

Wild Caught
Bernice Guthrie Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 53:19
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Bernice, now I know that it's a little nerve-racking going through all this endless setup stuff that we do here. But I appreciate you doing the interview basically just like we're old friends, which I consider us to be good friends. Just to start off with, talk about some of the things that you're doing right now in preparation for the Shrimp Festival. I guess just what you're going to do today, for example.

Bernice Guthrie: Today, I'm taking the pictures of the queens that were chosen Sunday, to the papers to get that in the news. About our ball coming up, the 5th of August, to get it out there that I have tickets for that. That's about what I will be doing today. Now, I've got to start all my publicity, sending everything to the papers. I got to set up the TV interviews, the radio, all of that within the next week or so, and send out all my posters. Well, get all the posters out everywhere. I always send the information about the festival to all of the incoming tourism welcome centers coming into North Carolina, to all of the larger Chamber of Commerce like Greensboro, Asheville, Charlotte. I get the information to all the newspapers of Charlotte, Fayetteville, Greensboro. I go way out. I got a lot of work to do within the next week or so. Well, up until the festival, really. I've already done a lot [laughter]. I have been so busy because I've just finished the book. I sell ads for the booklet, first get all the pictures together for that, the articles. That's a big job. I started that in 1st of May, and we're just getting it together now to send to the printers. I'm supposed to have it ready by tomorrow.

MB: Well, Bernice, maybe we should ask you this, talk a little bit about the Shrimp Festival, all the stuff you were building. Talk about the Shrimp Festival a little bit, how it started and all that.

BG: Well, it started in 1971. The first one, it only took about 2 months to put together. I think mostly everything was donated that first year. We had a great festival. First time we ever had a traffic jam in Sneads Ferry 30 years ago. Of course, it just kept getting bigger. Over the years we had it in different places in Sneads Ferry. Well, it got so congested that we had to find a place kind of out of Sneads Ferry. We found this place on New River off of 172, which was a perfect spot for our festival. We could have the shrimp boat parades and the different things. It was a lot cooler than the place we have it now. But we leased that piece of land for I don't know how many years. But then it was eventually sold and of course, we couldn't afford to buy it. Then we had to find another place. These rent festival proceeds had gone toward the community park, we called it. So, we had nowhere else to go and we just went there and set up for the Shrimp Festival. We've been having it there. We called it our community park. We've been having it there. I say so many years, I can't recall the exact years. But I know we've been having it there now several years. Over the years we built the community building and our covered bandstand. We just improve every year, and it all comes from the proceeds from the festival. This is our 30th year coming up. I'm hoping that it will be one of our bigger, better years. It's going to be hot [laughter]. It's always hot in August. But overall, we've had success. We have been so lucky over the years because of the time of the year to have never been rained out 29 years, and never had to postpone, or we don't have a rainy day. Everything is going that morning and we have to go. So, I'm hoping that everything is going to work out fine this year. Everything is looking good.

MB: Well talk about some of the different things that build up to the festival. Like the other day with the Shrimp Queen, you had – talk about the whole thing and then actually what happens the

day of the festival, the parade, and all that stuff. Take us through all that.

BG: The first thing we do is select our queen. That's usually done in July. We have over the years had a pageant. But the last few years we've had interviews. We just interviewed the girls, the parents, and dress, and so and so forth. Then she's chosen. Then the Saturday before the festival weekend is when we have what we call our coronation ball. That's when we crown the queen. We have food, we usually have it catered, and a band. We have dancing. Well, it's the big – I wouldn't say formal. But anyway, it's the nicest dance that we have where the whole community can come together and enjoy a night out. That is always the Saturday before the festival the following weekend. Then of course, the following week, it's busy, busy, busy getting things set up on the field, making sure everything is ready for that Saturday. Of course, Saturday starts with the parade at 10:00 a.m. Then everything else will take place on the field, the food, entertainment, arts and crafts, concessions, other kinds of food, military displays, different things for the kids, pony rides, petting zoo. Last year we had a shrimp trawl set up, which was very interesting. A lot of people enjoyed that. Hopefully, we'll have that again this year. That is on Saturday. Then Sunday things start at 12:00 p.m. Basically, the same things we have on Sunday, the entertainment, the food, the arts and crafts. Everything just about on Sunday that we have on Saturday. We just went to the 2 days started in [19]95. Up until then we only had just the one Saturday, always second Saturday in August. Then in [19]95, we decided to try 2 days. I think each year we have a little more on Sunday. This year I'm bringing in the famous Lewis Family, a bluegrass gospel group that's known all over the world. I'm hoping that that will be our draw for Sunday this year.

