

Wild Caught
Clare and Luther Norris Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: You've obviously been hearing what we've been talking about so far. I met you at that very moving church service at the community center about a month ago. Have you guys been continuing to go to that church or –

Clara Norris: My husband does. His friend is the one that's [inaudible]. He's the pastor. But I have a church in Jacksonville. I was going to church before all this came about at my brother's church at Bethel Baptist in Richlands or on the outskirts of Richlands. But periodically, I go with him on special occasions and stuff like that. But I just sort of can't break away from the church that I've been going to for quite a while. But Mr. Harry's church, I think, is a good church. I believe that they are going to really prosper. I hope they do anyway.

MB: It's funny. What is that pastor's name, Mr. Harry or –

CN: Harry.

Luther Norris: Charles Hughes.

CN: They call him Charlie Hughes.

MB: Charlie Hughes, that's right.

CN: But now, we met him, and he introduced us over thirty years ago as Harry. I've always called him Mr. Harry. [laughter]

MB: Well, it's funny. I met him I think two years ago when I first started. My wife just walked into his front yard. He lives right down by the water across from the fish house there. Very nice.

CN: My husband basically –

MB: You built that house?

CN: – basically built that house.

MB: Oh, that's a wonderful house.

CN: Helped build it. It was a log home, right, honey? They did the interior, my husband and Mr. Harry and my children.

MB: He talked about that. There's a lot of beautiful wood in there.

CN: Built the house, built another structure inside.

MB: That's a very nice house, a lot of big, screened-in areas. They invited us in, ended up having coffee. We were complete strangers.

CN: They're very good people. They're very good friends to us. We've known them for over

thirty years. Mr. Harry goes beyond being a friend. It's more like he's family now than he is a friend. I mean, he's done things for us that probably some family wouldn't have done. But there's a close bond there with Mr. Harry and Ms. Sue and my husband and I. So –

MB: Now, I should call you Carroll?

LN: That's fine.

MB: Carroll and Clara.

CN: Yes.

MB: I'm Matt. That's Rudy. Rudy's from Taiwan. He's a graduate student in our film program. He's been to about four of my classes. He's become a good friend. I want to start off with some of the same things I asked your children. Maybe we'll start with you, Clara. Did you grow up here in Sneads Ferry?

CN: Yes, sir. My dad was a commercial fisherman. I can remember whenever we'd take our clam sacks and go out, wade out, and go clamming and oystering. But when I was growing up and when my dad was a commercial fisherman and stuff, there weren't as many strict restrictions and rules and laws that you had to abide by. You just went out there and you got whatever you could. I can remember when oysters were \$3 a bushel. Back then, that was a good price for oysters. You didn't have all the restrictions on how little they could be or how many inches they had to be and stuff. It was just different then. As the years have gone on, it seems like they put more restrictions and more – which I understand. They have to have some laws on commercial fishing. But it seems to me that the longer it goes on, the more restrictions and the more strict laws and stuff. Once again, like my son said, I think the government has gotten into it too much. I'm not putting the government down. But I think that the government had a lot to do with so many restrictions and so many laws and stuff. It's just made it harder on the commercial fishermen. I think that if they don't do something, commercial fishing is going to be a thing of the past because of all the laws and all the restrictions that they put on it.

MB: Well, Carroll, let me ask you pretty much the same thing. Did you grow up –

LN: We moved here when I was fifteen years old. We were raised on a farm back up about 50 miles from here, up around Chinquapin, Wallace, Penderlea, out in that area. When we moved here, I started commercial fishing when I was fifteen years old, floundering, oystering, clamming. I worked on some of the shrimp boats. Long then the shrimp boats were small. I worked on several of them. As a matter of fact, well, I've worked with John for about nine or ten years. I've been involved in commercial fishing ever since I was fifteen years old up until about five years ago.

MB: So, you grew up near here then?

LN: [affirmative]

MB: Let me ask you this and ask Clara the same question. So, what does the town of Sneads Ferry mean to you as a place?

LN: Well, like my daughter and my son said, it's a tightly knit community. I've got a lot of good friends here, people that are like family. There's just no other way to explain it. They're family. I mean, though we're not blood kin or anything like that, we're just family. Boys I grew up with, I could go to every one of them, I guess, right now and say, "I need 10 bucks." He'd pull it out of his pocket. He wouldn't think anything about it. He would pull it out of his pocket and hand it to me. That's just the way we are. You don't find that in big towns. You don't find the generosity in big towns that you do in this small knit community. I had seen it when other tragedies in the community had taken place, how they rallied around. I never thought or never dreamed that anything like that would take place in my life here, especially after our tragedy. But it did. I appreciate all the people in the community. It is just a little bit hard to explain. We sort of look after our own.

