

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

Matthew Barr: Chops, let's start with you. It has been four or five years since we interviewed you wearing your cool shades there on the dock. That was a year before we actually went out with John, I think.

Michael Cowdrey: No, no. It was the same –

MB: When did we go out with John?

MC: I can't recall what year it is. It was the same year I got my tattoo on my back. It was immediately after I quit college.

MB: You were going to UNC Pembroke, right?

MC: Correct. Yeah.

Lisa Cowdrey: It was probably the year 2000, maybe.

MB: Sounds about right.

MC: Does that sound right, 2000?

MB: That's when I started the whole thing.

MC: Let's see. I graduated in [19]98. [19]98, [19]99, yeah, it was the summer of 2000, I'm pretty sure.

MB: Well, I always remember that trip as one great adventure though you've been hundreds of times. But for me that was – going 80 miles or whatever it was out there. The only thing that I regret not getting were any ships, big container ships going by would've been really cool.

MC: Yeah. I'm really surprised you didn't get any container ships. Because we usually see them a dozen a day at least most of the time.

MB: Well, let's just life. You can't get everything you want, right? [laughter] Well, let's start a little bit. That was five years ago, whatever it was. So, tell us about some of the changes [laughter] in your life since then.

MC: Well, there's been a lot. At the time when you went out, John Edens was running the boat. I was working as his crew on the boat. That's one thing that's changed. It was shortly after that, John started running a different boat, and I took the captaincy of *Lady Kay*. I guess I've been running *Lady Kay* for about four years now.

MB: That's an interesting thing because you might partner up with John or somebody for a while or somebody in the crew or somebody else on a shrimp boat and then it changes, right?

MC: Right. Well, John's on another boat now, and I'm on the *Lady Kay*. He and I both work as a team, usually in the ocean. We work together real close, help each other find fish, and whatnot. It's a really big ocean. To be efficient, it's really important to have other people and other boats to work with, help find fish, help target fish, so that you can go there and harvest them.

MB: Now, did he tow you in recently?

MC: Yes, he sure did. We were about 55 miles offshore, and the starter quit on the motor. That's another really good reason why it's good to partner up with somebody like that. Because as soon as my starter quit, I was able to call him up. He quit fishing and came and got me and towed me in.

MB: How long did it take to get towed in?

MC: I would probably say about eight hours. It was a long ride, really long ride.

MB: He had a tow rope strong enough to pull you.

MC: We used my anchor line. I unhooked my anchor from my anchor line and tossed it to him. He used it to pull me in.

MB: So, he's been kind of a mentor, a little bit of a teacher to you, right?

MC: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Especially when it comes to grouper fishing. That's mainly what I did with John when he was running *Lady Kay*, was catch grouper, snapper, complex. But, yeah, he's definitely taught me a lot and still does.

MB: Well, he's a great guy. People kind of do that kind of teaching with each other. That's kind of neat too. Because I don't know how you could learn that except that way, right? How could you learn what you've learned with John on your own? You can't learn that from a book, right?

MC: Yeah, absolutely not. You almost can't even learn it on your own. Everybody that comes up started by learning from somebody else. My father, when he started fishing, he had never fished before. He was from Michigan. He was in the Marines. He came here in the Marine Corps and was stationed on Camp Lejeune and started fishing here in the river. There were plenty of people that didn't help him. But there were a few people that did that were major key players in having a successful fishing business.

MB: Now, your dad and you are up scalloping, right?

MC: Yes, that's correct. Normally this time of year, he would be shrimping. I would either be fishing for grouper or doing some sort of a project on my boat, regular yearly maintenance. But just shrimping has gotten so bleak, I guess you could say. The price of fuel and just the price of expenses are getting so high. The price of shrimp isn't really climbing, isn't keeping up with the

price of expenses and with foreign imports and everything. Having shrimp as your primary living right now just isn't very effective. So, we had to branch out and do other things.

MB: Right. The scalloping is pretty profitable, isn't it, from what I've heard?

MC: Yes, it sure is. It's pretty profitable, and it's very consistent. You work on a daily basis. You come in every day. You have a limit of scallops you're allowed to have. You're allowed to have fifty bushels a day. You can get your fifty bushels fairly quickly. You're guaranteed a paycheck every single day.

MB: That's great. Sounds pretty good. Well, now, there's been a huge change in your life since we last spoke. [laughter] You want to tell us about that?

MC: Yes. I met my lovely wife, Lisa. Her parents had a vacation home down here. She had been coming down here to the Sneads Ferry area ever since she was very young and eventually got a job at the local fish house at Everett Seafood, which is where I pack out when I sell my fish. We met. We were friends for about three years, I guess, and one day decided to go out. Then we got engaged. Now, we're married.

