

Wild Caught
Nancy Edens Oral History
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Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Well, Nancy, just to get us going a little bit, I mean, we were just talking outside about what this film really is looking at a big story. We are just trying to show this kind of story of one fishing town kind of symbolizing a number of fishing towns. As you know way better than I do, Sneads Ferry is well over for 300 years. So, years that has been a fishing town all that time, families like yours, the Midgetts, and all kinds of families have been Davis' [spelled phonetically] have been here for generations, making a living from the river and the sea. Now, it is like all kinds of stuff is happening, imports and – tell us a little bit – just to make things going – well, maybe just a little bit as a background, what was it like growing up in Sneads Ferry for you? What was that like?

Nancy Edens: Well, we were a lot smaller than we are now [laughter]. The town – we know we didn't have as many restaurants. All the same fish houses were probably here. Maybe there's been one or two added, but not very many. But you knew everybody – when you went to the grocery store, you knew everybody you saw in there, now you don't. There're so many more people here. They have moved in here.

MB: I guess, obviously, they are attracted like everybody is to –

NE: To the water.

MB: – coast so –

NE: Yes.

MB: So, how does it make you feel to see all these lots for sale and all of that --

NE: Well, it's sad because the people that grew up here really can't afford to live here, can't afford to buy the waterfront property because of the price has been so high, which it does everywhere now. All over any coastal communities, the prices are high on the water. We're still here. We're still living here, but a lot of them are not living in the world they probably want to.

MB: When you grew up as a member of the Millis family –

NE: Right.

MB: – and the more I hear in Millis' Fish House, maybe described how was it five years ago? Is it a whole different scene now then? Are they busy or a lot busier?

NE: You mean as far as the fish house?

MB: Yes, or just the –

NE: Oh, yes.

MB: – whole town it seems like.

NE: Yes. Well, this year shrimp season has been really down. But five years ago, it was pretty good then. They were catching more. They were getting a better price than they are now. The fuel price was down. That's one of the things that's really hard and as bad as fuel price, and also the shrimp price, but we were catching more also.

MB: So, what has been going on with the imports and all? This is a big issue. Described what it seems like in the last couple of years is like?

NE: Yes. There are so many more imports coming in here that people don't realize. The Southern Shrimp Alliance was formed in 2003, to try to help that, to combat that. Not to stop it, you can't stop it, but to stop the dumping, which is when they put the shrimp in here for below the price that they're actually process them for. That's one thing that hurt the price of shrimp. Everybody can get them so cheap. They're not coming to the fish house. There are the retail markets to get them, but they don't know what they're eating. They're eating the ones that have so many chemicals in. What they're not eating are the wild-caught shrimp.

MB: So, in terms of the Southern Shrimp Alliance, what is this? Obviously, the southern states like the gold states.

NE: Yes. Eight states, from North Carolina all the way to Texas. There're two representatives from each state that meet every so often. They meet at least twice, three times a year sometimes. They go to Washington to see the representatives to make them aware. They're trying to get more testing done for the antibiotics in shrimp. They're working with the National Marine Fisheries on different regulations. They're just trying to help the commercial fishermen stay alive really. This is what they're doing.

MB: You did not take us through what the Southern Shrimp Alliance would be. You are the one of the state reps.

NE: From North Carolina.

MB: Tell us how did you get involved?

NE: Well, I knew about it, and we were members of it. Then one of the representatives from North Carolina had to get off the board. They asked if I would consider taking his place. So, then I was voted in at a meeting. That's how I became on it. I've been on it for – it was a year in February. I've been in, I think, about four meetings so far with them.

MB: So, what did you guys done? Have you done some legal stuff to try to –

NE: Yes.

MB: – tell us about what –

NE: They filed suit against six countries, which were Vietnam, China, Brazil, Ecuador, India, and Thailand for dumping the shrimp. They were found guilty of dumping shrimp in the United

States. Then what happens, they turn around and they have to pay tariffs for bringing their shrimp in, which they were not having to do. It has slowed down the import of shrimp. The imports are down from what they were even a year ago. They're down. They're not stopped. They're not going to stop because the wild-caught shrimp, you can't produce enough to supply the demand. So, you have to have some imports, but not at the low prices.

MB: So, what you guys are saying is it is unfair that they are actually deliberately dumping the shrimp below what cost them to actually –

NE: Right.

MB: – make them?

NE: Right.

MB: So, they are –

[talking simultaneously]

NE: They're farm raised, which they have such cheap labor over there. But they're still putting them in here at such a cheap price.

Female Speaker: So, the dumping is low prices and not paying tariffs or –

NE: Well, the dumping is when they put them in here below their cost. They weren't having to pay the tariffs. So, when they do that, then that's when they have to start paying the tariffs.

