

Wild Caught
Shannon Huie Oral History
Date of Interview: July 19, 2000
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 36:43
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Shannon Huie: No. I just kind of picked it up, secondary job. I knew a friend who knew a friend. I got into, started out. I made 1,250 an hour doing that. But then on days that I can clam, I can make \$30 an hour.

Matthew Barr: Oh, really?

SH: But I don't see this today. It's labeled a thunderstorm for the next five days. So, that 200 bucks you make one day, at the end of the week is \$200. You can't afford that. So, if you're lucky, and the weather is favorable, you do well in the summer months. But then in the winter months, rather than trying to work with the community that makes them fat, the fish houses just shut down on everybody. They won't sell what you catch. What you do catch, they don't want to pay for. Don't want to pay you anything.

MB: [inaudible] like a deep freezer or anything?

SH: Well, they're still doing business. But the tourists, the retail business slows down, the wholesale. The truck doesn't come as often. There are only a few things that you can catch, so they become saturated. Rather than work with the community and try to put a little bit back into it, they're all about keeping the money that they made in the summer months, and putting it in their pocket. They don't care about anybody else. Every fish house is that way. Make no mistake about it. You can interview them. They can talk about how their sales have gone down and this and that and the other. Right now, Baltimore, Maryland, they pay 28 cents a piece for clams. That man that brings that truck down here pays 28 cents a clam. Then they pay us 15, bottom line. They act like they couldn't make it. Last year – just off the fishermen that I know personally – at one fish house in particular, he cleared a quarter of a million dollars off of fifteen fishermen. All of them put together didn't make \$150,000 between all the fishermen put together. That's like ten people, ten to fifteen people. He cleared more money by himself than any five fishermen that worked for him. So, you tell me, do they not get more than they give? The way my dad was brought up and whenever my grandfather owned the fish house – and he wasn't perfect by any means. He was a businessman. But at the same time, he took a 20 percent markup on everything he bought. Sold it for 20 percent more than what he bought it for. That was it. He made a good living at it. But now it's just –

MB: Total greed.

SH: – total greed.

MB: [inaudible] your mic a little bit. [inaudible] Well, so what you're saying is that there's a lot of gouging going on basically.

SH: Yes, sir. It does. For example, this gentleman's deceased, so can I mention his name? He's dead. His name was Tom Everson. He moved here from up north and he had the idea of opening a fish house. So, he bought some land around there, riverfront beside another fish house. Everything was going well. The truck that bought clams from the other fish houses started stopping at his fish house and buying his clams. The other fish houses got together and they didn't like it. So, they had a price war. They were paying almost 20 cents a piece for clams.

At the time – this was several years ago – they were getting 18. So, they were paying out more than they were making. But since they had been stuck in the community draw for years, all the established fish houses had the ability to do this. They could do it for months and months and months. Around here you have to make the money when you can make it. So, the people that still sold to Tom, he was losing money. Plus he lost most of the fishermen that were selling to him anyway, until they blackballed him out, until he couldn't function. They did in the same way on fish, shrimp and everything else. They pushed him out. Unless you already have a lot of money, you can't even move in the industry as far as the fish house goes. Most of the fishermen I know have their retail license so that if they get the opportunity, they can sell without getting in trouble. If you pull up to me at the boat and I don't have my retail license and I sell you fifty clams, there's a big fine and punishment that comes along with that if you're caught. There are as many marine fishery officers in the river now as there are fishermen. There's not a day that goes by that you don't get stopped, that they're not harassing you for this, harassing you for that. Morehead can't set any laws – or Wilmington – they can't set any laws that actually protect the fishermen. Yet they can afford new boats every year. They can afford to sport around and stop everybody in the water, just joy ride all day. I know that their job is important. We have to have rules to protect the industry for the fishermen. But it seems to me that Morehead is more interested in what the sports fishermen want at this point. Because people with money are on the board that make the rules, the people that do the sports fishing, the people that don't want to look at commercial fishing. It's like they're leading an old dog around just wanting to put it out of his misery. So, any law that they can pass that makes it harder for us, they do it.

