

Wild Caught  
Michael Cowdrey Oral History  
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Let us just start off. What was it like growing up in Sneads Ferry?

Michael Cowdrey: I don't know. I spent a lot of time working. Pretty much all I did was go to school and work. I spent most of my time on the boat, especially most of the friends that I had were other fishermen's sons, you know what I mean, other people that were hanging out at the fish house. I've seen a lot and been a lot of different places as far as working in other states and offshore fishing and things like that. I lived a lot of my life outside. You know what I mean? It's hard for me to sit in a classroom or sit in an office or anything like that.

MB: So, would you say that you want to make a life of being a fisherman?

MC: Oh, yes, definitely. Definitely. I've already made a life of it.

MB: So, what is it about that you like?

MC: I don't know. I guess seeing something different every day. Even if you go to do the same thing, you're always faced with different conditions, different weather, different catch, different species of fish. Sometimes you see schools of dolphins. Sometimes you'll see some whales, sea turtles, just all kinds of things like that. Sometimes you'll see a freak of nature where you'll see a school of fish. You'll see the whole ocean. You know what I mean? The fish will just start jumping out of the water for no apparent reason. Things like that make it pretty interesting. I guess that's what makes it worth doing.

MB: Well, talk about the trip you just got back from last night. Well, you filmed it. I mean, talk about how long it was and what kind of fish you got, how far out you were. Take us through that.

MC: Well, we left out Tuesday morning or Wednesday morning. We left out Wednesday morning. We came in yesterday evening. That was Friday evening. We were out for about three days. We started out probably about 50 miles offshore, 40 or 48, 50 miles, WR2, the buoy off there. We didn't do a whole lot when we first got out there. We worked our way off a little ways to about 125-, 130-foot of water. We started catching a few red groupers. We caught a few reds, a few gags. We kind of died off. We went out a little bit further, about 150-, 180-foot of water. We worked there for a little while. So, we caught some dolphins, the dolphin fish, a few kings on the light line. John caught a 35-pound gag out there on the Miami. That was a humongous fish. It was probably one of the biggest fish I've ever seen. We got to see a wahoo swimming around the boat. We probably caught ten or fifteen king mackerel on the light line at that stop. That was pretty much the highlight of that day. We went off further. We worked our way off to probably 280-foot of water, 300-foot of water, maybe a little more than that. We didn't find no fish off there, though. We worked our way back in. We caught some tropical fish, some big eyes, yellow eyes, yellowedge groupers, red snapper. I caught a dolphin on the bottom rig. I guess that's about it. I caught some pink snapper and some other various grunts and snappers. They're cheap fish. That's about it, I guess.

MB: So, what do you eat out there?

MC: Fish, mostly. We've got a little gas grill on the boat. Like that dolphin, I caught that dolphin on the light line. We put him on the boat, filleted him out, and threw him on the grill. We brought a couple of T-bones out there with us. We'll bring a couple of packs of hot dogs or something. We cook mostly on the grill, whatever we eat. We bring sandwiches, meat, and bread, milk, orange juice, water, things like that. Sometimes we'll bring cereal. Sometimes we'll bring something to cook for breakfast. We used to cook on the stove a lot. It's kind of aggravating though. We used to fry a lot of fish. But since we got that grill, we've mostly been grilling everything. Because it gets kind of sloppy out there when you've got hot grease in the pan on the stove. It's pretty hard to deal with sometimes. When it's real pretty out, it's no big deal. But it's just a lot of effort. It's a lot easier to just throw a piece of meat on the grill and leave it there until it's done.

MB: Are you near shipping lanes out there? What is that like?

MC: Oh, yes. Yes. There are ships out there all the time. There's a shipping lane out there where it's designated a ship area. But it's not really like that. That's how it's supposed to be, but ships are just everywhere. You pretty much just got to pay attention, use your equipment, your electronics, and things like that to veer you away from them as much as possible. Pretty much if they see you, they'll turn away from you. They'll miss you. But a lot of times on a ship like that, especially this one out in the ocean for weeks at a time, you probably can't be in the bridge all the time. Accidents happen. I have never had no real close experience or nothing. I know people that have. But pretty much, we've had boats come pretty close to us, 500,000 yards from us, which is pretty close on the water. But that's about the closest I've ever come and encountered one of the ships.

MB: What about storms?

