

Wild Caught  
Jeremy Edens Oral History  
Date of Interview: Unknown  
Location: Unknown  
Length of Interview: 25:23  
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: I forgot to bring a release form. So, could you just state your name and say that you're willing to do this interview?

Jeremy Edens: Yeah, yeah.

MB: Why don't we start with that? I can set the sound level while you do that.

JE: My name is Jeremy Edens. I'm willing to do this interview for –

MB: Matt Barr.

JE: – Matt Barr.

MB: [laughter] [inaudible] Okay. I just want to get a general idea. Jeremy, talk about what it was like to grow up in this town. We were talking this morning about the huge changes going on. What was it like to grow up here when your family had this fish house?

JE: Yeah. My great-grandfather started the business way back about 1925. My grandfather started fishing. Then as my great-grandfather got older, he – I'm going to get nervous now I'm talking about this.

MB: Oh, you'll do fine.

JE: Okay. [laughter] I'm sorry. My great –

MB: Growing up you always worked around the fish house.

JE: Right. I was eight or nine years old. Well, as I started school, when I would get home from school, I would always come down here and start working every evening around probably ten, eleven years old. I would work down here in the evenings, do homework later. Then as time progressed, as I got older, I got more active. Then when I graduated back in [19]95, I started working full time with my grandfather.

MB: Okay. You got to hang on for just a second. [inaudible] Well, let's get right and cut to the chase here. What's going on right now with this – this is one of the biggest fish houses in town. You guys thinking about selling it or what's going on?

JE: We put it on the market about a month ago. The real estate prices around here have really skyrocketed in the last year and a half. As shrimping declines and the imports that are coming into the country pick up, we're not able to compete. They're just not catching the product anymore. As the real estate prices increase, we can't afford not to sell.

MB: So, now you were saying this morning like this – how long has Millis fish house been going on?

JE: It's been in the family as an operation since the [19]20s. My great-grandfather started

selling fish on a horse and cart. He would go to Wilmington. It would take him three days to go down there, sell the fish, and come back. That was before there were many cars around. Then it just slowly evolved into a company. We've had several places in Florida with a scallop operation. We had a place down east in Harkers Island at one time. Now my granddad's brother has one place in Marathon, Florida, just a small lobster operation. He's actually thinking this may be his last year there also.

MB: So, is this going on all over the country? What's going on? What are some of the major things going on that are causing everybody to get out, do you think?

JE: I think a lot of it is the imports where you can't get the price for your product anymore. It is just the price of real estate waterfront. You cannot compete with what you make in the seafood business to what you can do with land nowadays.

MB: Well, what's really going on? Sneads Ferry's gone bonkers around. What's going on around here? Has everybody discovered Sneads Ferry?

JE: Everybody loves Sneads Ferry. I don't know. It just seems like everybody who comes through on vacation, they fall in love with the place. They want to come back and live here, retire here, have investment homes on the beach. The military base next door to us too is bringing a lot of people in. A lot of those people will come in, work on the base. Then when they retire, a lot of them come back here because they love it so much. It used to be a little quiet fishing village. Now it's a big sprawling real estate development community.

MB: Let's see now. At this point there are what? There are six fish houses in town and half of them are for sale. Is it?

JE: Yeah, that's right. I don't know what the boats will do once the last one's gone. It's a dying breed. It doesn't look like it's going to come back. Shrimping around here really, I don't think will ever come back like it was, say, ten years ago.

MB: Why is that, do you think?

JE: A lot of people are getting off the boats and selling the boats because you can't catch the shrimp. You're having to sell the – you're selling the fish houses for real estate condominium developments. That's putting a lot of people out of work. I think a lot of the people here have depended on it for so long. They don't want to give it up but they're having to give it up. It is a way of life that's hardly – where you're hardly even able to make any money to even get your family to survive.

MB: No health insurance. No –

JE: No. You don't get health insurance unless you pay for it yourself. It's not like working for a big company that provides it.

MB: So, you can get in a serious debt pretty easily in this [inaudible]

JE: You can. You really can.

MB: Well, how does it make you feel? Being part of this family, are they – what are they talking about? What are some of the plans for this place that you've heard about?

JE: Well, what we've heard a lot of people have looked at it as high-rise condominiums. It's really a shame to see your family's land being sold that's been in the family for so long where you've been here making a living in the commercial fishing industry in Sneads Ferry. That it's just slowly fading away. In a few years, it'll be a thing of the past. You'll come by and you'll see high-rise condominiums. It won't even look the same.

MB: Well, by high-rise, do you have any idea what they're talking about?

JE: No, not really. I don't know. Could be single family townhomes or – which one problem we've got here is that we don't have a lot of sewer systems. That's holding a lot of development back. If we had a sewer plant here that would – could take the capacity that they need – the daily capacity – you would see high-rise condominiums everywhere.

MB: It's almost like Sneads Ferry's been off the beaten track for I don't know how long.