MB: You're kind of stuck between the rules and regulations and all that and then the price problems and not getting a fair price for –

SH: Yes, sir. The people that are supposed to make the rules to protect the fishermen are being influenced by the people that want the fishermen gone basically. The local businesses, they're going to take their business where they can get it outside the fishing industry, whether it's tourists or fishermen. They really don't have any say. They just sell their goods to whoever has the money to buy them. As it is, the people that move in that do the sports fishing, they have more money. They make more rules. They're able to push the people that don't have the money out of the way until they just get – until they basically get enough power that they don't want to look at us anymore. They just ban it altogether, most of it. Or they ban enough of it that you can't afford to do it as a living anymore [inaudible] the fishing. You go out and fish all day long for 10 bucks as a sport. You get in and they're going to pay you 10 cents a pound for them. That's \$10 a box. You've worked twelve, fourteen hours in a day for \$100. That's a lot of money to some people. But after you figure gas, food, time, your bills at home, not to mention, you can't do it unless – the only way that my father stays in it is because he can do everything. If he's shrimping, he can shrimp. He can get on there. He can clam, scallop, and oyster. You have to be able to do everything that's available. You can't live off of one thing anymore. When there are people that come down – there are actually people that come down from up north and out west and from the mountains during the summer months and clam and fish or whatever is available in the summer months. Then in the winter months they go home. It's kind of like migrant workers. They're the people who don't care what the price is because they're doing it for fun anyway. So, they don't care if they drop the price. Because they've got enough money when they come here that they don't have to work. I feel like I complain to everybody that I come in

contact with. But everybody's complaining as a whole. Everybody in the community is bickering between each other. They're either bickering with the people who make the rules, so that's the game – the commercial – the marine fisheries when the only thing that's going to save the fishing industry for the little man, is if all the little men get together and have one voice. As long as everybody is united. You stand divided, you fall. Nobody wants to band together and do anything. Because this one doesn't like that one because he sold some shrimp to a man he was going to. Or he sold oysters to somebody who he was going to. Or he's getting \$1 more a pound so we don't like him this week and bickering and fighting. It's the same thing with the farmer. They couldn't band together so big corporations moved in and owned most of the land. They're basically sharecroppers. Around here the fishermen are going to be endangered servants. Because in order to stay in the business, you incur so many debts that you have to do it next year to try to get out of debt. If you pay your debt from the year before, you've got this year's debt to pay next year. So, you pay debt every year from the year before, the year before that. Yeah.

MB: So, you're permanently in debt.

SH: Permanently in debt.

MB: There are a lot of expenses to look at, the engine and all –

SH: Oh, yeah. Because unlike a public job, my public job, if I break a \$1,000 jackhammer, the company will buy a new one. They set aside money on each job to pay for it. Whereas a commercial fisherman, he can't afford to set any money aside for future repairs because he's taking everything he's making to pay his bills and debts. I feel there's nobody to help the fisherman. I think Morehead or Wilmington are one of the fishing – one of the people – one of the places that make the rules. Got a \$180,000 or \$180 million grant from the government. I don't know anybody in my community that got a penny out of it. None of it. My dad filled it out. He didn't get anything, nothing. He wasn't eligible. He had a massive heart attack last year. He's already struggling back to work and he has to because – I couldn't believe how the community came out and helped him, donated and they were so good to him. It's unreal. But the community as a whole was poor. So, everybody helped all that they could. But everybody banding together can't afford to help one person very much. Everybody helps as much as they can. But the only thing that's going to save the fishermen is if all the fishermen band together. That'll be the only way. If they don't – she can't stand it. [laughter] She's a camera hand.

MB: Oh, yeah. She's dying to be on camera.

SH: Oh, yeah.

MB: So, the only way would be for people to get together.