MC: Well, usually the NOAA Weather Service predicts storms, heavy storms. They're not real good at predicting the weather as far as light and variable winds and twenty to twenty-five. But usually when there's going to be a big storm, it's going to be real bad, you'll know that it's coming. Every once in a while, especially this time of year when it's first starting to get real hot out, and the water temperature is still a little cool, and it's real humid out, you'll have some thunderheads come through or something like that, where a thunderstorm will come up. It will blow 50, 60 miles an hour for probably thirty or forty-five minutes. Then it will calm down. But that's probably the most dangerous thing out there is those storms.

MB: So, have you been through some really rough weather?

MC: I've been through some pretty rough weather out there. I've been through some real rough weather on that shrimp boat in South Carolina. I've been in some 70-, 80-mile an hour winds where it blew like that for about three hours. A storm like that would come, a big thunderstorm would come, and when it gets over a body of water – like when it's traveling across land, it gets over a body of water – it will settle in. You know what I mean? When it comes to a sound, when we're working in a sound, it gets to that sound. It will settle in on top of that water, and it will just blow on you for a while. We were out there one time. I think it was an 80-foot steel hole that got blown up on the beach. We were set out dragging when it happened. We couldn't

do nothing but just keep dragging. It weren't really that bad on the boat. The most dangerous part probably was that other people were dragging around us. It was raining and blowing so hard, you couldn't see out the windows. The radar couldn't pick nothing up because there's so much disturbance, things in the air. It's just all a big blob. So, it's kind of dangerous running into other boats and trying to watch out where everyone's at. I grew up on the boat, and I've seen rough weather ever since I was real young. A lot of times, I don't know any different. We'll get in some real bad weather sometimes that some people will think it's real bad, but dad's had me out and stuff that [laughter] most people wouldn't even – he wouldn't even go out fishing when he would go out there and working.

MB: Well, talk about your dad.

MC: My dad was in the Marines. My mom and dad were both in the Marines. My mom is from New Jersey. My dad is from Michigan. They both met here at Camp Lejeune and got married while they were still in the Marine Corps. Dad started fishing with some local people around here. They lived in Sneads Ferry. The base paid them extra money to live off the base. He started fishing with some friends. He had a job set up in Michigan in a concrete plant, making pretty good money whenever he got out. Because he was about to get out and his four years was about to be up, he decided he wanted to go commercial fishing. He quit his job. He canceled out on his job he had up there and just bought him a little skiff, a 16-foot skiff with a little 40-horsepower motor on it and started fishing. I think he said the first day he went commercial fishing, he made like \$3.50 or something, worked all day after he got done paying his expenses and everything. He didn't make no money. He had just got married. His wife was pregnant and everything. He worked real hard, harder than anybody I've ever met. Everybody around here will say that, too. He's a real hard worker. He eventually sold one boat and bought a bigger one and then worked real hard with it and made money and sold it and bought a bigger one. Eventually, we've got a couple of decent-sized boats now that we make pretty good money with. He's not scared to go anywhere. He will go to Florida or Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, wherever the money is at. You know what I mean? He does whatever it takes to make it.

MB: So, how do you know where it is good? How do fishermen know where to go?

MC: Well, it's a seasonal thing. Shrimps are something that can happen all year long. There's different species of shrimp. Some of them, their prime is during the wintertime. Some of them, their prime is during the summer, spring, autumn, whatever. When there's no other shrimp, you can go to Florida and catch pink shrimp or something like that. Roe shrimp, which is white shrimp, when they grow up and spawn out, when they get to their full size and they spawn out and they go out into the ocean to die, that usually happens right around May, right around this time right here or the beginning of May in South Carolina around Beaufort, Hilton Head, all down around there in McLeansville and stuff like that. It's usually where we're at this time of year. But the winter was so cold that so much of the larvae got killed. They considered it a national disaster, and they closed it. It's not going to open until May 12th or – June 12th, I mean, I don't think. Right now, we'd usually be in another state, in Georgia or South Carolina, right now shrimping. Usually when we go up north around Cape Hatteras and up towards Virginia, around there, we're fishing, which is usually a wintertime thing that happens after Christmas, January, February, right in there. We net fish and do sink netting with *Lady K*. Pretty much

during that time, the shrimp boat is out of commission. We're usually doing work and projects on it, fixing it up for the next season.

MB: Like right now, you are fiberglassing?

MC: Right. Right now, we're behind schedule. We should be done by now. Usually, we would have been already working by now, but it's just the way this winter has been. It's not been a shrimp winter. It's been basically based on fishing. That's where all our effort has been focused on is fishing offshore, king mackerel and things like that.

MB: So, how do you know where to look for the king mackerel and all that?