MB: Talk a little about the parade now. I remember last year the Sheriff was there. They had the Marine Band. Talk a little about some of the –

BG: Well, the parade nationally starts off. We usually have anywhere from eighty to a hundred entries and floats. As I said, the Sheriff always starts it off. Then we have the Marine Corps Band Color Guard, Marine Corps Band, and then of course, all the others. We have a lot of Sudan temple Shriners entries, all kinds of queens from the little, teeny ones right on up [laughter]. We have a lot of queens. As I said, the floats and a lot of Corvette clubs. We used to have the Sheriff's Posse on horses, but they – I don't know why, I think they must have disbanded. But we always have a couple of horses that come through along the last. Of course, the very last thing is our queen. I think she's the last entry when she comes down through. But it's one of the bigger, better parades in this area. I think everybody enjoys the parade.

MB: Well, really talking about the Shrimp Festival, you're talking about something that really takes a whole year.

BG: Yes. We start when we've finished one. Then we have to get together, pick a new chairman, a new committee. Hopefully over the years, a lot of the same people worked years there. The same people basically worked for twenty-five years, and I was one of them. Then the last 5 years – this will be 5 years – we did have some new people that have come forward to help because the ones that worked for twenty-five years got tired and some of them aged out. We've only lost one chairman over the years. All of our queens are still around. That's something else I'm doing this year, is inviting all the past chairman, all the past queens to come and ride in our

parade. Then they're invited to come on the field. But it's been a lot of work. It's an awful lot of work. It's year round, just like I had to –

MB: This is interesting. In other words, a little bit more about the Shrimp Festival. You personally have been very involved with the Shrimp Festival since its inception. What are you –

BG: Well, I was involved starting with the sixth one really. The first five, I was here, naturally, and went through the parade and everything. But I was working at the time. The first 5 years is when it was in places right here in Sneads Ferry. The restaurants were just loaded because so many people in here. We very seldom got out of the restaurant until midnight. At that time, we had street dances too at the end of the festival. Sometimes I didn't even get to one of those. But the sixth year, the restaurant owner closed because his daughter was very involved with it. She was so tied up trying to work and the phone ringing and all the things that she was doing. Because she was one of the main workers for those twenty-five years. So, he said, "Next year we're going to close. You all can go get involved with the festival. Just go enjoy. Do whatever you want to do, but we are going to close." So, that is when I started going to the meetings and got involved. How I got involved with the publicity, I just went to the meetings to see what was going on. The next thing I knew, they put me in charge of publicity. Because I kept telling them that I would take posters to the cafe and all the different people from all the different states that were in there in the summertime. They were from California, all over everywhere in the restaurant, because they were people coming to the beach and coming over and eat. I would give them a poster and tell them to take it back to California or Texas or Alabama or Tennessee, wherever, and advertise our Shrimp Festival. My husband, every now and then he'd say, "You know nobody's coming from California to the Shrimp Festival." I said, "Well, you never know when somebody is going to be heading for the East Coast and looking for something to do and be in our area." That's exactly what happens, that they come to the beach. I've had calls from California about the festival, wanting to know when it is or what goes on because they're going to be at Topsail Island that weekend and they want all the information on it. I've had calls from Upstate New York, Wisconsin, all these different places that are going to be on the East Coast. They've read about the Shrimp Festival, and they want more information on it. So, that's how I got involved in it. Next thing I knew, I was in charge of publicity. It all started at the Riverview Café. I would be passing out my information on the festival.