FS: So, you are telling me that at a fair price, if you get with the [inaudible] tariffs.

NE: Yes.

FS: Got it.

MB: First, how do you figure out their labor is so cheap in any of those countries? That's a problem, what they pay people. I think in Mexico they pay an average farmer– in Mexico, I just read about this in a book last – actually fascinating book called "Fast Food Nation." It looks at all of the different parts where this is going on. Like, beef production is bringing people from Mexico, and they pay them like, you know? They think they are getting great money. They are getting 8 to \$9 an hour over the last couple of months. They are already getting carpal tunnel syndrome and it's dangerous [inaudible]. It is like slave labor now. Then they get more group of people. They do not care if they cut their finger off or what happens to these people. They just bust them in, used them up, shipped them out.

NE: Bring some more in.

MB: Just horrible.

NE: Yes.

MB: So, it is just happening all over the place in the food production. But anyway, I do not think it goes into the seafood aspect.

NE: Well, there's some of the crab pickers have Mexicans that work. But I don't know stuff like that. I've never heard of anything like that.

FS: It's really nice [inaudible] about how these crab pickers were coming back from Montana and Mexico. They are part of the town. They would be there six months. But because of the timing and applying for guestworker permits, the permit quota was filled up before the people could – this was somewhere in Maryland – legally apply for the permits. The quota was filled up. They could not get these people. They are trying to work with the system. They were treating them pretty fairly. It was good situation all around. Now, it just wasn't working out.

NE: I know in oriental (Charles Starnes?) or [inaudible]. Have you ever been up in that area?

MB: We should go up there.

NE: I think it's more or less like the same ones every year and brings them up here. They had the shrimp. He has this real big house. I mean, it is like a two-story house. I guess they have like apartments in there, whatever, that they live in. Then he takes them back every year. I know that they're treated good there, but –

MB: So, where are we? Now, let me ask you where is the imported shrimp, is that all farm raised pretty much, or do they bring in wild caught from Ecuador or some place?

NE: No. It's all farm raised.

MB: What about some of the chemical issues? Have you found out about – the fact of the matter, what about that issue? A lot of American consumers really do not know what they are eating.

NE: No. They don't. They don't know what they're eating. The USDA does testing, but they don't test every shipment that comes in. If they find some, then usually they're sent back, which they can probably turn around and send them back again. I don't know. But they're not doing enough testing. We found out from some of the tests that they done, a lot of it do have the chemicals that are banned in the United States. If people knew what they were eating, they would not eat the imported shrimp.

MB: So, what are they putting in, the antibiotics?

NE: Yes, antibiotics. What is it that makes the shrimp grow faster so they can – in the ponds, and they can sell them faster? That's what it is. They're growing faster, and they're selling faster.

MB: They need the antibiotics because they are in these pits. So, obviously, the water gets full of waste. So, when they inoculate them, they do not get hurt by their own excrement, essentially, which is very unappetizing [laughter]. So, now, what is next for the Southern Shrimp Alliance? What is on the agenda in terms of –

NE: Well, now, they have started collecting the tariffs. As of February of this year, they started collecting the tariffs. That will go on for a period of five years – I can't remember – it's five years, or as long as they're still bringing the shrimp in here.

MB: Do you know how many people are in the Southern Shrimp Alliance? Do you know is this –

NE: I don't know.

MB: Go ahead. [inaudible]

FS: That's what –

MB: They dropped most of the boxes in for question.

NE: Right.

MB: Go ahead. I am rolling.

FS: How do you see the market for wild-caught shrimp expanding?

NE: Out of the Southern Shrimp Alliance has come a marketing group, which is Southern Shrimp Alliance is working with them. It's called wild caught – I mean, that's what they're promoting are, the wild-caught shrimp. That's one thing that the shrimp alliance is doing. It's trying to help the marketing for – I don't know if you saw. (Emeril? 00:12:09) now has his own wild-caught shrimp, which are coming out of Louisiana. He has his own bag. You can go in the grocery store and buy these. That says Emeril on them, which is supposed to help us also. We have all these different people that are endorsing it.

MB: That is great. Go ahead, (dear?).

FS: So, who do you think is going to be choosing wild-caught shrimp?

NE: The well-informed citizens are the ones that are going to be choosing them. Then other people as they learn. Even the taste can tell you. The wild caught are so much better in taste.

MB: I guess people do not realize like going out people like (Mack?) and (Ellen?) and Nancy, I guess the emotional aspect. So, you guys sold that beautiful boat here, right?

NE: The red one? Yes.

MB: Yes.

NE: They're always sold.

MB: Was that the family down the coast or –

NE: Yes. We also sold it to John Williams, who is the secretary treasurer of the Shrimp Alliance.