MC: Water temperature has a lot to do with it. When the water temperature is real warm, king mackerel are everywhere. They come right up to the beach. But when the water temperature is cold during the wintertime, they usually don't get in any water below 70-three degrees. If they do get in water below 73 degrees, they won't eat. When the water temperature is cold, you've got to go off towards Gulf Stream for it to get warm. When the water temperature is cold that far off, the kings are right there at the edge where the warm water meets the cold water and they're schooled up. That's when you can catch them commercially. Because when you go commercial fishing, you have to catch a load of fish. You can't just go out there and catch four or five fish just for fun. You've got to go out there when they're knotted up, and you can catch ten. You need to catch between five hundred- and a thousand-pound a day, anyway. Once the warm water comes in closer, the kings have a lot more bait and ledges and things like that to feed on, and they scatter out. There's still plenty of kings out there. Well, that's a lot of times when you catch the bigger fish when they're out roaming around by themselves, loners. But pretty much, we'll king fish until the warm water gets in. It gets in to about 40 or 50 miles. Once it gets in from there, they've got so much of a wide area to hunt in for bait and things like that that it's just kind of hard to catch a school of them. They won't go real far out into the Gulf Stream because once they get out there, they become bait themselves. They've got bigger fish preying on them. So, usually right there around the edge of the continental shelf, the Gulf Stream and probably about 70-, 80-foot of water, or 60-foot of water sometimes, 50-foot of water every once in a while, that right in there is when you do good king fishing.

MB: I asked John, your partner on the (group?), (John Edens?).

MC: Right.

MB: Would you consider yourself a hunter? You are hunting for fish?

MC: Definitely, yes. Yes. Because when you go out and catch fish, usually you're not really targeting the fish that you're hunting. You've got to find its habitat and the particular kind of bait that it likes to eat. You've got to find the places where the habitat is set up right for the fish to be there. That's how you know where to go. There's ledges and rocks and things out there. You kind of have an idea. John does a lot better than I do because he's been doing it a long time. That's something else that comes with learning how to fish, is experience. Certain times of the year, during certain weather, if the wind blows one way, John might know that the fish are going

to be on a certain ledge when the weather's doing like that right there because that's just the fish's nature. Fish are funny. Nobody will ever be able to figure them out. Different things in the climate and the moon and the tide, everything like that makes them behave certain ways and go to certain spots and eat different kinds. Some days there'll be so many fish in the water. You'll see them swimming all around the boat. You'll see kings everywhere cutting the water. But they just won't eat. They won't eat your bait. You know what I mean? They're just not in the mood or the water temperature isn't right. A lot of times, you don't catch fish real good around the full moon. You catch shrimp great around the full moon.

MB: You have already learned a tremendous amount about fish.

MC: Yes, definitely.

MB: Weather and all that.

MC: Yes.

MB: Well, you cannot learn that from a book, though.

MC: No. No, it takes a lot of experience. You've got to make a lot of mistakes before you can learn a lot about it. I still have a lot to learn. There's a lot of people around here that have been fishing their whole lives that are sixty, seventy, or eighty years old. I've been fishing my whole life, but I'm not but twenty. There's a lot that I know that most people don't, but I have a lot more to learn. That's a big part of why I'm working with John on the boat. He's kind of helping me out, teaching me about how to fish out there in that deep water.

MB: So, how old were you when you first started to really get into this stuff?

MC: The first time I ever went out fishing with my parents, I was a month old. Because they were both fresh out of the Marine Corps, neither one of them had jobs. Fishing was all they did. They couldn't afford a daycare for me, so they'd just bring me out in the boat. I learned how to walk on a shrimp boat right here in this river. As soon as I worked with them, as much as I was able to, until I was about eight, and then it was a full-time job. That was when I was really required to work. That's when they started paying me. I worked for probably 5 percent. I got a real mild share. I wasn't really much help. I was probably more in the way at that young of an age. Once I got to be about twelve, I started getting a bigger share. I started paying income tax, state and federal. I had enough money saved up. I bought my first piece of land. Once I got about sixteen, I guess, I started getting a full share. No, I wasn't even sixteen. I guess I was thirteen or fourteen. I started working with dad by myself, just me and him on the boat with no other help. Now, whenever me and him go, it's no problem for me and him. We go by ourselves. I can handle everything by myself now. Now, I take out the other boat and go out by myself and have crew that work under me sometimes. It's been a growing experience.

MB: So, you have been really a professional for about twelve years almost?

MC: Yes, I guess so.

MB: Around eight to twenty.

MC: Yes.

MB: Pretty amazing.

