

Wild Caught
Tommy Everett Oral History
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Length of Interview: 7:54
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: All right. Mr. Everett, can you tell me a little bit about – a little bit of the history of the fish house? How it came into being and your family's involvement with fishing in Sneads Ferry?

Tommy Everett: Yeah.

MB: Like I've been telling you – and of course we can edit everything out. I'm doing a documentary about Sneads Ferry and – which I kind of look at as a real fishing community. Did you grow up in a – did you have relatives, for example, who were fishermen?

TE: Yeah, my father was. He started this business in 1940 or 1942. He built a small building here. The guys didn't have anywhere to market their fish. He was one of the first to get started down here. We've been in this same location since 1940. That's the third building that's been put there. Hurricane got one of them. We had a fire in 1980 and we rebuilt. Every time we'd rebuild, we'd modernize a little bit more. But my father was a fisherman. He helped build Camp Lejeune when it got started back in the early [19]40s. They needed a place to sell their fish and market them. It seemed like then they caught a lot more fish than we're catching now, but they weren't getting as much for them. But they made good money. He stayed in the business till 1971 when I took over. I've been here since [19]71, me and my brother. We're partners in this business.

MB: What was it like growing up in Sneads Ferry?

TE: Well, it's – to me – an ideal community, something you never get tired of. There's something to do on the water all the time, crabbing, fishing, shrimping. You can get out there and play, water ski and whatever. It's just interesting. There's always something. Before you get burnt out on shrimping, then it's the fishing season. Then you get burnt out on that, it's time to catch crabs or something. So, it's something a little different. You're not getting burned out on one thing all year round seems like.

MB: Is there a real sense of community here in Sneads Ferry?

TE: Yes. Everyone here is – seafood's our main thing. The restaurants are growing now. We are getting some good restaurants. To me, the restaurants here have as good food as Myrtle Beach or Calabash, anywhere. There's a lot of old-time cooks here who really know how to prepare seafood. The community all pool together to build up this industry.

MB: Can you tell me – first of all, you should define what is – what does a fish house do? What's involved here?

TE: Well, we pack and ship. We have our own boats. We have boats that we buy from that travel up and down the coast as far away as Florida and near the Virginia line. They kind of follow the shrimp migration or the fish migration. We pack them out. We bring them in here at that dock. We unload them, put them on ice, and ship them out to different states. We got trucks to come in and pick up for the New York market and Florida market. We sell a lot locally. Most of our shrimp are sold locally here.

MB: Oh, so you have your own boat, shrimp boats?

TE: Yeah. We've had four or five shrimp boats. We're down to one now. But we still pack about thirteen to fifteen boats here every day. Then sometimes we pack as high as twenty-five boats.

MB: Now, what does that mean, pack?

TE: Unloading them and buying their catch and shipping. We take their catch off and pay them market price, whatever the market price is. The shrimp being caught here now, next week we may be in South Carolina with our boats unloading down there.

MB: I see. Talk about – a little bit about – okay, so now the family aspect, in other words. Because we've talked to your brother a little bit. We've talked to his daughter who's going to NC State studying to go in – in other words, talk about the family business aspect because – not only with you guys, but with a lot of people in town here.

TE: Yeah. Well, most of them, they don't wander too far. They go to school. We got a decent high school here. A lot of them are interested in fish. They go off and some of them learn how to build boats. Some of the people want to get back and get into law enforcement. Some of them go on and get jobs like engineers and whatever. But usually, they always come back. Like I say, when I got out of high school, I had a chance to go to college and I knew I wasn't going to need anything. I wasn't going to get away from Sneads Ferry because this is what I wanted to do. I was just raised in it. My girls and all, they love to come down and shrimp. I reckon someday they'd be married and go on to something else. But we've just been in it the whole time. There's nothing else for me but seafood business.

MB: Well, speaking about that, how do you think the future looks for not only – in general for, say, commercial fishing?

TE: Well, it seems to be on a – it's coming back a little bit more than it was. I believe it was on a downhill grade. But we're getting our water quality back like it needs to be. They got stricter regulations. They're putting size limits on things. Some of it, they're going a little overboard with, I think. But they've studied it and put a lot of input in it. I guess they know what they're doing. They've been to school for it. But I think it's going to be a good thing for the ones that can – that's got nice equipment and can stay in it and keep up with the times. It's not a fly-by-night thing. You can't come here and take a piece of junk equipment and work it and make a good living. You got to keep your equipment up. I believe the industry's looking real good. Our trout's coming back. Our shrimp, we have off here now and then, but our shrimp's been really good the last couple years. The hurricane just put a little damper on us the last couple years, I say since [19]96. The hurricanes have hit here right at the best of our shrimp season. But I think we're rebounding well from it. It looks like a good season is coming now.

MB: Well, that's good. So, overall, it sounds like a pretty optimistic look at the future.

TE: Yeah. I'm optimistic about it. Sure am.

MB: Well, are you – do you guys participate in the shrimp festival that's coming up?

TE: Yeah, we help. The whole community takes part in it just about. We help furnish ice. We donate shrimp. A lot of these guys who own these boats donate shrimp to cut down on the cost of it. We put floats in. Everybody chips in, little odd jobs. We're mostly behind the scenes but we're there.

MB: So, that's the time when the whole community really comes together.

TE: Yeah. The small community pulls together good for that. It turns out to be a great thing. All the money is donated to different charities and fire departments, rescue squads. It's for a good cause. They've got a scholarship fund. A lot of good things come out of it. It brings a lot of tourists here to see what goes on in the small community.

MB: Okay. Well, I think that covers it pretty well. Anything else? Well, obviously, you showed us in the – when we were in your market, there are all kinds of – it's not just shrimp out here.

TE: Yeah.

MB: You got all kinds of fish coming in.

TE: Yeah. We got different things. Like I say, you don't kind of get burned out on one thing before something else comes; the crab, the blackfish or grouper fishing, shrimping. We just love it down here. It's God's country. It's Carolina blue skies.

MB: Okay, great. Thanks so much.

TE: Thank you.

MB: Appreciate it. So, what we're going to do is I'm going to grab a few shots of the boats –

TE: Yeah. Great.

MB: So, your boat, where is your –

[end of transcript]