MB: Clara, would you –

CN: You don't realize until a tragedy happens, how close knit a community is. But I can't describe how good the people have been to us and are still being to us and still supporting us. You just can't describe it until – I've been to different places. I've been to Florida and different places. But Sneads Ferry always draws me back to it. Because we are such a close-knit community. I mean, I never imagined how the people were and how they would jump in and help out when a community member was in trouble or something until the tragedy happened to us. I can't describe how good the community has been to us and everything. They've just been fantastic. The Onslow County Sheriff's Department, Mr. Ed Brown, and Mr. Mack Whitney and different ones from the Sheriff's Department were just fantastic in the search when we lost our son. But the fishermen, Mr. Ed and them really helped. I don't know what we would have done without them. But the fishermen rallied together. The little fishing community rallied together. All of them got in there, and they searched until they found our son and Joey. I just can't explain how they rallied together. We were just all like a family, like a community, a close-knit community together. I just can't explain and can't tell the community how much we appreciate what they did until they found our son, even after they found him, until we put him away. Right now, right on, we can go to the grocery store, and they, "Hey, how are you Ms. Norris today? How is your week? How are you doing?" Just telling us if there's anything they can do or any way they can help out or whatever to just let them know or whatever. You can't go away and find that, not like you can in a little community that you grew up in. I appreciate that so much from all the community, not just one, all of the community. Because we are just a close-knit little community. I just can't explain it. [laughter]

MB: Well, you were very eloquent about it at that church that day.

CN: Yes. [laughter] Well, I tried to be. I tried to be what I thought Hotdog would want me to be. He died like he lived. I think Hotdog died like he wanted to die, right out there in that water. But I never imagined that he would die like he did. But from the time that he was old enough to talk to me and his daddy, he'd say, "Mama, I want to die in the water. I love that water. That's the way I want to die. I want to die in the water." I never imagined then when he was talking to

me about it. Hotdog loved commercial fishing. I mean, that was his life. He died right where he wanted to die. I believe he died happy. He died with his best friend. I believe Joey was his best friend. He had a lot of friends. He did never meet a stranger. He was so outgoing. He hardly ever fought with anybody. Or sometimes he would fight with his friends and stuff down on the water. They'd have disagreements. Then the next three or four days, you'd see them all gathered up together. When one got in trouble, all of them were in trouble. When one of them was doing good, all of them were doing good. That's what I'm trying to say. They're so, just knit together. I mean, there is a bond that I can't explain with the commercial fishermen in our little town. They're just fantastic.

MB: So, as a kid, he was a real outgoing kid.

CN: Yes, very [laughter] outgoing kid. He was wide open all the time. He never met a stranger. He was just outgoing and very friendly. Sometimes he was outspoken. I think that he got that from his mother [laughter]. His dad, my husband, has always sort of been quiet and very serene, didn't have much to say. But Hotdog has always been – like I said, he's always just been wide open and very outgoing. He was a good kid. He got out there and got in trouble sometimes. But what kid doesn't get in trouble sometimes? But he lived life to its fullest, I believe. I mean, he would get down and things would happen to him. But then he'd get right back up, and he'd go again. He was just our Hotdog. [laughter] That's all I can explain. He was just our Hotdog.

MB: Well, Carroll, how about for you, some of your memories of your son?

LN: Well, we had good times. We had rough times. I started taking him in the boat with me when he was hardly out of his diapers really. He started going fishing with me when he was 2, 3 years old. We loved each other. Sometimes I just didn't tell him enough that I loved him. I mean, like she said, I don't talk a whole lot. Words come sort of hard to me. But we were pretty close. Well, I'm close with all my children. I love one just because I do the other one. I guess it was because he was my firstborn. It was just a little bit different feeling. It was a tough loss. I mean, it's just something you don't get over. I was talking to a friend of mine down at the outboard motor place. I went to get some rollers for my boat trailer this morning. Me and him were standing there talking. I've known him for years. "Well," I said, "it was a tough pill to swallow." I said, "You don't know until you lose one of your own." It's just a hard thing. I have to go by the graveyard every day, going back and forth to work. Believe me, it's not easy. It's not an easy thing to do.

MB: So, how many years were you a commercial fisherman?