MB: Oh, really?

NE: Yes. We're working in the area at that time, and we sold it to him.

MB: Boats were sale around here?

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NE: Around here, yes, most of them are for sale [laughter]. Most of them are for sale, but you don't have very many buyers right now. Yes. Not for commercial fishing boats or shrimping boats. The ones that they're doing something else with like scalloping or doing some other type of fishing. But for just shrimping, I don't know if you could sell one if that was the only thing you could do with it. But most all the boats here in [inaudible], I don't know if any that aren't for sale.

MB: Well, then the fish house – I mean, this fish house is for sale, right?

NE: Yes.

MB: Well, there are six fish houses, and half of them are for sale. One next to Sneads Ferry Seafoods?

NE: Right.

MB: They are under contracts I supposed.

NE: Yes. They are under contract. There's probably another three of them that are for sale. Yes.

MB: So –

NE: You cannot make the money in shrimping that your property is worth, in other words. Although that's what you want to do, you can't sit here and lose money either year after year. You don't make enough in the summer to carry you through the whole winter because in the winter here, we catch a few clams and that's about it. So, if you don't make enough in the summertime to carry you through the winter, when you're not doing something else, then you've not done anything. You're actually losing. That's what it's been for several years here now. A lot of people are just going from one year to the other and you just keep losing, and you can't keep doing that. I mean, eventually, it's going to end.

MB: (Falling on debt?) is what you are doing.

NE: Right. Exactly.

MB: That is what I have been hearing about. You are worrying about having your home foreclosed.

NE: Right.

MB: How many people want to buy an old fishing boats or boat analysts work [laughter]? Same people, just like analysts work to keep a boat up.

NE: Yes, it is. It's a lot of work. If it sits up and you don't do anything to it, or don't use it, then it's worse on, you know? It's better to use it.

MB: It needs to be in the water.

NE: Right. It needs to be in the water. It needs to be working all the time doing something, which in the winter here, we usually work. Most of these shrimp boats work on their boat after they'll go to South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, maybe shrimping, then come back, and then get ready for the next spring for here. They work on their boats and get them ready. But just like last winter, you weren't able to do a whole lot of repairs and things to your boat that you needed to do because you didn't have the money to do it with.

MB: I was telling Mack, he was tired of seeing that.

NE: Yes. A lot of them right now probably needed some work done to them, not a whole lot, because everybody keeps their boat up pretty good around here anyway. But someone probably needs some things that they just didn't do, that we're not absolutely necessary. The things that are life threatening or things that have to be done, they'll do. They'll find a way to do it. But then some other things they may just let go for a while.

MB: They do not really want to, but they do not have any choice.

NE: Right.

MB: What do you see as a possibility turns around this whole ordeal, or do you think there is?

NE: I think slowing the imports is going to help the price some. It's going to help it some. But when the fuel price keeps going up, that's like giving one and taking one. You're not really helping it. With the imports, when they paid the tariffs, that money, the fishermen can get back under the Byrd Amendment, when the tariff money is available to the fisherman for the expenses on your boat. Like a lot of them last year, what expenses they – repairs they done on their boats, they can get that money back through the Byrd money, or Byrd Amendment, which is money

that's collected from the tariffs. We filled out the forms. We just mailed them in. Once they get it, they'll review it and then we'll be able to get that money back. But then when they get that money back, then they can spend that on their boat again. That's going to help, but that's not going to keep going. That's only going to last for probably around five years. But as far as a long-term solution, I don't know. It's just you don't know. That's why [inaudible] fishing is anyway. You never know what one year is going to be from the next. We're used to it somewhat, but not to this extent. In other words, it's like you may have a real good year, the next year might not be so good, but then the next year may be even better than your good year the previous one before. But lately, it's like it's been they've all been bad years. It's just a downhill slide seems like

MB: [inaudible] want to break.

NE: Okay [laughter].

FS: People tend to lump commercial fishermen together, and this small operators sort of get proof with the big commercial factory trawler –

MB: Freezer trawler –

FS: Yes.

MB: – like in Alaska.

FS: – that basically comes in, clears out an area, moves on to somewhere else.

MB: Like what the Russians use or the –

FS: The fishermen here understand the ecology. They are not of a size that can really destroy the environment, right?

NE: Right.

FS: Does the Shrimp Alliance sort of address ecological issues? I mean, most of the shrimpers are the smaller scale fishermen, right?

NE: Most of the now were – North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia are probably smaller than the rest of them. There are a lot of small-town fishermen in Louisiana. It seems like in0 the Gulf, they're a lot of bigger boats, a lot larger boats. They're mostly freezer boats. We don't have that many freezer boats here in North Carolina. We have some, but not as many as they do in the Gulf.