SH: Oh, yes, sir. Now, I'm not very, very familiar with how they do things up north. But as far as getting your electricity, we borrow electricity from Jones-Onslow. It's a co-op, every year. Every other community that I've been into, every other part of the state working, and everything else, as far as I know, we have the cheapest electric bill of anybody. Yeah. My electric bill is cheap. It's because we have a co-op. All the people in the community own it. At the end of the

year, every year, we get a check. It's not for \$4 or \$5 or \$6, but it's a check just the same. Where any profits that they make, they give back to the people as a nonprofit. They pay their workers. But other than that, it's set up to give us cheap energy. That's the way the fishermen have to do it. They have to set it up that everybody is together on everything. Because whenever the people with money, the sports fishermen, the people that are making the rules, they're already all together. That's why the rules are being passed. Auto workers fifty years ago, they started their unions. It's among the highest paid industries in the United States, auto builders. The government is not going to pass laws that protect the fishermen. Because there's not as much money in it for them as there is with sports fishermen. They come down, he'll buy a \$100,000 boat that he's going to keep for two years. He's going to pay the guy over there at the marina \$8 or \$10,000 a year to service it and fix it. Then he's going to go to the restaurant and spend a couple \$100 every couple of months. Fishermen can't compete. The only thing that we have to compete with is the product. Other communities – I'm sorry. Yeah.

MB: [inaudible] Well, I think we got the heart of it here. Well, I'll tell you I think [inaudible] and not just fishing –

SH: Oh, it does.

MB: Andy he's a cameraman in LA and now he works down in Canada because they got cheaper – Canadian dollars –

SH: Oh, yeah.

MB: are worth less than American and they give kickbacks. So, they're decimating the unions out there. They're killing them.

SH: Yes, sir.

MB: In Wilmington, they have a movie industry. But those are high paid jobs, but you don't –

SH: There are a few of them.

MB: – well, there are so many jobs and there's a lot of competition, you can only work freelance. So, I used to be a freelance screenwriter. It was the same deal. You fight for every dollar. There's a lot of other people out there competing and there's no safety net if you don't make any money.

SH: Yeah.

Male Speaker: Yeah. When your father was talking about being sick, the first thing that came to mind was there was no workers compensation. The health insurance [inaudible] you got to buy it yourself.

SH: Yes, sir.

MS: That was one thing I have in my union going back and forth. Because if they drop you off

the roll and then you've got to go back. Then you have pre-existing conditions and you're not covered for anything. Then you go back to the union insurance. Then they have to look for pre-existing conditions, so then you're not covered again and it's –

MB: That's a union.

[talking simultaneously]

MB: A lot of people aren't even in a union.

SH: Yeah.

MB: That's as good as it gets. That's not really good. So –

SH: Yeah.

MB: So, it's hanging all over the place.

SH: Oh, yeah. I won't say anything bad about his politics because I'm not affiliated with any one party. But it all started back with Lyndon Baines Johnson. That was the first year that – it was either Johnson or Carter, one of the two – when we started having the deficit. That's whenever it became the almighty dollar. China owns as much of American soil as America. We've got a base – Bill Clinton leased them a base in California. That's Chinese soil. They can bring anything they want to on American soil. We're not even allowed to go in and see it. Oh, yeah. I watch C-SPAN too, along with PBS. [laughter] Yes, sir.

MB: [inaudible] the Chinese are the most favored nation. There's no way American workers can compete with slave labor.

SH: No.

MB: Going from everything from electric toothbrushes to –

SH: That's right.

MB: – *Boeing* seven – we're going to end up basically give them all. There aren't going to be any American workers left who can afford to buy anything.

SH: No. One of the worst things that ever happened to the United States was NAFTA, North America, you all know all about that.

MS: Yeah. Yeah.

MB: Free Trade Agreement.

SH: Yes, sir.