JE: It's been off the beaten track for forever. But now it's the main attraction in Eastern North Carolina, I think, because it is off the beaten track. But it's being discovered – new areas in Sneads Ferry being discovered every day. People are falling in love with that and wanting to call it home.

MB: But don't you think they're going to want some of that fishing thing? But you can't just preserve a little bit of it just for tourists.

JE: You can't really preserve it when you can't make the money there anymore to even be able to preserve it.

MB: That's an amazing thing. It's not just like you have some pretend shrimper like you're Disney World or something.

JE: No, you [laughter] can't. No, you can't do that.

MB: It's just people like [inaudible] always – the other thing that's kind of – that I've thought about at times is the young people aren't going – do you think the young people have been going into the life as fishermen around here over the years?

JE: I'd say five years ago the young people that were graduating high school had that in mind, a lot of them. But a lot of them have realized what was going on in the industry and have changed their view on it and are going a different route to make a living. A lot of the people now graduating high school that have families in the fishing industry, the descendants of fishermen, they are totally going a different route to start with. They're not even thinking about going in it.

MB: I think Chops is one of the few young people that I know – I was asking him about that today – who actually is determined to be a fisherman.

JE: He is. My brother also is. He's twenty-five. He's got a family started. He's got two boats. They're sea scalloping right now off of Virginia. That's where a lot of these guys have had to go, is sea scalloping.

MB: Why do you think the shrimping has been so bad?

JE: I don't know. It's hard to say, really. I think a lot of the weather patterns, how they've changed over the last several years have – has got something to do with it.

MB: Is it getting warmer or –

JE: I think so. I don't know. It's just the weather. You can't depend on the weather anymore. I mean, usually you could depend on cool weather around Thanksgiving to start coming in. Sometimes now in January you've got shorts on. I think when the weather doesn't go through its normal cycle, your marine life and vegetative life is not going to work right.

MB: Maybe the global warming thing we're always talking about. I've heard about that in California. The plankton, the birds are starving [inaudible]

JE: I read something in the paper the other day.

MB: About that [inaudible]

JE: The winds -

MB: That's right.

JE: The winds it churns the algae up. Several species in the water depend on that plankton. Then you got several more species depending on those species to survive. When that first species does not survive, the second and third that's dependent on them are not going to survive either.

MB: Right. It's all tied in together.

JE: It's all tied in together.

MB: Now, if all the fish houses close up, there won't be any place for them to get ice or dock or – you have to have this infrastructure to make something like that work.

JE: Right. You got to have it all to make it year around. But I don't know what they're going to do. A lot of these guys are selling their boats and getting into something else. But a lot of the guys that have the bigger boats are going to other places to work. They're having to stay away

from home, away from family for extended periods of time.

MB: So, where are they going? [inaudible]

JE: Well, you've got their – some go to South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida for shrimp. Then you've got several boats now this year that have gone to Virginia. They've gone to Chincoteague, Virginia to sea scallop. Then they've gone to Cape May, New Jersey to sea scallop also.

MB: But what are they going to do when that finishes up? When it's too rough to go out there in the fall or –

JE: When it gets too rough, smaller boats will have to come back here. They'll switch over their gear and maybe go around Georgia and Florida shrimping. The larger boats may still work through the rough weather. Or they'll come back, switch their gear over, and go down to Florida or to the Gulf and try shrimping down there.

MB: Well, I don't know. Is there any positive – I'm trying to think of what's positive here that maybe – what could turn around? But you don't really see how this thing could turn – change then?

JE: I don't think it could really change enough to come back. Number one, because of your imported shrimp into the country.

MB: Let's talk about that. The imports have really become like a whole huge increase in the last couple of years or that or –

JE: Last three to four years. Shrimp is supposed to be the number one consumed seafood in the United States of America. It's a billion-dollar industry.

MB: What percentage of shrimp do you think is imported now? What have you heard?

JE: I would say 95 percent of the shrimp consumed in the United States would be imported.

MB: Sure.

JE: I'm not positive about that. But I'd say 90 to 95 percent.

MB: That's a lot of –

JE: You cannot compete with that much import. They can send it in here so cheap. You cannot compete at the time with how high the fuel is. Then you got ice. Then the production is down. This year, the production is probably, I'd say, 75 percent off of what it normally would be. Then you got record high fuel prices. You can't compete. All of it together is daily driving everybody out of the business.

MB: But then the American consumers – and of course the American consumer, obviously, they don't even know a lot of stuff.

JE: The normal American consumer does not know where that seafood they're eating is being shipped in from. They come around to these restaurants and they think, well, they're going to eat local seafood and they're not. They're eating foreign seafood, foreign shrimp.

MB: All seafood is imported now, right, everything.

JE: A lot of it. I mean, you got some shrimp, you've got sea scallops, you got flounder, clams, oysters, mussels, that will be – some percentage will be caught locally. But I don't know the percentage numbers on that. But I'd say, well, the majority of all seafood is imported.

MB: I've heard it's 60, 70 percent from this marine biologist at NC State. That's what he was saying. That's in the whole world.