MB: But you've been involved with all kinds. So, in other words, you're –

BG: As the years went on, I got involved in other things. I did publicity for several years, mostly publicity. Then I got involved with selling the ads, the booklet. I took over being in charge of that. I take care of all the billing and making sure the ones that haven't paid, I bill and all the money. I take care of the Shrimp Festival box at the post office. So, everything comes through there. I know who it goes to, if it belongs to me or if it's for the chairman. I take care of all that. Then I've helped with the parade over the years at the lineup, helping them answer questions. Of course, this year I've sold floats for the parade. What else have I done? I'm involved with just about everything that goes on, really. The only thing I have never done is I have never been chairman. I have been begged to be chairman for several years, but I never wanted to be chairman. I enjoy the things that I do. If I was chairman, I would have to give up some of the things. I just tell them I want to do what I enjoy doing. So, they say, "Your picture

needs to be on that wall." I said, "No, it doesn't. I don't want it on that wall."

MB: Generally, how many people will actually come to the Shrimp Festival? Give us some sense of how many shrimps you cook up.

BG: We will probably cook between 15-, 1,700 pounds in that area of shrimp, at least that many those 2 days, and French fries. Just a humongous amount [laughter] of hush puppies, French fries, coleslaw, shrimp, I think over the years when we used to do it ourselves. See, we've had it catered now since [19]96. But all those people that worked all those twenty-five years, they got right out there and cooked the shrimp and the hush puppies and the French fries. It was a hot time, but they did it. Some of them would stand right there from early, early morning until it was over that night. But now after [19]95 starting in [19]96, we've had it catered. That takes a lot off of the Shrimp Festival Committee. He takes care of everything. He gets his help, so we're not involved in that. That was a big part of it. Very big part of it was that cooking. But that's helped us a lot.

MB: Well, now speaking about the Shrimp Festival, so the Shrimp Festival really is a great way for the community to come together and celebrate shrimp, which are obviously on the main –

BG: That's how it started. They wanted to do something to celebrate the shrimp. Some said, "Why did you have it in August, the hottest month of the year?" I said, "Well, that was the height of the shrimping season." They got it together within a couple of months. It was to say it just happened to fall the second Saturday in August when it first started. Of course, it's always been the second Saturday and now the second weekend. But we've gotten through it every year. I said we've never been rained out. Came really close in [19]84, I believe. But we broke even that year. So, somebody's been looking out for us [laughter] always. Sometimes I've been quoted in the newspaper, somebody up above was looking out for us a certain year that maybe it looked like it was going to really be bad, but it always turned out great.

MB: Well, so I guess part of the whole Shrimp Festival thing is celebration of fishing shrimp.

BG: Shrimp.

MB: So, talk a little bit about the importance of fishing to this town and this community.

BG: Well, that is the livelihood of a lot of the families on Sneads Ferry. That goes back generations, that that's how they have fed and clothed their families from the river, fishing, shrimping, crabbing. It's just been handed down from one generation to the next. But I don't think that is – well, this day and time with the strict restrictions that they have, a lot of them have gone into other jobs. But there are still some of the main ones, like Marie was talking about Roy Edens and the Davises. They've just stuck with it all these years. It's a hard life. But that's all that they've ever known, some of them, is fishing and just shrimping. It's fed and clothed their families. So, I think it's important. Well, one of the main things of Sneads Ferry has always been called the little, sleepy fishing village [laughter]. But we're not little sleepy too much anymore [laughter].

MB: Well, speaking about that, you've been here for many years.

BG: Thirty. Well, my family moved here the first day of 1949. I had already graduated from school, started to work at the Riverview in 1949. Then of course I got married in [19]50 and was gone 10 years and came back in last day of 1960. So, I feel that Sneads Ferry is really my home. I've been here so many years. I love it. When I go on vacation, I always have my Shrimp Festival bumper sticker on the van and all the information on Sneads Ferry and give out to motels I stay in and welcome centers. I go in welcome centers in all the states that I go in and give them a little brochure on Sneads Ferry and maybe a bumper sticker or any information I have on the Shrimp Festival at the time. I think they call me ambassador, some of them do, [laughter] because of everywhere I go. I always had my little card on the Riverview Cafe because that's been a part of my life since 1949 too. I worked there and got to know so many people. I've watched them. I've fed them in the highchairs. They've grown up, got married, bring their children in. I've waited on them. That's been just the last 38 years that I was there. We could go back three generations or more from the time I started. But I've really enjoyed all my years at the Riverview. It's been a part of my life really especially since 1961. Everybody says I'm a walk-in advertisement for the Riverview Cafe Shrimp Festival [laughter].