MB: [inaudible] going to Mexico and Canada and –

SH: Yes, sir. Because they can go to Mexico. They can build a car for \$4,000. Just ship the material down there. They can pay five workers what they will pay one American worker in an American factory. They would be stupid not to do it. It's a loophole that Bill Clinton opened so that the people that have the money can make more money. The top 2 percent of the population gets richer, everybody else can migrate to Mexico where they can live a better life. That's the way it works. That's the way it works around here. The top 1 percent of fishermen that already have the money can afford top of the line equipment. They can afford to fix anything that breaks. They are the people that don't have to work anyway. They've already got \$3 or \$400,000 in mutual funds that they make money. Every six years, it's 400,000 or 800,000, so on and so forth, roughly every six years. The little man that doesn't have any money, he can't compete. You can't compete in any industry. If you have people, if you have money, you make the rules. But you also don't have to play by the rules. Whereas if you don't have money, the man that's got the money and makes the rules is going to make sure that you play by the rules. Because if you don't, he's going to take what little bit of money you've got. Because you can't fight him. Because he'll wind up with all of his money and yours, too. That's the way they work. That's not fair. It's life. I have learned that.

MB: [inaudible] I keep hearing about these dot com or bloom economies? Well, I don't have any bloom economy going.

SH: Roughly if you have \$60,000 – because I've read up on mutual funds and exactly how I'm going to get into some kind of profit sharing with the company I'm with. So, by the time I get to my father's age, even though I'll have to work my whole life, at least I'll have something. But if you've got \$60,000 in the bank that you don't have to touch for six years, roughly five years and eight months at the current interest rates, it'll double. As long as interest rates don't drop, you can make it. That's why there have been more new millionaires in the last five years than there have been in the previous hundred. Because a few people have got educated and they've got a few friends that they helped out to make it. As far as the fishing industry goes, anybody that's got any money – unless they're an exception to the rule – they don't even want to be associated with us. We're dirty to them. Because we have grease on our hands. Or we don't wear the nicest clothes. Or we can't afford to sport around in a \$100,000 boat.

MB: So, what do people say when you tell them this stuff?

SH: "Oh, you're right. You're right. That's –" then he'll go right up the road and be complaining because somebody's getting a penny more for their clams. It goes in one ear and out the other. The few people in the community that feel the way I do are scared to say anything. I personally am not scared to say anything to anybody. It doesn't matter if they are a million people or one person. It doesn't make any difference. The worst somebody's going to think of is you're stupid. Half the people on earth think I'm stupid anyway. So, what's the problem with the other half? It hurts me to see my dad, everything that he's worked for his whole life, he has a heart attack and just about loses everything he's got. He's worked his whole life to acquire this little bitty piece of land and an okay house. If he has another spell with his heart, if he has another heart attack, he

won't have that. Because the bill man doesn't care. If you die, he's still going to come and get your stuff. So, if you're sick, you're just a burden to them anyway. So, they'll come and repossess your house, just the same. I guess it's like that everywhere. Everybody in every community has got a gripe. But my gripe is the way that the fishermen in Sneads Ferry as a community won't band together to get anything done. The few people that are in the fishermen's association, 90 percent of them are the ones with money already. So, it doesn't matter to them. They're just in it for the kickbacks from the state that they're going to get. What I mean by that is if you already have \$50 or \$60,000, you can afford to go out there and lease 50 acres in the river from the state. Then the state is going to give you a \$30 or \$50,000 grant every year to go buy clams from a state owned VAT, go put it in the garden. Then you get to harvest it, keep all the money. You don't have to pay the money back to the state. So, you've spent 30 or 40,000 to make 100,000. If you don't have money, you can't do it. The state came around with the big idea to take away all the [inaudible] deeds, Queen's Grant. My family owned 80 acres on the beach. The state came and took it away from us. Then there are other people that will go out here in the river and lease bottom from the state that my dad and myself and my family and almost everybody that I know have worked in their whole life. They'll come out and stake it off and tell us that we can't work on it, unless you're going to give him 60 percent of what you make. So, he gets to sit in his house with his million or two and get 40 percent of what you make every day out of his garden. It's like that in several places on the river. The state has several different laws that prohibit that. That if you can go to a certain spot on the bottom in a certain area and you can catch so much, whether it be clams or oysters or scallops or whatever, it's not supposed to be leased or dated. That's how they managed to take away all the land that we had – all the bottom that we had over on the beach. They took it away from our family. Since our family didn't have any more money than just to pay the taxes on it every year. Because even though our family worked, it wasn't big enough to make big bucks off of. It was a family home thing. Everybody in my family worked there, all of our family that lives in Jacksonville all the way to Arkansas. Family came down from Arkansas and they would work in the garden. Every year we might be lucky enough to go to some polluted bottom and harvest oysters or harvest clams and stock it. That would be the only way that we could. It wasn't large enough to get state grants to stock it because we didn't have the money. So, if you've got the money, you can make the money. If you don't, you can't.