MB: What we're trying to get across in the film is you're going to have people – I heard for years about how (Mack and Budd?) and people kind of created this kind of shrimp channel. Out there [inaudible] offshore where the shrimp kind of grow on this. They kind of created almost a nursery for shrimp. Have you heard about that?

NE: Yes. It's like little slews. Maybe Mack might have called it that or something. We don't have a lot of [inaudible] bottom here. They tie like in the same area, and those shrimp will stay in that same area, it seems like. Is that what you're talking about?

MB: Yes. How do you pull up rocks in the net? It is kind of –

NE: Move them.

MB: Move them around.

NE: Yes.

MB: Create their own.

NE: Yes.

MB: That is really amazing to me. So, when did you first hear about them? Can you just describe because nowhere in any interview was able – this is really important because it is like a local knowledge that –

NE: Yes.

MB: – nobody else –

NE: As far as I can remember back, when I was small, they would always bring big rocks. We'd put them in the maybe line or driveway with them or something. There used to be a whole lot of them out there. They don't catch them like they used to. I guess because they have either caught them, brought them in, or moved on. They would tear their nets up in doing so. But they would try to tow the same area over and over. It creates like a little slew and those shrimp will stay in those little areas, it seems like.

MB: They know those areas –

NE: Yes.

MB: – like the back of their hand.

NE: Oh, yes [laughter].

MB: I think that's far more trying to get across like (Johny?) [inaudible] crabber. He knows so much about the river, where to put the crab. You can't just pop them out any.

NE: No. Most of them know where things grow best, where the shrimp are, where they lay, and where they grow better; just like you said, where the crabs are best and things like that. Experience is a whole lot of it.

MB: Which if the fishing dies out here, nobody will know all this.

NE: No.

MB: (Cornelia?) was saying, we are trying to differentiate between big, huge industrial. That is where fishermen get a bad reputation with the general public. They mixed all together. They do not know that there is such a thing. It is a commercial small farmer with a giant Archer Daniel's Midland. To my time, two different worlds there. Somebody who actually – like, this cattle farmer has got 400 head against some company who has got 100,000 cows. They're using all the steroids and all that stuff. So, what are we going to end up with if there's no [inaudible] around it. Who is going to get this wild-caught shrimp? If you will not get it, it will be all farm stuff.

NE: Yes, for North Carolina. There's not that much shrimping area in North Carolina. Well, really, probably, from Pamlico Sound back this way south. Just like, for example, what you're talking about some of the areas, I think it was last year before last one, they had a dredge that was dredging around [inaudible] Moorhead. He went there. An area that they had sort of what you were talking about "cleaned out," that they had been shrimping in, he went there and dredged it and tore the bottom all up. So, now, those shrimp don't lay there. Their environment was just disrupted. Now, they can't even tow there now.

MB: Now, where are the young people in this town? Even things like not having a health insurance and things are obviously very important. Are the young people going into this life anymore? Like high school kid, they are thinking, "Wow, I want to be a shrimper when I grow up."

NE: Some of them probably would do it. A lot of them probably won't. There are probably more than won't than – there's some that's been raised here and that's what they want to do. They're going to try it anyway. Even if they don't make a go at it, they may try it and then go on to do something else. But it's a hard life. It's hard work. But a lot of them, they wouldn't do anything else. That's what they've always done. That's what they want to do.

MB: It just seems like Chops was talking about this. Most of the people he went to high school are not going in this.

NE: No.

MB: He says he is one of the few.

NE: Yes. He and one of my sons graduated together, same age, and they're both in commercial fishing. But that's true what he said, there's a lot of them that's not.

MB: So, the next, I assume the shrimp importers are appealing this thing? I mean, trying to get it reversed or whatever what your victory or whatever is this they are going to a lot of court?

NE: Yes. It's still in the legal proceedings. It's going to be a long, drawn-out battle. It's not

over with by a longshot. Although the ITC found they were dumping, they began collecting the tariffs, they still can appeal. It still is just an ongoing process with it. So, it's not over.

MB: ITC, what does that stand for?

NE: That's the International Trade Commerce. That's what it is. That's who governs the – and the customs also governs this imported shrimp that are coming in here.

MB: So, now, here is the Southern Shrimp Alliance. You guys are doing this PR stuff. Would you tell us about what you are doing in terms of the radio spots and all that?

NE: They have a lot of advertising, informing people that what they are eating is not what they thought it was. That's one of the radio. It's really a good commercial. They have some on TV, informing you that what you eat is not what you think it is. It's more or less what it says. It doesn't say a whole lot about the chemicals. It just says you think you sit down to a restaurant, and you look out the window and you see

[end of transcript]