

Wild Caught
Luther Ennett Oral History
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Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina
Length of Interview: 37:57
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Mr. Ennett, appreciate you doing this. Basically, this document is trying to give a portrait of a fishing town. But it's also a portrait of a North Carolina coastal town. Now, let me ask you just a few background questions. Did you grow up in this area yourself?

Luther Ennett: Surely, yes. This is home and I have never been in a position to do a whole lot of traveling from this area. I've done just a bit of traveling in my lifetime. I often think that I missed something by not having been in the Marine Corps, which is our neighbor here. The Marines travel and go all around different places, travel the world. I missed that by never being in the military. So, this is home and this is where I've spent all my life [laughter].

Male Speaker: Matt, you're not going to like this. I didn't have the audio set quite right. It was a little low. Can we do that one again? I'm still rolling.

MB: Oh, okay.

LE: Back it up and do it again.

MB: Well, I have another different way of asking the question. What was it like growing up in Sneads Ferry for you? What was Sneads Ferry like when you were growing up here? Did you actually grow up in Sneads Ferry?

LE: Yes, I was born here in Sneads Ferry. As I said, have never traveled any great distance from here. The extent of my travels kind of revolve around scuba diving. I was able to travel south of here and down into the Keys and down below Cuba and the Cayman Islands a couple times, do some diving. But so far as traveling the world, Sneads Ferry is my world [laughter].

MB: So, what was it like as a kid here in Sneads Ferry? What was it like? How big was it?

LE: Well, of course, Sneads Ferry has grown tremendously since 1940s. Of course, the mainstay of Sneads Ferry has been Camp Lejeune. Camp Lejeune is what has kept the economy here strong, as is true with the entire county. Not just Sneads Ferry, but all of all the county. Of course, I grew up at the time when it was very rural here. Of course, very rural. There was no bridge to the beach. In fact, the bridge that goes over to Topsail Island was only built in 1969. Prior to that, Highway 210, which is to your back here, was not even in place going over to the beach. I grew up working on farms and I cropped a lot of tobacco. Have just over the years seen it evolve into a bustling, little town. Of course, I have mixed emotions about what has happened and that I love Sneads Ferry for its rural flavor. Yet being in real estate, that means it's got to grow. I've got to sell property. So, like I said, I have mixed emotions. But I don't like to see Sneads Ferry losing its rural atmosphere. Yet, you got to have progress.

MB: So, there's been a rural atmosphere here, which you still see. There's still corn growing down and all that. What kind of work did your father do?

LE: My father worked on the Marine base for a while. He later opened a small general store. Plus, he was the local, rural, mail carrier for a while. He became disabled early in life and gave up the mail delivery. He and my mother together delivered the mail for probably longer than

anyone else had delivered it here in the area. He built a little country store later on. Then he built a little washerette. Very proud of my father. He supported a family of five from a wheelchair. As I said, when he became disabled, he could no longer hold his job at Camp Lejeune and later on had to give up the mail delivery route that he had. But he had a little country store, and as I said, was in a wheelchair. From that wheelchair, actually built the first washerette here in Sneads Ferry. Very proud of my father. He was a proud man, and as I said, he raised a family of five of us. I have a brother and a sister, and of course, my mother and him made five. He did well without any relief, so to speak.

MB: That's good.

LE: Very proud of that.

MB: That's good. Well, speaking about the rural thing, it's interesting I've talked to people who – to bring in a little bit of the fishing aspect – who both would farm and then fish depending on the time of year. Talk a little bit about the fishing aspects of Sneads Ferry in this.

LE: Well, actually, I grew up in a fishing family, as well as my father's venture into the retail country store business. My grandfather, my mother's father, was lifelong fisherman and other members of my family. The Davis family is my mother's family. In fact, (Theorin Davis?), which you might have already talked to, they're strongly in the fishing and shrimping business. That's my mother's side of the family. So, I don't know if you have talked with Buddy Davis. He's my first cousin. Theorin, of course, is my uncle. So, the Davis family that's in the fishing business is my mother's people.