MB: It works both ways.

SH: Yes, sir.

MB: You got more, you get more. You got less –

SH: You get less. Because the one that's got more is getting what you got, too. They've got it going. They just work it all the way around. It's frustrating.

MB: Yeah. Yeah. I can feel –

SH: Because I hate working a public job. I hate it. I hate that I have to work for somebody else. I would really enjoy working with my father. But unless I have enough money to buy a boat, completely outfit it, I wouldn't do anything that would be a burden on him. So, I'm hoping that

with my job and profit sharing and having medical insurance and all that good stuff, that one day I'll have enough money that maybe he won't have to work so hard. Because if I ever get to where I have money, I'll buy him the nicer stuff, brand new boat, brand new nets, brand new everything, which of course, I'm sure that's every child's dream. But it happens. Because with the plumbing, I think I'm going to go into business for myself, that way – and only to free myself up so that I can be in the river more. So, if I can make the money somewhere else and work in the river, I will. Several people that I've worked for do that. Not necessarily with the river, but they went into business for themselves, not to get rich, but to give themselves more time. Because if you get somebody reliable to work for you, you can work with them. You can make money.

MB: So, the river is still calling you?

SH: Oh, yeah, always. It always will. I'll always want to work in it. Even in the wintertime when it's cold and your hands feel like they're going to burst, there's still something about it. I guess you get salt in your blood. That sounds corny. As long as I can remember being very little, so little that I had to have a life jacket. Even though I could swim, my dad made me wear a life jacket till I was seven or eight. But I can always remember being on the water doing something. If it weren't clamming – when I was little, little, he had a 55-gallon drum that he cut in half and I would ride in it. While he was catching clams, he would throw the clams in it. Then once it got full enough to half – the drum got full enough that it started to sink, I'd jump out and I'd swim for the last little bit of the day. Because usually in the evenings when the tide would get low, I could touch and I could clam a little bit. When my granddaddy owned the fish house, I'd get 20 bucks for five clams when I was a little kid. Because he would watch out for me. Those were the good days. Now you have to scrape for every penny that you get. Then that's not enough. Then the people that make the rules have their foot on your neck, just waiting for the opportunity to choke you the rest of the way out as a community. Even the Marine Fisheries would much rather ride up and down the waterways and check out people skiing and stop them, rather than coming to the boat and getting their nice clean uniforms dirty, trying to check my clams to see if I've got a bottom so that he can write me a ticket that's going to cost me \$1,000 for something that I didn't even do on purpose. They say ignorance is no excuse. So, if you do something wrong, whether you know it was wrong or not, you're in trouble just the same, which is understandable. Because if they didn't do that, a lot of people would get a lot more stupid and do a lot more stuff wrong. But it's tough the way they work. But they would much rather worry with the sports fishermen and the weekenders than they had the commercial fishermen. Because there's more money in it for them. You get a lot more money for stopping somebody and them not having life jackets. Then you can start harassing them and get them for this and get them for that. Then you get them caught up in the system. Then that group of people being weekenders, they've got a little bit of money to spend anyway. So, it's no big deal to them. They don't even see it as harassment. They figure a good time costs more. When in reality for us, just living costs more. Because not only do we – we're getting gouged on one hand by the fish houses, we get it on the other hand by the people that make the rules. They make rules to the point that you can't even do anything. They go out with turtle excluders. You can ask my dad if he – I don't know if he told you in his interview. He said that he shrimped all his life. In the whole time that he shrimped, he killed one turtle. In thirty years, one turtle, and that was by accident. A turtle can hold his breath for over an hour. They should make regulations