MC: Well, when I was probably six years old, I used to drive that, not *Jenny M's*, but the *Lady K* fishing boat. We used to shrimp with that. I used to drive it up and down the beach. I used to drag with it. With my father on the boat, he'd be picking up shrimp. He'd have me out there driving. I would take it in the inlet here. It was just kind of a big deal. I didn't really realize it then. I was exposed to a lot of things.

MB: I think that can be tricky getting in that inlet sometimes.

MC: Oh, yes. Yes. There's been a lot of boats lost on that inlet. There's been a couple lives lost on that inlet. Sometimes, it's pretty much Mother Nature does with that inlet, whatever she wants to. She'll cut it out and make it deep. Then they'll go out there, and they'll pump it. We know the Corps of Engineers come down and try and dredge it out. They'll cut a deep hole in it. Then the tide will run through there and fill it back up. They'll cut another deep hole somewhere else. There's always water to get through that inlet somewhere on the beach. If they would just leave it alone completely, it would keep deep water through there. You would just have to know how to find it. You couldn't just mark it with buoys because it changes all the time from day-to-day. The tides change. The whole beach, just everything on the coast changes all the time. You kind of got to be a water man and know how to read water and waves and breakers and things like that and tides.

MB: We interviewed an anthropologist right here a couple of days ago. He was talking about how fishermen know way more about anybody else about all what you are just talking about –

MC: Right.

MB: – and care deeply about the environment.

MC: Yes. Well, the environment and the river and the ocean and the beaches and the coast, everything has to do with our living. If it gets destroyed, then we have no living. Just like the fish and the shrimp and everything that's in the water, at one time or another, they all come from the water's edge. They all come from larva. The big fish come in here from offshore to spawn. Just like in Channel Bay, they have grouper, the little baby grouper in Channel Bay. The fish come in shore to spawn. The fish raise in here. Then they go back off there when they're large. That's when you catch them. So, if the waters and things get polluted, just like the beach – the beaches are barrier islands. They're out there to do a particular job. When they build on the beaches and they jetty inlets and things like that, they interrupt the natural cycle of what's supposed to go on. If you just let it conduct its natural cycle, everything will be okay. You'll just have to adjust to it every once in a while. But everybody wants to set things in a certain place and have them be there. It's just not going to work like that. Like when they jetty an inlet,

it makes the inlet real deep, but it messes up the barrier island around it. It'll eat all out on one side of the inlet on the eastern side. Then on the western side, it'll deposit all the sand. If you go to a jettied inlet, on one side of the inlet, it'll be eaten all out. Then on the other side, it'll be all full of sand. It doesn't really seem like that big of a deal that it's like that, but that's not how it's supposed to be. Eventually, it's going to eat out around those jetties. Then it's just going to be a big mess.

MB: Well, North Topsail Beach is a mess right now.

MC: Oh, yes, definitely.

MB: There is hardly any beach left over there.

MC: Well, that's because the reason there isn't no beach left is because they built structures there. Then they tried to keep the dunes in one place in front of the structures. Well, the beach eats away. That's what it's supposed to do. That's what it's there for. It eats away. It goes out into the ocean. It comes back up behind it. It's just a going cycle. You know what I mean? Everything is moving, the continents and everything. They try and keep those dunes in one place, and the beach gets shorter. Well, the dunes are supposed to be moving back, too. It's just the way it's supposed to happen. But they keep pushing the sand up there with bulldozers and stuff. Then a storm comes. They have a bunch of fluffed-up, unsettled sand. When a storm comes, they're not even dunes. All they are are sand piles, and they just get washed away. They have no growth in them. They have no maritime force. You know what I mean? Things like that held everything together.

MB: Well, now, let me ask you this. You are the future generation of fishing.

MC: Right.

MB: A lot of the people you grew up with and went to high school with, are they going into it like you are?

MC: Not really. There's a few of us around my age. You probably have met some of them, know some of them. (Jonathan Yapp?), he's a few years older than me, but he's around my age. He graduated probably my freshman year in high school was his senior year. (Steven Edens?), me and him grew up together. We were best friends. He owns a shrimp boat, not *Barbara Sue*, but *Lady Barbara*. We graduated high school together. (Matthew Hudson?), I don't know if you've heard of him. He works with Steven a little bit. There is probably four or five of us my age. Andy Edens, Timmy Edens' son. I don't know if you've heard of him. Donnie Edens, you know Donnie Edens built the boat, it's his nephew. Steven is his son. There's not a whole bunch of us really. Most of the people around here, I don't know, they kind of are here or from other places. A lot of the generations are kind of piddling out, a lot of the older people. There's a lot of people that don't have ongoing bloodlines for young people my age or people that want to be in fishing. A lot of kids, they just don't like to fish in life growing up. Because when you do that, you don't have time for much else. I'm twenty years old. This will be the first summer that I've ever been home during the summertime. I mean, I'm going to be out fishing for four or five