MB: I guess we have gone out with Billy Davis on the shrimp boat. That was my first time ever on a shrimp boat. We filmed that. We have interviewed Buddy Davis who was full of wisdom.

LE: [laughter] Yes, Buddy is my first cousin, as I said. His family grew up in the fishing business and had done very well and are still in that business.

MB: Have a fish house. We interviewed Jodie Davis who runs it, and his wife who's a dental hygienist. Yes, that's an amazing family. They're welding together the riggings. You know how many they can do. Very classic American story. They do welding. They can rebuild anything. A lot of Cummins diesel. There were some aspects that reminded me a little bit of similarities between farming and fishing. A farmer can't. They've got to have a lot of range of skills.

LE: Right. Exactly. Yes. They have been very prosperous in the fishing business. They're hardworking people and have done very well, I believe.

MB: Well, talk about some of the growth aspect. I've been coming here for about six years. Because of my family, we use a condo on Topsail Beach. That's how I kind of really came to – I saw the shrimp boats out there. So, at first, I thought, oh, that's interesting. Then I began to get into it. I guess for me one of the big themes here is sense of community of a small town, a way of life that may be in – I think for sure Wilmington's pushing up.

LE: Absolutely. It certainly is still changing and has changed tremendously. I can remember as a Boy Scout spending many, many weekends over on Topsail Island when north of Surf City, which is totally undeveloped. My scout master's family had a small cabin or cottage over on the island. That was situated around the area probably thereabout the Villa Capriani. Somewhere in that area they had a small cabin there. We actually went from the mainland across the waterway to the beach because we did not have the high-level bridge, which was only built in 1969. If you went by car, you had to go all the way down to Holly Ridge, down to Surf City, across the pontoon bridge that was built by the Army when the army occupied the Topsail Island during the war. Then go all the way back down to the north end [laughter] of the island. So, many times we would just cross the waterway from the mainland by boat. I think we were a very fortunate scout troop because I'm sure many scout troops didn't have what we had in access to the beach and a cottage and miles and miles and miles of unspoiled beach front. As I said, that was the only cottage probably within a 10-mile span there. Had a great time. So, as I said, that entire end of the island – well the greater part of it – was owned by one family. The Grant family owned the majority of the island. Of course, when the new bridge came across in 1969, the world changed [laughter] in that part of this area. Of course, you've seen the growth that's there now and the development. It's amazing when you really start to think how much has happened in such a short span of time on that island.

MB: Well, when did all the development really – after the bridge?

LE: Yes, after the bridge. The bridge was what was the beginning of the development over there, yes.

MB: I didn't realize this, but going towards Surf City, going south there, the city of North Topsail Beach goes down towards Surf City.

LE: Yes. The town of North Topsail Beach is – well, I started to say geographically speaking, and it's true. Geographically speaking, it would be the biggest town on the beach. Population wise, it might even be the biggest population wise over Surf City and Topsail Beach. I believe I'm correct with that. Like I said, over the years, I've seen a tremendous amount of growth. I was licensed to sell real estate in 1965. So, it's been thirty-five years. Of course, in Sneads Ferry, I was the only realtor. I had a monopoly at that time [laughter], so to speak. I was the only realtor here at that time. Of course, when the bridge came across that changed everything. I have quite a few friends that are in the real estate business along with me now.

MB: So, how many realtors are there in town now?

LE: Oh, between Sneads Ferry and Topsail Island, I expect there's – I could get that figure for you. But I would say probably a hundred to one-ten, I believe probably between Sneads Ferry and Topsail Island.

MB: You said one-ten what?

LE: Realtors.

MB: Then of course, as a town then there are all the other aspects of any town. The Rotary, Gowanus, and chamber commerce and all that, except you probably end up really talking with all those folks too.

LE: Exactly. Yes. The Lions Club is active here. The Rotary Club is active. I think they have a scouting troop, a number of civic organizations, including the Sneads Ferry Community Council, which is the umbrella for the Shrimp Festival. The Shrimp Festival operates under the umbrella of the Sneads Ferry Community Council. That's a strong organization too. A lot of people put a lot of hard work into that every year. I was involved in that for a good long time and I decided it was time to move over and let someone else have a part of the activity in that.