MB: Well, now talk a little bit more about the Riverview Cafe. Let's talk about that some, about how you came to that restaurant, what the restaurant is, how it's gone through the generations of owners and that family.

BG: Well, I had cousins that worked there when we moved down here. I had never done anything other than farm. My daddy was a farmer. So, I just wanted to see if I could wait on people. I started in September of [19]49. I worked a year, met my husband there, Christmas Eve of [19]49. I worked through August of [19]50. Then we got married in September of [19]50. Him being in the Navy, I was gone 10 years. Then we came back, and I started back in [19]61 and was there straight 38 years. I worked through three generations of the same family. It started out with the original owner, who was Mr. Jimmy Lewis. His manager was his brother-in-law, Percy Jenkins. That went on until 1969. Mr. Jenkins bought out Mr. Lewis. I worked for him all those years up until the late [19]80s. Then Mr. Lewis's son bought it. I worked for him 3 years. Then his grandson bought his uncle out. I've been working for the grandson for I guess 14, 15 years now. People said it was a three-family restaurant, Jenkins, Lewis's and Fosters because I had three sisters and myself that's been working there off and on since 1950. I have one sister left and I've gone back. I've been working five weekends now. So, it's one of the best and most well-known restaurants on the East Coast, I would say, because we are known all over the world. I have had people to come in and say they heard about us in Germany. Of course, it's because of Camp Lejeune so many transits, people moving out and coming in. I've heard people say that they were sitting on a bench in Fishermans Wharf in Los Angeles – no, where is Fishermans?

MB: San Francisco.

BG: San Francisco. Somebody on the other side of the table was talking about the Riverview Cafe in Sneads Ferry, North Carolina. Just a story. I've got so many stories about the Riverview because I could go on and on. People tell us it's the best seafood that they've ever eaten. All

these people that I've been waiting on the last 4 or 5 weeks that I've been back down there, they say, "You just can't beat the Riverview. We've been everywhere. But the Riverview is the best place to eat."

MB: The pies sort of help.

BG: Oh, yes. That dessert that the owner's mother – those pies. They're all made from scratch too, the pies, the cheesecakes. She used to do cinnamon rolls and Eclairs. A lot of people still come in and want those, but she doesn't make those anymore.

MB: That's pretty amazing. So, you've worked there really for almost 50 years then?

BG: I was working, yes, 50 years last year [19]99.

MB: You met Murray. Talk about that.

BG: [laughter] Well, not much to talk about other than I met him there on Christmas Eve. We started dating. I worked on through August of [19]50 and we got married September the 29th. Then of course, I had to move or did move to Norfolk. We had two children. I have a daughter 47, and my son is 44. My daughter lives in Cary now. She's a dental hygienist. My son is right next door. They have two daycares and three children. I have my three grandchildren right here. Been right here in my yard watching, might I say, all of their lives, which has been really nice. I hear people talk about, they get to see their grandchildren once a year or twice a year. It's been nice that I've had mine right here with our yards joining, because they used to live right there in the old house and running in and out all the time. Oldest one is 20. Hardly seems possible, but [laughter] time passes on. But it's been a good 50 years. I wouldn't have had it any other way, I guess. So, we'll be having our 50th anniversary in September.

MB: That's wonderful. What's it been like living in this wonderful, little town of Sneads Ferry?

BG: Well, I've enjoyed it because it is small. I thought one time that I wanted to live in Norfolk, but Murray said if we did, we'd wear two or three more cars out going back and forth like we did the 10 years we were up there. Just we ought to get on down and settle down in Sneads Ferry because he was born and raised here. So, we did. Of course, I have some relatives around, and everybody just seems like family. Like I heard some of the girls talking about you go to the food line and you're going to run out there a few minutes, pick up a few things, you run into three or four people and you got to talk. So, sometimes you go to the food line. You're gone an hour or 2 hours. You go to the bank. You know everybody in the bank. It's just a close-knit place. You've got most everything you want. We got the beach so close, and we got the river. We got Wilmington and Jacksonville. We were in between Wilmington and Jacksonville to shop in town. So, it's just a good place to live and bring up your family.

MB: Tell us about all the organizations [laughter]. You are in, what, the Homemaker's Club. Talk about some of the activities.