days at a time. But when I come home, I'll be in my hometown. You know what I mean? I can hang out with my friends and stuff. Usually, I live in South Carolina. As soon as I get off school, I go to South Carolina and live on the boat down there until I go back to school. Every Fourth of July, I have been out there picking up shrimp and watching people on the beach having parties and stuff, bonfires, and shooting off fireworks, things like that. That's a lot of things you have to give up when you're a fisherman because it's not just a job, it's a lifestyle. According to how you live it is how you're going to live at home. If you work real hard and put in a lot of hours, you can live in a nice house and drive a nice truck. If you don't, you can't.

MB: Why are not more young people want to go into it, do you think?

MC: It's not easy. For one thing, the way things are set up now, the rules and regulations, you can't really get in it if you weren't raised in it. If you do, it's going to cost you a lot of money. They have a moratorium now on North Carolina commercial fishing license. If you haven't had a license or can't show income or commercial fishing income for so much percent of your income for the last so many years, it's not even legal for you to get a license, unless you go in front of a board. They interview you. They judge whether you're worthy or not or whatever. There's a grandfather clause that if your father was a fisherman and you fished with your father, once you get of age, you can get a license. It's real hard to get into. Things have gotten kind of high-tech these days anyway. Just for commercial fishermen themselves, if you just went out and learned about the water and learned about the tides and the winds and the weather and things like that, you could catch fish. You can still do that and catch fish. But the big money fish is on a whole higher level. Everybody has bigger technology, bigger and better nets, better equipment to find the fish with, faster boats, things like that. It's a lot more competitive. It's not something that you can learn in a year or two. If you want to go from someone that's not doing it, not been raised in fishing to doing it, it's going to take a few years of poverty pretty much. [laughter] It's possible. My father did it. But it's a hard way to go.

MB: It is pretty amazing when you think about your dad because he came from Michigan. He had to learn a whole new way of life.

MC: Right, exactly.

MB: He must have really fallen in love with it.

MC: Yes, he really did love it. It was kind of hard for him here because he was a Yankee. This is a hometown with a lot of Rebs here and things like that. I mean, I haven't had any problem growing up because I was born here, and I was raised here. But when he came here, he was a Yankee jarhead from the Marines. You just aren't accepted like that around here. It's kind of a hickish, small town. I mean, I'm right in it myself. I feel the same way. If some Marine came off the base and tried commercial fishermen, I'd tell him he was a fool, that he would never make it. That's the same kind of things that dad heard.

MB: Obviously, he did not listen to them.

MC: No, no. Not at all, no.

MB: [laughter] It shows a lot of grit there.

MC: Yes, definitely so. He's definitely a self-made man.

MB: Well, back to Sneads Ferry, would you say there is a good sense of community here? We have footage of you at the shrimp festival running that shrimp net mobile where most of –

MC: The hayride in the boat.

MB: The hay riding. [laughter]

MC: Yes.

MB: Talk about the sense of what it has been like growing up in a small town. There are some good things about it [inaudible].

MC: Yes, there's definitely some good things about it. Like a lot of times, a lot of the people around here will fight amongst each other and argue amongst each other and not get along. But as a community, as a whole, they all stick together. If there's a problem entering the community or something negative in the community, all those people that dislike each other will pull together. For the most part, they'll pull together and combine their forces to help get rid of it. It's kind of a love-hate town. People will go outside the bar and fishermen and stuff like that. They'll fight each other. They'll go back inside and buy each other a beer. Everyone around here has grown up together, grown up fighting each other, and loving each other and helping each other out and things like that. It's a pretty tight-knit community, I would guess.

MB: Well, how about when the thing with Joey Green and Hot Dog and all that happened when they drowned before Christmas? Did that draw the community together, something like that?

MC: Definitely. Yes, especially to help the families of the people of Joey and Hot Dog. I think everybody got together as much as they could and tried to raise funds and do what they could. The Commercial Fishing Association, they did what they could. They donated money. I know all the churches did. There were jars in all the convenience stores. Any business around here had a collection for the family. That right there was definitely an incident that proved how tight this community can be because when that happened, everybody was affected by it. Everybody knew those two fellows. I think pretty much everybody did what they could to help out the families and comfort them. Joey left behind a wife and three kids, I believe. I'm not sure how many kids. But everybody's done a lot of things to help them out. It was a bad thing that happened, but a lot of good came out of it with the way people worked together to help everybody out.