MB: Yes, our friend Bernice Guthrie.

LE: You're right. Bernice, right, yes.

MB: Been a mainstay of that island.

LE: She has. Bernice has really stayed with it. But as with anything after you've been in it so long – which this is not true for Bernice, she doesn't get burned out. I think I kind of got burned out [laughter]. Bernice has stayed in it and I think she's just as excited about it now as probably as she ever was. Too, my business has grown to the point that I just really didn't have time to devote to it. So, I haven't been active in it in probably four or five years. But for many, many years I was very active, both me and my wife.

MB: You have children?

LE: Yes. I have four children and the seventh grandson is coming soon. So, that's both my children and my wife's children. So, between the two of us we have four children and soon to be seventh grandchild.

MB: Have your children stayed around here or –

LE: Yes. They're still here in the immediate area. Surely are, yes. I'm very blessed in that respect that they're home [laughter].

MB: That's good. So, people tend to – I guess that's an interesting part of the documentary. You mentioned that you're related to the Davis family. Everywhere we go, everybody is, "Oh, that's my first cousin."

LE: [laughter] Yes.

MB: I can't keep up with all this stuff.

LE: Yes, lots of family here. Yes, lots of family.

MB: Talk about that a little because it's different. Well, Andy still lives in L.A. I lived there for

a long time. It's not like people don't have families there, but people don't stay rooted in the way they do here more. I think that's the difference. North Carolina, I think, and maybe an area like here, really the family is still number one.

LE: Yes. Most families are close knit. Maybe it's just in our genes being from the south that we have a tendency to stay loyal to our roots, so to speak. That's the only logic that I can put to it that I have friends who left the area from college or high school and went to other areas of the country and did well and inevitably come back home [laughter]. Retire and come back home. I have lots of friends who have retired and come back to Sneads Ferry. So, I think there's always a pull to come back home if you're from this area. That seems to be the norm here.

MB: Well, there is a real beauty to it in that river and little ocean, and the look of the little inlets and the boats. Like, I find the fishing boats are really beautiful. I even like the ones that are kind of half sunk there.

LE: [laughter]

MB: Because it's a very picturesque place.

LE: Yes.

MB: That's another thing that drew me to the place too, was just the look of the marinas and the very traditional way of life. Yesterday we filmed at Everett Fish House the people working on the nets. I remember them back in 1840.

LE: [laughter] Yes.

MB: Really, it hasn't changed some of the traditions.

LE: Tradition, yes, is very strong, I think especially in the seafood fishing industry. Yes. Very strong.

MB: That's a big theme of this documentary is that it is a traditional way of life that's in transition.

LE: Exactly. That's exactly right. It has lots of growth, lots happening here. Someone said that the Sneads Ferry-Topsail Island area for many years was the best kept secret in Sneads Ferry. I'm sure you've probably heard that phrase before, the best kept secret in a certain area. But I think that's true of this area. It had for long time been kind of a secret as to just what it – not a secret, but just wasn't well known as to what really is here.

MB: Well, in terms of the development, obviously the development is just part of life and all that. People want to be by the water and have a right to be by the water. Let's hope that everything can kind of coexist. In a way having Camp Lejeune there, all that land obviously they'll hold. It's their land, the Marine.

LE: Yes. I guess that will never be developed. I won't get a chance to sell any of that, I'm sure [laughter].

MB: [laughter] You keep filming and then you hear these heavy machine guns are going back there, man. Pretty wild.

LE: [laughter] Now the helicopter is coming over there with a roar [laughter].

MB: Serious business.

LE: Yes.

MB: Coming to town we just were pulling up here and these big trucks were going by these guys driving all over. How many towns are there in the United States where they're doing war games right in the middle of – not in the middle of town, but they're going at it for a while.

LE: Yes. Exactly.

MS: They captured the bridge up there, they told us.

MB: Yes.

LE: Yes. They use that as a point of training at times.

MB: The high rise over to the base.

