – well, I do as the police and my boys do, too. I don't pressure them into doing anything they don't want to do. If they want to do something, it's all right. If they don't, it's all right with me. I don't pressure them on anything.

MB: Well, it is beautiful being out on the water.

BD: Yes. It's a peaceful place. It is, especially on an early morning, nobody to bother you.

MB: Just out there in nature.

BD: Yes, just doing your thing. [laughter]

MB: Well, speaking about doing your thing, I mean, it is a very talented family. I know that you all do rigging and stuff.

BD: Yes.

MB: Talk about some of that. I mean, you have the crane back there.

BD: Yes. I don't know why. It is a fever, I guess, you get. But I've always worked on boats. I don't know why I like to do it. It's something I like to do. We'll buy an old hull, just like that one, and tear it down and rebuild it. We'll build everything, rigging and all. Takes a little time, a little money, but we'll do it.

MB: So, how did you learn training? How to do all these things like welding and engine building and all that?

BD: Well, just do it. I mean, if you get your mind on it, you can do anything. I've done it. If you set your mind to do something, do it. If I have something I want to do, I'll hammer it until I get it done.

MB: But that rigging, do you draw out a whole blueprint for how that ring is going to be? Or how do you figure it out in your head? Or how do you go through all that?

BD: We just measure up a little bit and measure what we want to measure. That's what we go by. We don't write or draw anything up. People build boats. They don't draw anything up. They just know what they want to do with it.

MB: Talking with some of the fishermen like Mack Liverman and some of the other people, they talk about okay, it is pretty complex in terms of knowing the tides and the effects of the moon, there are a lot of different things to it.

BD: Yes. Yes. There is. You learn it. You are in it all your life. You'll learn things. You sure will. That's just like farming. I wouldn't know how to even set out peanuts. I wouldn't know anything about farming.

MB: Well, there are some similarities to farming, too, though, in terms of harvesting.

BD: That's right. Yes. But I've just done all this all my life and that's all I know. I must like to do it, I guess.

MB: Well, talk a little bit about your family and your sons and your daughter and everybody.

BD: Well, I have three boys. Two of them went to college for about a year. But they got homesick. I believe that's what happened. They just couldn't stand it. They came back and went to shrimp and fish, which they've done all their life, too. When they were in school, they would shrimp in summertime. My girl married a shrimperman. So, it's still in the fam. She's in the shrimping family right now. They must enjoy it. Billy loves it. But now Jody tends to the fish house. He doesn't care as much about shrimping as Billy does. That's Billy Conley. Acts like he enjoys. Shrimping isn't like it used to be. It's a whole lot different than it used to be when I was young. When I was Jody's age, we didn't have all these bigger boats and weren't as many other boats and just bigger nets, bigger engines, bigger boats, just a whole lot different.

MB: How about the aspect of regulation and all that? Has that affected things?

BD: Well, sometimes you think it does. When they put a new regulation on you, you think it's just a disaster. But once you get used to it and everything settles down, you kind of grow to it. Just like these turtle shooters. That was a bad thing to start with, but people don't complain about them anymore. Very seldom you'll hear anybody complaining. But that's the regulations, isn't it?

MB: So, what do you think in terms of the future of commercial fishing in this area? How does it look like to you for the next generation?

BD: I don't know. It's hard to tell. Change is so quick. I think it'll be all right. I think it will. I'm hoping. I don't think they ever put us out of business completely. But it'll make it hard on us. We have some regulations. Everything's got regulations. There'll probably be more and more of them, too.

MB: One nice thing about fishing is that you can still be an independent businessperson.

BD: Yes, that's true.

MB: You do not have to be a big corporation –

BD: That's right.

MB: – [inaudible] the business.

BD: It's family here. We don't buy stuff from the other boats, just our boats. It's family. That's the way it's always been here.

MB: Now, this land, this is all in your family, right?

BD: Yes. My daddy bought this in 1949. He lived there at the bridge for years and he had a chance to buy this whole point down here in [19]49. He bought it. There was nothing here except an old camp back where the house is now, just an old camp. People came down on the weekend and stayed in it. He bought it and fixed it up pretty well. It's been a while back.

MB: So, now do your sons all live on the Point pretty much? Or with their families? Or is all –

BD: Yes. I can see one of their houses right there. I can see Barbara, my daughter. She lives right here on the Point. Stevie lives just up there in the woods a little bit. They didn't get far.  
[laughter]

MB: [laughter] Well, now do you have big get-togethers socially? I mean, that is really great to have a whole extended –

BD: Yes. We are always getting together. If we want to do something, we do it.

MB: So, take us through a little bit of the season, how it goes. In other words, I was talking with Vicky when I interviewed her just now about does shrimp go – what is the season for shrimp?

BD: We usually catch a few shrimp in April. But in the last few years, the spotted shrimping hasn't been all that good, the first part of spring. Lately, we shrimp on up right on through December. I mean, I can remember years when we didn't have any shrimp in December, very few in November, December. It seemed like fall shrimping has gotten better in the last several years. But spring shrimping has slowed down. I'd say we shrimp from April to Christmas or after Christmas sometime. That's about the way it's been running lately.