MB: So, looking way down the road, do you think towns like Sneads Ferry will be able to keep going?

MC: I mean, Sneads Ferry will always be here. It's going to be a lot more commercialized than

what it is. Just like Topsail Beach ten years ago, it wasn't near as commercialized. There used to not be nothing but a sand dune over there. Sneads Ferry is getting the same way. The property value is going up. The beaches grow. The bigger the beach gets, the bigger Sneads Ferry is going to get. Because that's pretty much what's – when tourist season is out, Sneads Ferry is desolate. Nothing happens. Nobody comes out. Nobody spends no money. I mean, the economy is not real great. The beach brings a lot to Sneads Ferry. I think a lot of people come here to the beach to visit. They buy land here in Sneads Ferry, and they retire here because it's a nice, little, small town. It's going to keep on happening. Eventually, it's not going to be a nice, little, small town no more. It'll always have something to do with the water. There always, I think, would be nice places of it, but it's getting more commercialized, which is bound to happen. The population is going up. It's going to get more populated everywhere.

MB: Well, how about for the fishermen, though?

MC: You're always going to be able to fish here, I believe, but it's going to be a lot harder. There's going to be a lot less waters to fish in. There's already a lot less water with the pollution and everything in the river. They move the shrimping line up every year, just about. I don't think it's been moved up the past couple years. But every time they move it ahead, it's not very much longer for it. They move it ahead a little bit more. With people developing on the coast, like people buy waterfront property and put a dock out there and then they don't want nobody fishing around their dock within so many yards of their dock and things like that. Enough people have waterfront property. There's enough docks out there. A lot of those people that have those kinds of places have enough money that they have a pool. You know what I mean? If they want to get a law passed, enough of them get together and got enough money and they want to get a law passed that you can't set a net within so many feet of their dock, then they can do it. That's the kind of things that are going to happen. That's the kind of things that are already in progress of happening.

MB: As I understand it, a lot of that has happened in Florida already.

MC: Right. Oh, yes. They completely banned nets in Florida. I think it's against the law to even have a net in the back of your truck now in the State of Florida. See, a lot of what happens is a lot of people that come to places like this come here because of the water. They like to fish. They like to sports fish. Every year isn't the same. Every year, something's lacking. Either fish is lacking, or shrimp is lacking. One species is always lacking. Another species is always plentiful. They don't always come in by the beach. Sometimes they'll migrate offshore, north to south, way off the beach. When someone goes out there in their boat and they had been out there last year and caught piles of fish, then they go out the next year in their boat, and they don't catch no fish. They say, "Oh, well, there's no fish. The commercial fishermen has caught all the fish. We can't catch no fish," like right off the beach and the piers and everything. Well, sometimes the fish, they migrate offshore. They don't come in here. Every year is different. If they don't see the fish, they feel like they're not there, the same way with sea turtles. When they count sea turtles, they fly over the ocean. They count sea turtles in so many square miles. Then they multiply that by how many square miles there is in the ocean. Well, what if all the sea turtles that they flew over just happened to be diving down? They can hold their breath for forty-five minutes or an hour sometimes. There's probably fifty sea turtles swimming around underneath

the surface of the water they didn't even see. But they can't go around and count all the sea turtles in the ocean. So, what they don't see, they don't think is there.

MB: I have heard that fish stocks go up and down in cycles anyway.

MC: Oh, yes. It's just nature and how it happens. Whenever anything happens in the ocean to any particular species, it affects everything else because everything in the ocean eats something underneath it. Shrimp feed a lot of fish. When there's not a whole lot of shrimp, the fish aren't going to run inshore. They're going to go offshore where they'll eat a lot of other crustaceans, little crabs, and things like that. Everything affects everything else.

MB: Well, is there anything, any stories, or anything you want to wrap it up? This is your life. You are committed to it.

MC: Yes, definitely so. Definitely so. I plan on fishing for the rest of my life. I plan on doing a lot of fishing offshore. I really don't like fishing in here. I really don't like fishing in the river or around the beach. I like getting offshore and seeing the different tropical species of fish and catching bigger fish and things like that. It's nice when you go out there and catch a fish and it's worth \$60. Opposed to picking up a thousand-pound of shrimp that are worth \$1 a pound, which you make a lot more money shrimping usually on average than you do fishing off there, but it's a lot more enjoyable off there. It's kind of like you're out there doing just what you want to do. You're not out there doing something because you know it's good money. You're out there enjoying yourself.

MB: So, it is being out there in the water, the freedom?