MB: Well, that's wonderful. Congratulations, you guys. That's a good thing to get to know somebody as a friend first and have that –

MC: Oh, yeah. That was definitely a benefit in our relationship. We were good friends for a long time. I guess I chased her around a little bit. But she wouldn't have any part of me until she knew I was really serious.

MB: Well, I'm going to say, Chops, I've always thought you were a mature guy, but you're different now. I was talking about this with John, actually. You just seem really mature. I don't know how to say it. It's a great thing. I didn't get married for the first time until I was 39 or – let's see. No, I was 37. But it just took me a long time to grow up, sort of. But you're already talking about kids. That's cool.

MC: Yeah. Well, the first time you interviewed me, I was fresh out of college. I guess I was about 21 years old then. I had just turned 21. Since then, I've had a lot of responsibilities. I've experienced some things and some of life's tribulations, I guess you could say. I had a house. I had bought a house, and it burnt down. Everything you go through in life is another step up to being more responsible, I guess you could say, or experienced in life. Now I'm in a situation where I have a boat. I make my living off the ocean. Things are changing all the time to where you have to be more professional. There's a lot more paperwork involved in fishing than there used to be. There was a time where you could get a North Carolina fishing permit or commercial fishing license. With that commercial fishing license, you were allowed to do anything. You can go catch groupers or shrimp or scallops or clams or oysters or crabs. Anything you wanted to do or harvest out of the ocean, you could do with this North Carolina commercial fishing license, which was probably about \$50. Nowadays, things are changing. Anything you do in the EEZ, which is more than 3 miles off. It's federal waters. So, anything you do in federal waters, you have to be federally permitted for. Lots of permits, not anybody can have. You have to be

grandfathered one, having already had one. Whenever they passed the moratorium, saying you couldn't get them anymore. With every permit you have, you have to fill out paperwork for every trip you make, where you caught your fish, how much expenses it cost you to catch your fish, what depth of water you were in. It's really technical. To be able to keep fishing and keep doing what you want, you have to stay responsible and get technical with it. Otherwise, they'll revoke your license. It's just like anything else. If you have a job, a public job, and you're going to be successful at it, you're going to have to take on some management positions. You'll have to take care of a lot of these things. That's really how fishing is these days. It's a lot different than it used to be.

MB: Right. Well, Lisa, so your family had a place down here, a vacation house?

LC: Yes. It was actually in Holly Ridge. We got that probably in kindergarten, and we would go to Topsail Island all my life. Then probably, when I was in high school, we discovered Sneads Ferry. So, I actually didn't know Sneads Ferry was here. But we discovered Sneads Ferry. I moved here in January of 2000 after my second year of college. When I got here, I didn't go back to college. Then I started working at Everett Seafood where Michael packs his boat out. Let's see. In the year of 2003, the fall of 2003, that was after Chops and I had started dating, I went to college. I've been there since.

MB: At UNC Wilmington?

LC: No. Actually, I went to Coastal Carolina Community College for one year. Then I transferred to UNC Wilmington. So, this will be my second year at Wilmington when I go back in a couple of weeks.

MB: What do you plan to do for a living, I mean, for a career?

LC: My major is elementary education. So, I plan to be a teacher.

MB: You want to be what, kindergarten or anywhere in the elementary years?

LC: I really prefer, about third through sixth grade, actually.

MB: Would you like to teach right here in Sneads Ferry?

LC: I'm not sure. I've done some tutoring at the local elementary school. That's the only experience I've had in any school at all. So, I'm not sure where I want to go. It would be nice to teach in Sneads Ferry. But I've never got to work in any of the schools in Wilmington or Jacksonville either. So, I'm not really sure.

MB: So, you lived here in Sneads Ferry for a couple years. Well, five years, it sounds like.

LC: Yeah. I've been here since January of 2000. Yeah.

MB: In Sneads Ferry?

LC: Yes, sir.

MB: Did you kind of fall in love with Sneads Ferry as a place or –

LC: I'm not sure what it is. I was so family oriented. I lived with my family all my life. I wasn't a very social person. I didn't get out a lot. I spent most of my spare time, like on the weekends, even my first two years of college, with my family. I guess it was just a chance to spread my wings or something. I wasn't really big on going out and things like that. I was pretty shy. I guess when I moved here, I kind of got to, I don't know, grow up a little bit. Because I wasn't right there with my family anymore. I had to be more independent, and I liked it. So –

MB: Your family is near Winston-Salem, right?

LC: Yes. They live in Walkertown. It's right outside of Winston-Salem.

MB: My neck of the woods now. Yeah.

LC: Yeah. [laughter]

MB: Just to kind of get back into the story a little bit about meeting, you guys met right there at Everett's Seafood.

LC: Yes.

MC: Yes.