MB: Then after Christmas or whenever it ends, then what happens?

BD: Well, we do a lot of fishing offshore and stuff. But we don't even fool with that anymore. It's got too many restrictions on that. We just got out of there. Most of the time we're working on these boats. Because they always need some work on them. If you got a boat, you've got some work.

MB: It is like a house in that way, but there is probably more.

BD: Yes. But you can find something to do on your boat most of the time. If you get some spare time, you do it mostly.

MB: So, you guys know how to overhaul the engines and all that?

BD: Yes, we work on these Cummins. We'll work on them. But that's all we got, Cummins engines. So, we got one V12 GM and that's it.

MB: So, rigging or something, you just do it right here pretty much?

BD: Yes. We do it right in the yard. Yes. If we have something to build, we'll build it, if we know how.

MB: Well, going out on that boat with Billy, that was a beautiful boat.

BD: It's a good boat. Yes, it is a good boat. We bought that hull from a fellow. He built it right over here. A little way around the shore here, the hull of it. I didn't really want the boat. But I got kind of stuck with it and I had to fix it.

MB: Then, I mean, the inside, the pilot house, and the paneling and all the electronics and –

BD: Yes. I worked on it for two or three winters, I imagine, off and on. It's a lot of work, something like that. I mean, you can work, work, work, and see nothing you do. Then directly you see a little something you've done. It's just the way it is.

MB: They call this a headboat right here?

BD: It was old headboat. It was built in 1960, that boat was. But it's a good boat. Used to be an old headboat. I've been working on it for probably three winters off and on, might be four winters. I didn't hurry.

MB: Then you are going to take it out pretty soon?

BD: Yes. I think offshore out here a little bit. I'm about through with it.

MB: Then you will use that as a shrimp boat?

BD: Yes, that's what we'll use it for.

MB: Sure. It is a pretty boat.

BD: It's a good old boat. I mean, it's kind of a different boat. But it'll work well. I worked on boats with the house on the stern. They work well.

MB: Well, let me ask you this, fishing. I mean, there is this movie out called *The Perfect Storm*. It was about fishermen that get in trouble off of New England. How about in your life? Have you had some tough calls out there at sea?

BD: Well, yes. I've been in some – we call them scrapes right here. We have been in some. Everything worked out. I've been down on that inlet down there. That inlet isn't all that good a shape. It gets shallow there sometimes. It isn't as bad as it used to be. That boat there, I have beat that boat out there a lot of times, dragging the bottom, hitting the bottom. I mean, just kind of – well, I wouldn't do it now. When I was younger, I did.

MB: Any scrapes that were particularly special? I mean, not special. But in other words, can you tell us about one of the more exciting ones that happened to you?

BD: Well, I've never been in life-threatening – I don't think I have. But I've been around the ball and go round and round. The sea is breaking across. You couldn't go anywhere, just round and round. If you keep messing, you'll get off after a while. But it doesn't do your boat any good beating on that hard sand.

MB: So, the water was going over the boat?

BD: Oh, yes. When you hit the ground with a boat like that, she'll lay down or side until the chimes of the boat hit the bottom. Then that's as far as it can go. But that – it's bad on your boat too. Sure is.

MB: So, that inlet is a little tricky, right, from what I have heard.

BD: It used to be terrible, and it still is pretty bad. You had to watch and take your time and get the right time. If you get it real rough or something and it's shallow down there, you can tear a boat up. You sure can.

MB: Well, so much of this seems to be really dependent on a lot of experience. You cannot –

BD: Yes.

MB: – learn it from a book really.

BD: No, you got to know what you're doing. I sure have.

MB: In your life, you started like many other people, so you have been doing it your whole life, right? So, you have got –

BD: Yes.

MB: – a vast amount of experience to draw from.

BD: Well, yes. We didn't have boats like this back when I was young. My daddy had small boats, 30, 35-feet, 40-feet at the most. That's all you see around this part of the country. Over the past twenty years, twenty-five, thirty years, boats have grown, got bigger. I had that boat built in 1968. There weren't one or two more right here that size in [19]68. Since then, you don't see any little boats. They're all gone, all the small engines. Everybody wants more power, bigger nets.

MB: Bigger is better.

BD: Well, the more power, the bigger nets, the more you'll catch, the more comfortable on your boat. Most boats are fixed up nicely. You live on if you want to.

MB: Do you ever go out on longer haul – longer trips?

BD: No. I used to spend a little bit of time up [inaudible]. I would be gone over five days. I'd be home on the weekend. But most of the time I'll stay around home. I like to be home when night comes. I never liked being away from home too much.

MB: Well, speaking of home, is this a close-knit community, would you say, this town of Sneads Ferry?

BD: Yes, I think so. It's not like it used to be though. Because – shoot, people used to know everybody. Very seldom – you go to the store and don't see anybody you know anymore. When I was young, people would visit one another, and everybody knew one another. But it isn't like that now. I know all the people around here who work in the river and the ocean. But there are so many other people here and you don't know them all. Keeps getting crowded. It helps our business here. We retail and sell right here.