LE: Yes. Exactly [laughter].

MB: Well, I think this covers it in terms of looking at what it was like for you to grow up here and to be a part of the town. Personally, are you involved in Rotary in some of the different civic organizations, Lions Club, or things like that yourself?

LE: Yes. Well, I'm a member of the local Masonic Lodge. It's called Stump Sound Masonic Lodge. Of course, I am a member of the New Bern Scottish Rite bodies, as well as I am also a Shriner. I don't know if this can be filmed or not, but I'm a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. We call them Camps. So, I'm a member of the Jacksonville Lewis Armistead Camp Sons of Confederate Veterans, which I'm very proud of that. I have an ancestor who was a doctor and was also a major in the Confederate Army. Very proud of him. His roots are here in Stump Sound. After the war, retired in the Pender County area around Burgaw. As I said, he was a doctor and his military rank was major. I'm pretty much into that. I like the genealogy and all that's involved with the Confederacy. I feel that the Confederate flag has kind of had a bad rap in many instances. A lot of folks don't understand, I don't think, about exactly what is involved in the organization called the Sons of Confederate Veterans. We're not a radical hate group. We do a lot of genealogical study. Our meetings are kind of centered around our heritage. We're not with any agenda to create any problems. It's just a study of our ancestry and our heritage. I enjoy that a lot. I enjoy that probably more than any of the other organizations

that I'm a member of.

MB: Good. I see the tie there.

LE: Yes. As I said, I enjoy the study of the Confederacy. I know it's very controversial in many ways, but the Sons of Confederate Veterans are not controversial. We are just interested in our roots and in our history and I enjoy that a whole lot.

MB: Is that a strong organization in this area?

LE: It is growing considerably from what it has been in the past. I think recent events in different areas have created kind of a renewed interest in that organization.

MB: Right. You mean the South Carolina thing?

LE: Right. Yes. That, I think, has created a great deal of interest in the study of the Confederacy, hopefully to enlighten people and show the people that it's not a hate group. It's not what a lot of people think it is. It's a good organization. Clean and intelligent people are in it, not a bunch of radicals and troublemakers. The history of our ancestry is really what it is – the study of the history of our ancestry. I enjoyed it a whole lot.

MB: Well, that's good. People are very prone to stereotyping. Like we were talking, honestly with some of the fishermen, they feel like they get a bad rap sometimes. Oh, yes, you see one fisherman that's got a Budweiser can, they're all boozers.

LE: They're all alcoholics [laughter].

MB: What's the old saying? One bad apple spoils the barrel or whatever. People will go for the negative. They'd rather the one fisherman who's got an alcohol problem.

LE: [laughter] Yes.

MB: There are people with alcohol problems in any – well, there are professors that have alcohol problems.

LE: Sure [laughter].

MB: Unfortunately, I'm not in that camp, but humans are human. Yet, we much prefer to look at stereotypes whether it's of people interested in their proud roots in the Confederate Army and all that or then suddenly they're all, "Oh, God." The media, of course, they love to feed off of that stuff and oh, they'll exaggerate.

LE: [laughter]

MB: It's funny. I'll give you a story. These hurricanes the last couple years, well, if you watch – my mom lives north of San Francisco. She called me and said, "Well, it looks like Greensboro is

getting battered. Is the hurricane there yet?" According to the weather channel, the place was underwater. I said, "It's fine here. There's nothing. It's sunny weather."

LE: [laughter]

MB: Then she goes, "Oh, no. You sure about it? You wish." They'll make it unbelievable. Exaggerate because it sells every time in the newspaper.

LE: Exactly. The media does what it takes to make a story. They really do. The more controversial it is, the more controversial they can make it sound, the more newspapers they sell, I suppose.

MB: So, they're in there I guess –

LE: [laughter]

MB: Well, news is entertainment or infotainment as they call it. It's interesting.

LE: [laughter]

MB: Well, is there anything else you want to add to this? This has been great.

LE: Well, I can't think of anything else. Probably once the camera stops rolling, I'm sure I'll remember lots of things that I should have said. Right now, I can't think of anything else unless you have a question about anything.