BG: Well, I have belonged to the Sneads Ferry Homemaker's – which they've changed the name

now, but I still think of it being Homemaker's – for about 29 years. I have perfect attendance for 24 of those years. Never missed a meeting. I've really enjoyed it. My husband asked me, "What do you get out of all these meetings?" I learn a lot. I've learned most of my crafts from my Homemaker's, and I do a lot of crafts. We have programs on health and safety and cooking, just so many different things, environmental. We have a program each month concerning different things. It's just really good and it's worldwide too. Because I have even been to one of the national meetings that they come from all over the world, was in Charlotte in [19]89, I believe. I enjoyed that. Several years ago, I joined the Garden Club. All of them say you need to belong to the Garden Club. Anybody that loves flowers like you do and work in that yard like you do, you need to belong to the Garden Club. So, I joined that. I've really enjoyed those years now with the Garden Club. I'm a member of the Sneads Ferry Community Council. I go to all those meetings. I belong to the Beautification Committee. It has to do with beautifying Sneads Ferry. The Garden Club and the Beautification is the one that's put all the flowers and this rubber around there, Sneads Ferry signs coming off the beach, coming off the base. I'm involved with that. I just enjoy all the things that I do. My husband says I go to more meetings than Hillary Clinton [laughter]. My calendar is full every month with something. There's something for me to do. I never get bored. I don't understand how people can say I'm bored, because there's so many things you can do. There are so many things out there to do if you just want to get involved in doing them. I enjoy everything that I do. I don't know how many more years I'm going to be able to hold out, but I enjoy all of them.

MB: Well, that's great. We don't need to use this if you don't want it later on, but wasn't in [19]96 something, then the Shrimp Festival kind of was in a little trouble. You don't need to talk about that if you don't want – no worries – if it's a sensitive issue or anything. But weren't you involved with kind of saving it?

BG: Yes. But I don't know whether I want that in or not.

MB: On that one, right.

BG: You think, Marie? No. Off the record, I was hurt really bad because of what I did to save it and the people that came forward to help me save it. I say this is off the record. But all those people that worked with myself for twenty-five years, that worked so hard to make it what it was and still is, they just got tired and wanted to vote to never have another one. I came home and cried. I felt like a part of me had died. I just felt like something's got to be done. I just started talking to people and nobody knew that it had been voted that we would never have another one. So, the next thing I knew, I just had a meeting and put it in the paper, whoever wants to help save the Shrimp Festival. But there were some of these people that voted it down thought that I did the wrong thing or went about it in the wrong way. I didn't know any other way to go. They had voted it. Five people said we'd never have another Shrimp Festival when there could have been thirty-some people to vote. So, all these new people, that, what, are more or less twenty-five years and the last five years, a lot of new people have gotten involved and they're the people that came forward to help me save it. So, we've had 4 great years, and hopefully this will be the fifth one. Or if it hadn't have been for what I did, it would have stopped with twenty-five years. But I don't want, as I say, all the feelings, all the people that made me feel really bad that year and the next one. They've kind of come around. They treat me, I think, with more respect now and they

do talk to me and all. But it was rough there. I went through trying to save the festival and trying to get the help to save it. That's why we had to go, like I mentioned about the catering, we had to go with a caterer because none of these new people came in knew anything about cooking shrimp. They were mostly retired people that had moved into the area and wanted to get involved in things going on. They didn't know anything about getting out there in that shelter and cooking shrimp. So, we got Poochie – well JC is out here – JC's restaurant, Calvin Ray. He had worked with the festival all those years for twenty-five years. He had opened up his restaurant catering. We got him to cater it, and he's catered it ever since.

MB: Well, we won't use that though.

BG: No. I said I don't want to. It's as if it's still going on and nothing has ever happened.

Murray Guthrie: A lot of jealousy involved too.

MB: A lot of what?

MG: Jealousy.

MB: Jealousy, right. Well, I think anytime somebody stands out a little bit, then people tend to want to knock them down. That's just human nature, unfortunately.

BG: I always say everything is volunteer. I don't get anything out of all this running around I do. I never ask for a penny, gas money, anything.

MG: They don't give her gas money or nothing.

MB: Sure.