LN: Roughly forty-five years. I started when I was fifteen years old. It's something that I would still go back to. I love to do it. I still love to do it. I'll always love it. You're sort of independent. Like I say, that's hard to find on a job, on a lot of jobs. You've got a boss man standing over you, telling you what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Out there, you're your own boss. I hate to see what the government has done to commercial fishermen. The way the government has done, it has actually cost lives, like the boys that got drowned on the trawler up on the other side of Morehead. It was up on the other side of Morehead a couple of years ago. They had a quota to fill. They had a certain length of time they had to get that quota. They had

to go out in rough weather to do it. If they hadn't had that quota on them, they wouldn't have been out there in that rough weather. They wouldn't have drowned. I mean, when you have a quota to fill and you have a certain length of time to do it, you've got to do it. Or don't, you lose it. Because they shut it down at a certain time. State of Florida, they put forty thousand people out of work in one lick. The people not knowing what they were voting for and some of them not caring what they voted for when they voted on it, voted to put the net fishermen out of business in the state of Florida. Well, they did it. Put forty thousand people out of work, millions and millions of dollars' worth of equipment. I feel like it's not right for the government to get mixed up in an industry like that. It's the same way they've done to small farmers. They've done it to small farmers the same way. They killed the small farmers. We are just a dying breed. That's all. Like you said, fishing and farming are two of the oldest industries in the world. That was the first two industries there were, fishing and farming. I've done a little research on it, not a whole lot, but I do know that much, that it was two of the oldest industries in history. If the government doesn't get out of it, there's going to be a whole lot more of them out of business. They've got so many restrictions on them now that they can't catch any grouper right now because they've got a season on. Those fish were there when we were born. Those fish will be there when we're gone. I can understand size limits. I can understand some of the net size limits and stuff like that. But when they start telling you, you can't have but 50 pounds of this a day or 25 pounds of that a day, you can't even pay expenses like that. I've got a friend right now; I'm working on his house. He's got a boat in Southport. The seabass got so cheap right after Christmas, he just about had to give them away. A lot of it's because of a lot of imports. That seafood they import in here isn't fit to eat. I know I was raised on fresh seafood, partly raised on it, and I know the difference. Half of that stuff that they bring in here from a lot of other places is just spoiled product. I mean, they just don't take care of it.

MB: Well, I've certainly gathered from these interviews with you guys and with many other people about the sense of community here and how powerful that is and how rare it is maybe these days. Clara, I know it's difficult for you to talk about, but take us through – because I think this is a very important part of the story. People have got to understand what's at stake here in terms of the future. Because if it happens to fishermen, it can happen to anybody. It can happen to the small hardware. How can the small hardware store owners survive with Home Depot and Lowe's and all that? You can't make it.

LC: Well, you can't.

CN: It's hard to survive with the restrictions and all that stuff on them. I feel like Joey and Hotdog would have not been out there in that kind of conditions, in that kind of weather, if the restrictions on the crab weren't like they were. I feel like they might have been pushed because it was right there coming up Christmastime. He has a son in Arkansas. It was the 17th of December, which he already had Thomas's plane ticket to fly him here for Christmas. Because he got him for every Christmas, and he got him for the summertime and stuff. Him and his wife were separated. But he had his plane ticket. We had scrapped around and got around and got up the money for his plane ticket. But he felt like he had to have Christmas presents under the Christmas tree waiting for him when he got here. I think that pushed him and Joey. Joey was the same way. I mean, commercial fishing is, if you don't work or if you have bad weather or whatever, there's no money coming in. I feel like if the restrictions and stuff hadn't been on, the

boys – like some of the restrictions and some of the laws – they wouldn't have been out there under the circumstances. But they felt they had to go because they had families and it was right around, like I said, Christmastime. They felt they had to go. I believe that it was Joey's and Hotdog's time to go. But there's a lot of times that restrictions and stuff are put on the boys that I don't believe that they would put their lives in danger like I've seen some of them do, if the laws and the things, the restrictions and stuff, weren't as harsh as what they are. Now, I feel that with all my heart.

MB: Well, as a mother of professional commercial fishermen and your husband having been one for forty-five years, has this always been a worry to you about the danger aspect of it? Because it is dangerous. I'm absolutely agreeing with what you're saying. I'm just saying, has that been something you thought about?

CN: Yes. If they didn't come in when I thought that they should come in, then I would start to get concerned. When Hotdog and Joey left, I had talked to him that morning on the phone. I had no idea that he was even going out that morning. He had been oystering and clamming, which he wasn't supposed to because he was still under doctor's care and everything. He was still disabled. But a lot of times, whenever you're pushed into something – I fully believe that he wanted his son to have a good Christmas. Therefore, he went out, and he broke the rules. I mean, that was a rule that he broke. He was just trying to support and take care of his son. It was him and his son, and he just gave his life. Him and Joey just gave their life for what they believed in. I believe Joey and Hotdog both loved the river, and they both died just where they wanted to die. It's hard to understand. It's still hard for me to understand. But I don't question the way that God took them. I'm a very outspoken Christian. I think Hotdog and Joey both were saved. I believe that both of them are just waiting. They're just up there looking down on us, waiting for us to come be with them. That's the way I feel. I feel like they're just waiting. I just see him up there, and he's laughing and being with my mother and my father and my aunts and uncles and just waiting for us to come and join them and be with them. I mean, that's the way I believe.