JE: Sixty to seventy.

MB: Yeah, in the whole world –

JE: Right.

MB: – everything. So, we're just big importers of everything.

JE: Right. They have really run the small business and small part-timers and the old timers out. It's just a way of life that's gone. A way of life that won't ever be the same.

MB: That's sad.

JE: It's really sad. I mean, it's really sad to think back what was caught here and how much money has been made in the past and just to see families flourish and do good. It's sad to sit down and think about all that's going away from here.

MB: You need to get that? Do you mind if I get a shot of you talking on the phone?

JE: Okay.

MB: Well, Jeremy, do you mind talking about how much money's involved with the – what you guys are asking for this place or would you –

JE: It is up to several million dollars.

MB: Then what would you do if it – once –

JE: I really can't say that on the –

MB: Oh, okay.

JE: No. I'm talking with a company about bringing a business to Sneads Ferry.

MB: Oh, I see.

JE: Investing my money in a business. It's not a chain, but it is. [laughter]

MB: I got you.

JE: I can tell you off camera. [laughter]

MB: Okay. Now do you have a family?

JE: No, I'm single.

MB: In other words – I asked you this before. But in other words, it's like a whole way of life though really. It is not just a job here –

JE: Right.

MB: – that we're talking about losing. It's amazing when I started filming five years ago, if I had finished the film – I was thinking about this today.

JE: You're sort of glad you hadn't finished it.

MB: I am. I've been beating myself up for three years that I – but I tried to do a book for a while. I tried different ways of telling the same story.

JE: Right.

MB: But now if I'd done the – finished the thing even two years ago or three years ago, we'd have to do another one because it's – the whole story is completely different now. It is amazing how much has changed.

JE: Right.

MB: The property values in North Topsail Beach and –

JE: Even Sneads Ferry waterfront, last – well, in six months I gained \$110,000 on the property value of my home.

MB: 110 grand in six months.

JE: 110 in six months. It's on the water. Now the county's talking about raising the price of the tax and a lot of these people won't be able to afford it. They're going to have to sell.



MB: Well, you mean the local people?

JE: A lot of the older local people that are retired and they get their social security checks and whatnot. They won't be able to afford the tax. They're going to have to sell and go inland. They won't be able to stay on the waterfront. There is a lot of waterfront for sale right now in Sneads Ferry.

MB: You mean partially for that reason, do you think? Or people think they're going to make a killing while you –

JE: Well, they got to sell it right now when the market's hot. Two years from now, it might not be as hot. I think we will have another three or four years of good prices.

MB: How much of the price has gone up in the last couple years? Just give an average [inaudible] percentage. What are we talking about?

JE: Some property has gone up 475 percent.

MB: Wow.

JE: Hold on just a second.

MB: Yeah.

JE: I got a thing I can read.

MB: Oh, okay. Oh, I think I read – yeah. What, the tax guy?

JE: Yeah. An empty lot on North Topsail Beach in 2000 sold for 175,000. In 2005, it sold for approximately 1.2 million. It's around 475 percent growth. I think that's right. But –

MB: That is astonishing. In two years?

JE: No, in five years.

MB: But still, 100 percent a year.

JE: Right.

MB: Man, that's some serious growth. I'm kicking myself that I didn't buy anything five years ago. Man –

JE: A lot of these people that've had this old family land, hundreds and hundreds of acres, they're locking it off and selling it to developers, investors. I would imagine here in Sneads Ferry this year, there's probably been over 1,000 acres exchanged hands already this year. It's

August 5th.

MB: So, this is like the Wild West here, the Wild [inaudible]

JE: It is. Talking about the ghost towns, I don't know. It's not around here. [laughter] Used to be a good little ghost town. But it's not anymore.

MB: [inaudible] documentary seriously it's a tight knit community of people.

JE: Very tight knit. When something happens to one person or one family, all the families will come together, raise money, and do fun drives, barbecue dinners, whatever they have to do to help that family get through their situation that they're facing at that particular time.

MB: So, talk about what you were just talking about that you raised some money for –

JE: My granddad's nephew, his boat capsized off of Georgia. His wife drowned on the boat. We got together and we raised money for them. It took a few days to get it going, well, the first day that it happened. The second day we had it going. We had several news crews down here doing interviews and got us some good publicity. We had money coming in from all over the state.

MB: Now when all the – if all the fishing thing stops, then that's not going to be – how's that going to affect the community thing here? If –

JE: We'll still have a tight knit community for the families that were in the seafood business, in the shrimping industry. When something like that happens, they'll face it every way they have to.

MB: But the town's changing with all these people moving in. It's not the same old Sneads Ferry anymore.

JE: No. You can go to the grocery store and you won't know anybody. You don't even know who's working the cash registers. You could go and you would spend an extra hour talking while you were at the grocery store. You couldn't get out of there for somebody – running into somebody that you knew and holding a conversation with them.

MB: So, that's not going to be the same.

JE: No, that's not the same now. It won't ever be the same again.

[end of transcript]