MC: Yes, yes. Just like I was saying earlier, the things you see – every once in a while, a bird will get blown offshore, I mean, like a yellow finch or a little golden finch or a barn sparrow, things like that. Little birds like that, they get up in the Gulf Stream or in a jet stream. They'll get blown offshore. You'll see them flying around. He'll fly to the boat because it's the only thing he can land on. Birds like that, they can't land on the water. They'll sit on the boat. You can walk right up to them and pet them and stuff like that. He's so tired and exhausted. He's just so happy. Sometimes they'll land on the boat. They'll catch a ride with us all the way in. They'll just sit down. When they sit down, you can just tell. You know what I mean? They'll just take a load off. They'll sit there and breathe. You can put your finger up to them. He'll step up on your finger. Normally, if he had any kind of energy, he wouldn't let you do nothing like that.

MB: That is pretty cool.

MC: Yes. Yes, that's pretty neat.

MB: From a spiritual sense, do you find it out there, any kind of spiritual at all in terms of just being out on the water?

MC: Yes. I think my favorite part of the day is usually – what begins and ends my day is sunrise and sunset out there in the water, especially when it's real pretty out because it's quiet.

There's no sound except for the water splashing on the boat. There's birds and fish and things out there. During sunrise and sunset is when you get most of your activity out in the water, out of everything. Everything feeds at sunrise and sunset. The sky is real pretty. It's just a real nice time to be out there. That's probably my two favorite parts of the day, sunrise and sunset.

MB: You got strong working on the boats?

MC: Well, yes, pretty much. When I was young, I wasn't very big. Harvey can tell you. He was my basketball coach. I wasn't really very athletic. I was a little bit chubby. I used to be real chubby when I was young. That's how I got the name Chops. My dad called me Pork Chops. It just kind of stuck with me. When I got older and started playing sports and things like that, everyone just started calling me Chops. I went to college and my roommate called me Chops there. Everybody at college started calling me Chops. My dad used to work me out a lot. He used to get me up in the mornings before I went to school. 5:00 a.m., he'd take me to the beach and run me for miles. I had bad grades when I was in fifth grade. I just had to get up at 5:00 a.m. and go run on the beach for miles. That's when I was pretty chubby. He used to get me up every morning and do PT and stretch out and stuff before I went to school. It never really seemed like it paid off for a long time. Eventually, I thinned on out. I lost a lot of my fat. But I was pretty skinny then. I always had big bones. I had big hips and big shoulders and everything. My bones were all stuck out. Then between my junior and senior year in high school, that summer, I probably gained 60 pounds of muscle just working on the boat. I hit puberty, I guess. I had a growth spurt, grew a couple inches. Then I came back and kicked (dad?) at wrestling after four years of losing. [laughter] Yes. I've never really lifted weights. The longest I've ever lifted weights is probably two weeks consecutively. You know what I mean? I've lifted weights probably five or six times throughout my life for a week or two-week period. When I was in high school, I worked out real hard wrestling. I used to run. Before I went to school, I'd run two miles between school and practice, which was that afternoon. Then I'd probably eat six big meals a day. I guess that just kind of grew on me, being strong. You kind of got to be when you're out there. Not so much just the physical work, but just being on the boat. You know what I mean? You're balancing yourself all the time. You use all your muscles when you're on the boat. You can go out on the boat for a day and not do nothing, but just go boat riding. When you come back, you'll be worn out. Your body will be sore and everything if you go out when it's rough. You're always having to bounce off of things and hold on to things to hold you up. If you can't hold on to nothing, it works the hell out of your legs. [laughter]

MB: That is a good point.

MC: Yes.

MB: Then have you learned how to work on engines, all the different aspects of –

MC: Oh, yes. Yes. That's one thing about being a commercial fisherman. You have to be a professional at almost everything. You've got to know about electronics. Not just the equipment electronics, but about your batteries and negative and positive and grounds and noise. Because when you get on a boat like that, the only ground you have is water. You have a ground plate that goes through the bottom of the boat. When you have all this equipment running close to

each other, it creates noise in other equipment, and it causes it to not function properly. You've got to go through and make sure everything's grounded out. You've got to know a lot about it. You've got banks of batteries. You definitely got to know a lot about mechanical work. Me and dad rebuilt that V12 about ten years ago, I believe. I guess I was ten years old. We took it apart all by ourselves. We rebuilt the whole motor completely by ourselves. We had a mechanic come down and set the racks, set the valves, or the rocker arms on it so that it would be tuned in. But we did pretty much the rest of that. We've worked on that Cummins a lot. We've done everything but rebuild that Cummins. We'd sent it off to get rebuilt. But you've got to know how to run hydraulics. You've got to know how to work on hydraulics, woodwork, fiberglass, stainless. I've got to know how to weld. I built that rigging, things like that. You've got to fabricate things all the time. That's one thing about it. You're constantly having to invent something to accommodate your needs, especially the smaller boats you've got. Because the more compact things got to be, you can't have big old equipment on there to satisfy certain needs. You've kind of got to build something that serves several purposes on the boat and not just one. You've kind of got to be inventive.