MB: Well, that's great. That's great. So, in other words, you guys are going to raise a family here in –

LC: Yes.

MB: – Sneads Ferry? That's the plan, right?

LC: If we have children, we'll raise them here, I'm sure.

MC: Yeah. That's the local plan. There's no telling what life brings. If things get to where I can't make a living fishing, I'm sure we'll move to the Winston-Salem area. If things get so bad with expenses and fish rules and regulations, if it gets to where we can't make a living and afford to raise a family here, we'll definitely – when we move, if we have to move, we'll definitely go to the Winston-Salem area around her family.

MB: Well, hopefully that won't be able to – I know you love fishing, Chops.

MC: Oh, yeah. Our plan is definitely to live here and raise our family here.

MB: But as we all know, I think there are some tough situations happening here in the fishing world.

MC: Yes.

MB: What about all the growth that's been going on right here? That's kind of an issue that affects fishing. If the fish houses close up and it becomes like a little Myrtle Beach area [laughter] or something like that which it seems to be rapidly doing.

MC: Yeah. That's definitely an issue with the fish houses. As far as I know, all the fish houses in Sneads Ferry, with the exception of Davis Seafood, are very much sellable. Any of the places could be bought right now, and that would definitely have an impact. There would be no place to tie your boat. There'd be no place to sell your seafood. As far as tourism goes and the growth of our town here, it is growing rapidly. It could be a benefit, if we use it as a benefit. A lot of these people that come here like to eat seafood. If the fishermen are going to make it, it's going to be the fishermen that take some initiative and try to market what they're doing to these tourists, these people that are coming into town and all the business and everything. It's all money. Everybody is coming here and spending money. If you take the initiative to reach out and make sure that you get part of that money, you'll probably be able to do fairly well. If you don't, then you won't. With that, I like to say, if somebody started a seafood market on their own or even just something on the side of the road, like some people are doing now, which is something that you could definitely do. But it's going to take, again, a lot of paperwork, a lot of responsibility, a lot of business sense. The fishermen that have that will probably do well, and those who don't will probably get out of business.

MB: Like any business.

MC: Right.

MB: Of course, property taxes go up for everybody. That makes it tough for people to live here if the price of homes get to 600 grand for a house that was worth –

MC: Right.

MB: It's insane.

MC: Yeah. Oh, yes.

MB: Then it becomes like nuts.

MC: It'll definitely be very hard for somebody new. If a child was growing up and decided they wanted to be a fisherman when they grew up, they grew up in a place inland somewhere or anywhere, and they really wanted to be a fisherman when they grew up and decided when they got out of school they were going to fish for a living, it doesn't look very promising for them to be able to do that at all. Someone like myself who grew up in fishing and has already established yourself in the fishing industry, we definitely have a good chance.

MB: Right. How would you look at the future, Chops, in terms of all this, I mean, between the real estate price, land boom, and the fuel? But we were talking the other day. You were kind of saying that if people can just survive the next five years or so, that it could be actually a pretty good deal.

MC: Yeah. I definitely feel like it can be a good deal. One of the major factors is competition. Like I was just saying, there's very few young people that are getting involved with fishing. Right now, at this present moment, it looks so bleak. It doesn't look like a very attractive living. You have to work very hard, and sometimes there's not much reward. Sometimes there is. A lot of factors have been – well, actually the main factor has been imported seafood and the public not having any idea about imported seafood. When most people go to a restaurant and order, say, a shrimp dinner or any type of seafood they have, when they bring them out a plate of shrimp, that's all they know that it is, is a plate of shrimp. Most people have no idea that there is a difference between imported seafood and wild-caught seafood. Most people don't know about antibiotics and steroids. It's just like any of these other foods, these hybrid farm products. They take something natural, and they boost it up with a bunch of chemicals. It becomes unhealthy. There's Southern Shrimp Alliance and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and several organizations that are working on educating the public to where they actually know that there is a difference. I feel once the public is educated and have the opportunity to make a choice, I think it'll really boost things up a lot.

MB: I think that's the future.

MC: Right.

MB: But especially farmers out in California that grow really high-end vegetables for restaurants, they want the best lettuce, tomatoes. Because a lot of tomatoes you buy at the supermarket don't have any taste. It's the same thing with genetically engineered –

MC: Yeah.

MB: – just like they ship them and pack them. The taste, unfortunately, got left out of the equation.

MC: Right. Just like at the grocery store, eggs, for example. You get all different brands of eggs. They're mass produced. Then there's one particular brand of eggs that's from free roaming, organically fed chickens. They're probably three times as much. But we always buy them when we go to the grocery store. Because when you crack it in a pan, it looks like an egg. It doesn't look like a pancake.

MB: It tastes better.

MC: Yeah.

MB: You feel better that the chickens weren't –

MC: Right.