BG: It's all me. I enjoy doing these things for our community. A lot of people if they can't run the show, the heck with it. As I say this is right here, I don't want it talked. But we had a little group that wanted to run everything. Everybody called them the little clique. It was a little group. Actually, when somebody was mentioned coming in as chairman or something, if they didn't like that person, oh no, we can't have that. It's supposed to be open to the whole community, anybody getting involved. But a lot of the people wouldn't get involved because of the little clique. So, when all the little clique voted, we didn't have no more festival and got out of it, of course it hurt me. It really hurt me that they felt that way about it. Then they would not go to a meeting. They never came to a meeting. They never even came to a Shrimp Festival. Some of them did show up to our ball in [19]96, and I heard later that was to just show face or whatever. It really hurt me that as hard as I had worked all those years and then they just snubbed the whole thing. They washed their hands of the whole thing. They still don't have anything to do with it.

MG: I'll have to say, the people that's moved in here, have been more cooperative than the –

MB: Than some of the old hosts.

MG: Of course, that's not to get out either [laughter].

MB: Where are you going, Bernice?

BG: Am I through?

MB: No, we're not through.

BG: Oh, come on. I thought you were ready to take for Murray now?

MB: Well, pretty soon. But there are a few more things. Just relax.

BG: [laughter]

MB: You're doing great.

BG: I'm doing great.

MB: Just a few more things.

BG: You're not taking all this down here, are you [laughter]?

MB: No. So, let's see. I think we've covered a lot of the stuff. I think it's wonderful all your volunteer work. It's nice that you have your son right next door and your grandkids because not many people get to do that.

BG: Yes, I've been really lucky.

MB: So, you've had a very fulfilling life here where we're at. How has Sneads Ferry changed over the years?

BG: Well, it got bigger, really. Well, so many things. It used to be just little Sneads Ferry right here. Now of course, Four Corners is Sneads Ferry, Topsail, Food Lion, and all that. That's Sneads Ferry. Which when I moved down here, it was just this little area right here where Sneads Ferry Fulcher's Landing through the marinas down this way. Peru Road, that was the main road. We used to have IGA and a Red & White supermarket down here. We had our post office. Eventually, the library came in. Then we had a bank. I was here before all of these things came in. We thought we were really getting up when we got a bank and the library. Then of course it started spreading out Four Corners. The Four Corner area is built up, restaurant out there. Then the food line came in. Well, that did away with our IGA and the Red & White, all the little mom and pop stores around. Had one right up the road here that I walk to a lot of times at lunchtime to get me a drink and a nab or something. When all these other things started happening, naturally all those things went. That was sad, in a way, to see all of the – and they were people that had lived in Sneads Ferry all their lives that had the little grocery stores and the little restaurants. We did have two or three more restaurants. Of course, the Riverview is the

oldest one down here. It opened in 1946. But it just kept spreading out and spreading out and different things moving in. It's just gotten bigger and more people moving in. You get people now with names in the phone book, names that people say are definitely not a Sneads Ferry name because it's Fulcher's and Davis's and Guthrie's and the Sneads Ferry names. Now, you got names, some of them you can't even pronounce [laughter]. But I think it's good. You've got to you got to go along with change and things can't stop. I mean, progress. We would like for it to stay the same and a lot of the old timers want it to. But time changes everything. As time goes on, it's going to get even bigger, I think, because we hear of different things that's coming in. It's going to keep spreading out. It's not going to be a little, old, sleepy, fishing village of Sneads Ferry. But a lot of us old timers will still be here.

MB: I hope it doesn't grow too much.

BG: I hope so too. But what has happened within the last, I'd say 10 years, has been amazing. The housing developments, it's just going right on toward the beach. So, it probably will within the next 10 years. You probably would not believe now what it will be in the next 10 years.

MB: I think unfortunately, it will lose some of its character as a fishing town. Well, it's still pretty reasonably priced housing around here, but the more it builds up, the more expensive it gets, the tax rate goes up. Then you see all those fancy homes on the Intracoastal. Those are all people that come in from wherever they live just for the weekend or whatever. But for the fishermen, it could push them out really if they can't – I don't know. There's still going to be fishing here though.

BG: Oh, yes. I think there will be. But it's changing.

MB: Well, is there anything else you want to add?

BG: I think we've covered everything [laughter].

MB: That was great. Very good. All right. So, now what we need to do is to let me unplug this thing. All right.

[end of transcript]