MB: So, you taught yourself how to weld?

MC: I learned how to weld a little bit in high school, not a whole lot. I learned the basics on how to weld. I don't know how to use a MIG welder, any kind of shielded gas welding or anything like that. But I can use a buzz box, a Lincoln buzz box. I can weld stainless. I can weld pretty much anything but aluminum. I learned the basics in high school. I came and worked on the boat and used what I knew. I eventually got where I can do pretty good. I can build pretty much anything, I guess, I suppose.

MB: Now, are you still living at home? Or do you have your own trailer or –

MC: Well, I got that land I bought a while back. Probably about six months ago, I bought a trailer. I got it set over there. I'm saving my money right now. I'm trying to get a septic tank put down. I've got to get county water run. They won't run county water back there where I live. The well water is so bad back there. It's got iron in it. So, it's going to cost me \$1,000 to get my water hooked up. So, I've got to run pipes and everything down my road. Hopefully, before this summer's over, hopefully before August, I'll have my place set up, and I'll be living in it.

MB: You will get your satellite dish?

MC: I don't watch too much TV.

MB: You do not?

MC: No. I'm going to get me a nice big screened-in porch, though. Yes, I like sitting outside a lot. Yes, I don't watch much TV. I doubt I'll even have a TV. I'll have me a nice radio, definitely.

MB: Listening to music?

MC: Listening to music, yes.

MB: Okay. Good.

MC: Now we're going to get Harvey here.

Male Speaker: You don't need me.

MC: [laughter]

MB: [laughter] Yes.

MS: This man has done far better. I'm proud of him.

MC: The spotlight is off.

MB: Well, the first interview we did for the whole documentary was Harvey. That is right. That was the first one.

MS: Yes. I was talking about graveyards in the old days, Mike.

MC: Oh, yes.

MS: This is today. Mike was on my rec league basketball team in [19]79, boys and girls playing together way back there. That bunch that he had, (Matt Smythe?) and (Paul Hicks?) –

MC: Yes. We were the Saints.

Male Speaker: I'm telling you –

MC: We won the whole thing.

MS: – every one of them has gone on to do good things.

MB: It is great.

MS: But Michael is the one who's most closely associated with the lifestyle here out of all of them.

MC: Yes.

MB: That is interesting.

MS: He's the one closest to the [inaudible].

MC: I got some roots.

Male Speaker: Yes, you do.

MB: Well, you love doing it, too, though.

MC: Yes.

MB: That is very important.

MC: That's something about commercial fishing. It's not a job you can do if you don't – it's not like a profession that you can go out and do. It's something that you've got to love to do. Because in order to survive off of an income from commercial fishing, you have to go and work when you really don't want to go. I mean, really don't want to go. [laughter] You know what I mean? You've got to go out and work in some really nasty shit sometimes. You've got to put up with a lot of things that are really miserable. That's probably 40 percent of the work you do is like that or sometimes more. But the few times when it is real nice, it really makes it all worth it. It makes it all worthwhile.

MB: I think a lot of people these days; they are not going to tolerate. There is no air conditioning on that boat.

MC: Well, the bigger boats you can get – like we're about to get a generator for that boat. We've got an air conditioning on it right now that hooks up to a gas generator, which we don't like because it isn't safe. It's not safe to have gasoline on the boat because diesel engines are just a lot safer. You can produce a lot more power, a lot more KWs. We can put a generator on there, like a fifteen- or twenty-KW. We could run everything that you would have in a house, hot water heater, television, freezer, refrigerator, microwave, electric stove if you wanted it. You can have all the luxuries of home on the boat if it's big enough to hold everything you want to put on there. Some boats just aren't big enough to even justify putting a generator on. Like *Lady K*, our fishing boat, it's probably the minimum. We're going to put a generator on it so that we can put a freezer, a refrigerator, and a couple little things on it. But it's going to be a small generator. That's probably about the smallest boat you'd want to put a generator on. It's just the weight. It's just not feasible to put it on there.

MB: Thank you so much. We will take that mic off.

MC: Yes. Do not let me run off here with –

[end of transcript]