MB: So, this whole event, you're very thankful to have that deep sense of faith.

CN: Yes. Yes. If we hadn't had God in our family and in our lives, I couldn't go on. God is first in my life, first and foremost in my life. A daily walk, if I didn't have God in my life, I couldn't go on. So, he's the one that's carrying me. We are a close-knit family, always have been. I haven't always been as faithful to my Lord as I am now. But he's first and foremost in my life, and that's what carries me, keeps me going on.

MB: Well, this will be the last question for both of you. But going to that actual day then, take us through what it was for you. In other words, how it transpired for you.

CN: It was just unbelievable. Well, we had a baptismal service at the church. No. It was my brother's birthday. My brother's birthday was on the 17th, and he's the pastor of the church that I go to. We had a surprise birthday party for him. Well, Hotdog didn't come to church that morning. I found out later that he and Joey had gone out. But I didn't know anything about him going out crabbing that Sunday night. But I came home, it was about 9:30 p.m., and my husband

didn't go to the surprise birthday party. I had bought a tape in town the day before. *Fly Away Home* was the tape of the little girl with the geese where she raised the geese from babies and stuff. I had been setting up that night watching that movie, and my husband went to bed. He said, "Honey, I'm tired. I'm going to bed." I was restless, and I couldn't sleep. It was 1:30 a.m. They say that Hotdog and Joey died on the 17th. But at 1:30 a.m., on the 18th, I had the weirdest feeling. I got up, and I went to bed. I just couldn't sleep. I had a weary, restless feeling. So, I got up the next morning. Every morning at 8:00 a.m., Hotdog would call me and his dad before he'd go out in the water, go to work. Well, he didn't call that morning. My husband went on to work. I was home all day long. It hadn't been but two weeks, moved out from staying down there with us. He didn't call me that morning. I sort of thought, well, there was something that wasn't right. He had told me, "Mama, I need some flowers to go in my trailer." He'd moved back to the landing. He said, "I need some flowers to go in my trailer." So, I had made him a little pop with a spider lily in it. All day long though, I tried to call his house, and I would get the answering machine. I thought, "Well, something just is not right." I just had that restless spirit all day long. About 5:00 p.m., I started my dinner. I had my dinner on. I was fixing to start my dinner. I was washing cabbage. I was going to cook cabbage for dinner. Then my husband came in. He stood in the hallway, and I knew there was something wrong with him. I turned around and looked at him. I said, "Honey, what's wrong?" I could just tell there was something wrong with him. He came over there to me and he put his arms around me. He said, "Honey." I said, "Carroll, what is wrong?" I thought something had happened to his mom. Because his mom's getting old and she's sort of in bad health. I said, "Honey, what's wrong?" He said, "Honey, they found Joey's Green's body floating up the river." Just as soon as he told me they'd found Joey Green's body up the river, I knew that Hotdog was with him. That told me right there what my restless spirit was. It's sort of like in a dream. From then on, it was like I had been in a dream or something. I know it's real, but it's like it's not real. But as the days go on and as the time goes on, it gets better. But the community sticking together and getting out there and helping us look for him and supporting us and the things that they did with us and helped us out and helped us with donations and stuff like that, that really helped. That made a real bond with the community, the way that we feel about the community and everything. But it's still hard. We just have to take it one day at a time. There are days that I have a good day. Then there's days that it's not so good. But talking about it helps. Just talking about it really helps.

MB: Carroll, is there anything you want to add to that? Or is that pretty much it?

LC: Yes, that pretty well covers it.

MB: Well, I want to thank you both very much. That's very moving. It's an honor to be with you.

CN: Yes. Well, we appreciate you doing what you're doing.

MB: I appreciate that. I'll do my best job that I can, you know that. I'll do the best job I can to tell the story, and this is a big part of it.

CN: Yes.

MB: It's a way of life.

CN: Yes. It is a way of life. Sometimes it's a hard life, but it's also a good life. I wouldn't want it any other way. How Hotdog died and what he died for, it was – I just can't explain. That's one consolation to me, that he died like he wanted to do, like he wanted, where he wanted. I believe he died happy. I honestly believe that he died happy. The only thing I just hate is that he had to leave his son. Because his son will be twelve years old in June, and that's at a very tender age. But I feel like me and my husband are going to pick up and take – we can never take Hotdog's place in his son's life. But we are going to pick up and take over where he left off and see that Thomas is looked after and taken care of the best that we can do for him. That's very important to us, that Thomas knows that we love him, and we're going to support him and be there for him when he needs it and just be good grandparents.

MB: Okay. Why don't we shut down?

[end of transcript]