MB: So, now you have your grandkids.

BD: Yes. Well, I don't know what's going to happen when they get big enough. I think they're going to be professional ball players. [laughter]

MB: [laughter] Yes. We got the –

BD: Every young one's dream, isn't it?

MB: Baseball.

BD: Yes.

MB: Billy – all your kids are very athletic.

BD: Yes. They love ball. I did too. I got into it pretty good there, too. That's the only reason they went to college, to play ball. I'm pretty sure.

MB: So, you think you might have some future ball players in the grandkids there?

BD: Yes. They really love it, too. Yes, sir. They do. Now, I imagine they will probably get on one of these boats when they get old enough and go shrimping. It is in their blood, I guess. I know Rookie likes it and Jordan does, too. I have two grandsons. Is that right? I believe. Yes, two.

Female Speaker: One on the way.

BD: Yes. It would be three.

FS: Nine altogether.

BD: But it's a good life if you like to do it. You don't see too many people who love their jobs. Not too much, do you?

MB: Oh, you mean in my –



BD: A lot of people get stuck in their work.

MB: That is true. I do not think most people really –

BD: I've been hearing a lot of people complaining about their jobs. You have got to do something.

MB: Yes. I think a lot of people who work for big organizations feel kind of like they do not have much control over their lives.

BD: Yes.

MB: Here, you really can kind of run your own life, so to speak.

BD: Yes. That's what's good about it.

MB: I teach at the university, UNC Greensboro.

BD: Yes.

MB: There are a lot of people there, thousands of employees. So, you are part of a big organization which is good and bad. It means it is not personal.

BD: You ever get tired of it?

MB: I do sometimes. I am getting tired because I have to start teaching again in about a month. But once I get going, I am fine. I just have to get going. I go through this every year.

BD: Well, I'll get tired of shrimping before it's over with. But we'll slack up. We'll have two or three months. We'll work on these boats. Do what we want to do.

MB: Well, that is nice. So, you have some different things to break up the routine.

BD: Yes. When it's shrimp, you need to work hard. Do your thing because you don't make it all winter. Better put some aside.

MB: Just like a farmer.

BD: Yes, that's true. It isn't here year-round.

Male Speaker: Or a teacher.

BD: You had to work, yes. [laughter] Put some aside for the bad days.

MB: Well, that is true. Of course, I guess some years are better than other years, right?

BD: Yes. True. That's true. Well, we've had some pretty good seasons here the last few years. It's been fair.

MB: So, the shrimp supply seems to be pretty good then. There are no –

BD: Yes.

MB: – shortage of shrimp.

BD: It's been fair for two or three years. Yes.

MB: But would you say overall – I mean, seems like they are plentiful out there.

BD: No, they're not plentiful. I mean, they're not really plentiful. But they're not really scarce either. It's average. It's nothing outstanding, but it's all right. Could be better. It could be worse. If you didn't know anything but good, you wouldn't know any bad. Would you? You wouldn't appreciate the good then. Would you?

MB: Well, you would take it for granted.

BD: Yes, that's true.

MB: Well, I think this has been a lot of good stuff. Anything else you can think of to add or –

BD: No. I sure don't know anything else. I put in about everything I know. Unless you want to know something else.

MB: Well, I am sure I have a million questions. But it will probably occur right after I finish the interview. But I think this gets the main part of it.

BD: Yes.

MB: I mean, I think one of the themes of the documentary is it is a way of life.

BD: Yes.

MB: It goes back, not just in this area, but all over the world people fish.

BD: Yes. There's a lot of fishing going on. It's everywhere. There's a lot of fishing. In fact, I guess, some places are overfished. But you got to make a living, don't you?

MB: Well, also fishing has been going on since the beginning of –

BD: That's true.

MB: – civil human life.

BD: Yes.

MB: So, it doesn't look that different now from what it was hundreds of years ago in terms of the way it is done. I mean, Andy filmed this morning some people clamming with their feet.

BD: Yes.

MB: I mean, that is pretty basic.

BD: Yes. That's something that – I've never done that. I don't know how they do it. But I know people that would clam with their feet and they would do well at it. I mean, they'd do good. [inaudible] fingers. To get in water that deep, you use your toes to get the clams. Clamming is a big thing. It's kind of a big thing around this part of the country. Clams are always a good – fairly good price. Used to – clams didn't grow in this river. Used to but not like they do now. There used to be a lot of oysters out here. But they – many of them are no more. But a lot of people depend on clams for wintertime months. They opened this river up this past winter for dredging new clams. There are a lot of clams. People have done good at it.

MB: Oh, they have a dredge machine?

BD: Yes. It's got a conveyor on it. The pump will pump the sand and clams up. The conveyor will pick it up. Bring it out of the water. The conveyor belt. You just pick your clams off of it. Some of them have done really well.

MB: Well, thank you very much.

BD: Yes.

MB: I appreciate it very much.

BD: You're sure welcome.

MB: Good interview.

[end of transcript]