that shortens drag time toward that you have to haul back every hour. That way, if you catch turtles, you can let them go. They won't drown. They get tumbled in the net. They're cold blooded, flip them over, hit them on the chest a couple times. Knock the water out of their lungs. I've never seen one drowned. He may quit breathing when hits the deck. But if you shorten your drag times, you won't lose any or it'll be an acceptable loss. Whereas now with a turtle excluder, you're losing 30 percent of your catch right off the top, 30 percent of the shrimp. So, if you were going to catch 100 pounds, you're only going to catch 70, if you're lucky. If you happen to get a stick in the turtle excluder, there goes half. That's a rule that they made because they don't have to do it for a living. They're listening to some environmentalist's poor mouth. I understand that saving the environment is everything. But it comes to a point development costs so much. I'm one of those people I don't believe in dumping oil in the water. I don't believe in littering, throwing anything in the water, anything out on the sides of the roads or anything else. I think that any industry should be held responsible for the environment 100 percent. But at the same time, you have Jacksonville. They pump 100,000 gallons of raw sewage into the New River every day. I'm a plumber. I see it. I've worked on it. The environmentalists aren't saying anything about that. Camp Lejeune over there has two or three sewage pipes that pump raw sewage into the New River every day. Nobody says anything about that. Because they treat it. They treat it. You can ride over there to that pipe and it smells just like it did when you flushed it down the toilet, just the same. Because it's the same thing. They run it through a little bit of sand and say that it's treated. That's why we have Pfiesteria bacteria in the river that's eating the fish. It's not because the fishermen's dragging the bottom. If we don't drag that bottom, in five years, everything in that river will start dying out. Or it won't die out but it won't be anywhere near as plentiful. All the sports fishermen are worried about these fish that they catch offshore and everything. If we don't cultivate and work the bottom, those fish will move up north or they'll move south. Because if you're not stirring the bottom up, you don't get any nutrients in the ocean from the river. So, the fish won't be there. That's a cycle. The fishermen may damage the environment but not as much as we can help it.

MB: Nobody's looking at all the development and sewage –

SH: Exactly.

MB: – and all the condo, all that stuff, all that [laughter] crap.

SH: Yes, sir.

MB: It's got to go somewhere.

SH: Yes, sir. For example, nobody has even addressed the issue of North Shore Golf Course over there. I know the guy that used to take care of the lawn. He dumps almost 1,000 pounds of fertilizer on that place every six months. Then it rains. It doesn't absorb into those greens. It runs right off into Gator Bay. But they want to fault a fisherman for dragging. They want to fault us for killing a few fish when what feeds Pfiesteria but phosphates and other garbage that they're pumping out of these pipes. I've not seen a fisherman flushing the toilet in the river. We don't flush our waste out there. We have so many regulations from the Coast Guard or anything else. If we get caught doing it, you can forget it. That's a \$25,000 fine, just like that. You can't

get out of it. You have to pay it. Because you don't have any money to fight it. A sports fisherman, he can blow an oil line in the river, pump ten or fifteen, 20,000 gallons of water and oil out of his boat where he's pumping his boat full of water with the lines busted. Have an oil slick half a mile long, half a mile wide down through the middle of the New River. The Coast Guard pulls up to him and fines him. In a week's time, he doesn't have to pay that fine because he has enough money to go get a lawyer. It was an accident. He didn't mean it. But a fisherman, if we get caught doing it, you can't get a lawyer that can get you out of that. You're burnt.

MB: Well, I think this is very important stuff. Is there anything else?

SH: [laughter] One more thing.

MB: One more thing.

SH: As a community, if Sneads Ferry doesn't band together in the fishing industry, we're all doomed as an industry. The fishermen are dead unless the fishermen that are left band together and make something for their children. If they don't do that, my dad and his generation are the last. Everybody else is going to be either migrant workers or endangered servants to the few people who have the money and all the boats. Okay. That's all.

MB: Great stuff.

SH: Yes, sir. Now you know I could sit and talk for another two hours.

MB: So, NAFTA and all that has been major disasters for the working people in this country.

[end of transcript]