MB: I think the main thing I really want to look at was the growth and changes that occurred with that and you've seen that.

LE: Yes. To kind of sum it up, as I said, Sneads Ferry when I was growing up was very rural. I worked on tobacco farms. This road here, 172, was probably the only paved road in the area. Of course, when I was very young, they were starting to pave the roads down into the over section of Sneads Ferry. I remember my uncle had one of only I think, three telephones in Sneads Ferry when I was about seven or eight years old. He had a general store. I think there were probably three general stores here in Sneads Ferry. He had a phone and a couple of other folks down here had a telephone. There were three digits in the number. It was like 336, that was it. Then these general stores, they had everything. They had everything from shoes, to toothpaste, to pork chops, whatever you would need. It was on a very, very small scale to Walmart I guess, because they had everything; clothing and over-the-counter medicines. Just anything that you would need was right there in that store. Like I said, there were three of them here at that time, I believe. Roads were not paved. I can vaguely remember that the only source of light at my parents' home, it was called a gaslight. I can barely remember it because very shortly we had electricity. But I can barely remember a gaslight. But I was very young at that time. We soon had electricity. Of course, as I said, the roads were not paved. Something else that might be of interest to you, I guess I'm tooting my own horn or maybe dwelling on my own family a little too much, maybe. But Edmond Ennett had the first license issued by the state of North Carolina to

operate this ferry, which Sneads Ferry is named for. The bridge that traverses New River goes into Camp Lejeune. Of course, originally there was a ferry there. So, that's where the name Sneads Ferry came from. This ferry was owned by a fellow who I think was a colonel in the Revolutionary War. I can't remember his first name, but his last name was Snead. He owned the ferry. But my great-great-great grandfather had the first license, which was issued in 1725 to operate a ferry. Of course, I'm kind of proud of that. I don't know if you've noticed now, there's a plaque just as you enter the road that goes down to the Davis's Fishing Enterprise. There's a plaque there that gives a little bit of a history on that. It relates to Edmond Ennett as being the first person to own a license to operate that ferry.

MB: Wow. That's interesting. So, your family has been here since seventeen?

LE: Well, that license was issued in 1725.

MB: Your family has been here for –

LE: For a long time [laughter].

MB: – almost three hundred years.

LE: Yes.

MB: We have interviewed Harvey Bradshaw.

LE: Yes, Harvey would know a lot about the history.

MB: Oh, yes. He was the first person we interviewed actually. Bunny helped set that up. But he's an amazing person. All the combat missions over Vietnam. But we interviewed him at his family plot there where his ancestors going back to 1691.

LE: The grant family is an old family in this area.

MB: Your family as well.

LE: Yes. We go back a good ways too. Like I said, that was in 1725 when he was issued that license. Speaking of combat missions in Vietnam, I have a first cousin who's like a brother. Billy Ennett, he's called. He was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. He has told some amazing stories about what he witnessed in Vietnam, flying helicopters, bringing the men out of the jungles. They'd be in such bad shape. They'd still be alive but had been in the jungle so long they had what they called jungle rot. I don't know if you want to film all this or not. But they had the jungle rot. He said he'd pick them up and take them back to headquarters or wherever. They would have such a stench that he would kind of hold his head out the window of the helicopter. They'd smell so bad. These were live men. They had just been in the jungle for so long. Just terrible. He has some interesting stories about Vietnam. Really does. He lost his copilot right beside him to gunfire. Sitting right beside him was hit and died right there. Vietnam was a bad, bad time.

MB: Well, he was proud of the military, Harvey talked about this. But in terms of farming, fishing, military, it's kind of three major things in the culture here. Not just the Marines, but the Revolutionary War, Civil War. A lot of fighting men have come out of this area. Proud tradition. Obviously, looking to fishing, for example, that's a very dangerous occupation. I interviewed a clamor yesterday who didn't seem to be fazed by having some big gator come up.

LE: [laughter]

MB: Here he is in the water and a big, old, 50-foot gator comes up kind of curious about him. Not going to get me in there. He was feeling the clams on his feet.