MB: – living a horrible life, being stuck, they can't even move.

MC: Yeah. People who are health conscious like we are, we try and buy things that are organic. Less chemicals, less ingredients, the better.

MB: Right.

MC: I think the United States, as a whole, is taking a turn toward that route. With the pharmaceutical companies and all the drugs that are being put on the market to fix all the problems and all the cancers that are going on, people are starting to actually research and find out for themselves, natural foods and natural lifestyles are really a plus when it comes to –

MB: Yeah. You wonder why there's so much cancer around. There's a lot of chemicals. I would think that all these people, younger and younger, are having cancer. You wonder if it isn't all the chemicals that's in every – you can find mercury anywhere in the ocean, anywhere in the world. There are over 60,000 chemicals that are in constant everyday industrial use. That's a lot of chemicals. Who knows what they do to us when they get in our body, whether it's from transformers or what's in plastics or preservatives for food, all the chemicals they use to adulterate fast food. I'm reading a book about that now. It's called *Fast Food Nation*. It's a pretty scary book about how McDonald's and all these people have special flavorings that are made up in these special labs in New Jersey that develop smoked flavor and all this –

LC: Yeah.

MB: – totally artificial stuff that simulates taste. Of course, it stimulates you to eat more and more of the stuff.

LC: Right.

MB: Did you guys see that documentary called *Super Size Me*? It's pretty –

MC: I did.

LC: I haven't.

MB: – pretty entertaining about the guy, how bad it was to eat junk food for a month.

MC: Right.

LC: I've read a lot about all the chemicals in foods there. So, I'm pretty knowledgeable about it.

MB: Right. Well, like in beef and pork, they jack those full of antibiotics.

MC: Yes. Antibiotics and steroids to make them grow faster.

MB: So, Lisa, you obviously really like the whole kind of fishing culture yourself.

LC: Yeah.

MB: So, what was that like to work in a fish house? Was that a neat experience for you?

LC: It was a neat experience. When I first started working there, I had no knowledge of different types of fish. I didn't know how to head shrimp. I didn't know how to clean a fish. I had no knowledge about saltwater fish whatsoever. The longer I worked there, the more I learned. Now I can tell you the names of most fish that I see. I can clean fish. I can head shrimp. But it was a very neat experience. Yeah.

MB: One thing that's neat about a place like this and the fishing life seems to me is that you're so connected more with the – like you have been all your life, Chops – ocean. I remember you talked, in the first interview, very knowledgeably, about everything from coastal erosion to –

MC: Right.

MB: – to the tide, just some of the natural cycles or even how you go about looking for the fish. It's highly complex but a real knowledge and love of nature. I remember you told that one story about how sometimes birds would hitchhike rides that were like –

MC: Oh, yeah.

MB: – lost at sea.

MC: Yeah. As a matter of fact, this past summer, I believe that there were more birds this past summer than I'd ever seen in my life. Sometimes as many as a dozen would be on the boat at a time. Birds ranging from finches to barn swallows to canaries. Matter of fact, this whole past year has been kind of different. The longer I'm in fishing, the more I get to see everything works in cycles. This past year has started a particular weather cycle. We had all these hurricanes, and they're predicting all these hurricanes for the next ten years. Everything's really affected. Our winter lasted way longer than any winter had. Even John Norris was saying we had northeasters this spring as late as he had ever seen them. The water temperature was colder for way longer. Everything ran late. The shrimp were late. It is just another year. Another ten years, I will have seen something else, I'm sure. But the birds, there's probably 1,000 percent more birds out there than I had ever seen, as far as land birds. They aren't supposed to be out there.

MB: It's kind of neat. You've had all these experiences that most people never even – in modern life, in cities, Greensboro, Winston-Salem or LA, really have no connection. There's no birds around or no nothing. It's an asphalt jungle as they used to call it. That was an old TV show. But it's like you're seeing the ocean on television maybe.

MC: Right.

MB: I think this wraps it up pretty well. Well, like how many kids do you guys want to have? Let me end up on that question. Have you maybe thought about that?

MC: Oh, we definitely want more than one. I don't know. It's not something we've worked out final. But I was thinking about two kids. Yeah. We want more than one kid though.

LC: When we first started dating, we were just talking. We said four or five. Well, he doesn't have any brothers or sisters. So, therefore, he doesn't have any nieces or nephews. I have five nephews and two nieces. So, I've brought them here over the summer, and he's got to spend a lot of time with them. Those are the only children he's really got to spend any time with. Since then, it's given him a lot of experience with kids. We've decided four or five is a bit too many. [laughter] So, I'm thinking at the very most, two, maybe three, but I'm thinking more like two. Yeah.

MB: Great. Well, good luck to you guys. You're a great couple.

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