LE: Yes [laughter].

MB: Unbelievable.

MS: He said he did get out of the water when the hammerhead sharks came.

MB: The hammerhead came and flipped its eyeball up and was looking at him. He got out at that time.

LE: [laughter]

MB: That's a pretty amazing image to think about.

LE: Yes [laughter].

MB: Well, I appreciate it very much. That's really interesting. Actually, this last thing you were saying about your great-great-great grandfather. I'd love to go film that plaque. Well, certainly, I'm going to have to try to find some history professor around here who knows the scoop on all the early-day Snead. There's got to be somebody who could give us – because that's an important part of the story, the history of the town basically from the colonial days on. I think it's fascinating the idea of families who have been here, like your family, from really the get go in terms of that's really amazing. They're still here and then like the Davises and the Grants. So, that's pretty amazing, I think, that people are still pretty much rooted with a place. That's very important. I think those are some of the big themes of the documentary.

LE: Yes. If you'd like – to make sure I've got all my facts and my dates right – I have just a real short history that I could read to you that I have in the other room. If you'd let me get that and read it to you.

MB: Sure. That'd be great.

LE: If you want to stop filming for just a second, I'll get that then.

MS: Yes. I got to change battery anyway.

MB: You were saying that you have an account of the first –

LE: Yes, I have something here that I'd like to read to you. I can read it much better than I can tell it from memory regarding Sneads Ferry and the name and how it was arrived at. So, I'll just read this to you better than I can remember it. "There was a time when Sneads Ferry was on every tongue in North Carolina for a darkly exciting reason [laughter]. In 1791, Robert Snead, for whom Sneads Ferry was named, shot and killed Colonel George W. Mitchell, a Revolutionary War hero. That was a result of a political quarrel at Onslow Courthouse. Snead was tried and convicted by a Superior Court sitting in Wilmington. However, when he appeared in court for sentencing, he carried with him a full pardon signed by Governor Richard Dobbs Spaight. Reasons for the quarrel that led to the murder are not clear now. Nor is it clear why the governor acted so promptly to prevent execution of the sentence. Snead died in late 1798 or early 1799. Originally, Sneads Ferry was called Lower Ferry on New River. The first license for a ferry there went to Edmund Ennett in 1725. The first post road from Suffolk to Charleston, also crossed the spot. Folk in the area got the news of the Battle of Lexington in 1775 from a post rider as he galloped southward. Robert Snead, an attorney, settled in the spot in 1760. He not only operated the ferry, but also a tavern. The community then became Sneads Ferry, the name it has born ever since." So, that's a kind of a history that's really, I think, very, very intriguing, or interesting as to the mystery behind the murder and the fact that Snead carried a full pardon to court with him already signed before [laughter] he was tried. He was pardoned before he was tried by Governor's Estate [laughter]. So, I thought that was really interesting [laughter].

MB: That's great.

LE: This was pulled from the archives in Raleigh by *The News & Observer* some years ago.

MB: Excellent. Thanks for reading that. Well done.

LE: Thank you.

MB: I think that that wraps it up. Yes, it is fascinating. I wonder how he got that pardon. That's a pretty good deal.

LE: Yes. Like I said, that's really a mystery. He had some political clout, apparently [laughter].

MB: I guess he had some good connections. He saved the day there.

LE: Yes, he surely did.

MB: All right. Well, thank you very much, Luther. I appreciate that.

LE: I've enjoyed.

MB: Also, for taking the time to do this.

LE: Right. I've enjoyed talking with you. I hope that I have helped. There's lots of things that I'm sure I haven't covered.

MB: Again, this becomes kind of big thing that has to be pieced together in the edit room and all that. But I think it could end up being a very, very good document, I hope [inaudible].

LE: Yes, I hope so too.

MB: So, I think it's a good story. People will like it. UNCD will run it now. Yes, let's go nationwide, go international for that matter.

LE: That would be great, wouldn't it? That would be great.

MB: So, sure. We can shut. We're all shut down here.

[end of transcript]