

Wild Caught
Patricia Huie Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: It's Patricia Huie, right?

Patricia Huie: Right.

MB: Anyway, I got this on tape. Well, just to start off, can you tell us a little bit about your background? How you came to become the – your title is what, collections manager –

PH: [affirmative]

MB: – for the Onslow County Museum?

PH: Collections manager for the Onslow County Museum.

MB: Just gives us a little background of your background.

PH: [laughter] Okay. Well, I've lived in this area for 16 years. I've been working here at the museum for 10 years. I started out part time as the registrar. Then later on, the job evolved into registrar collections manager, which means I register the artifacts that come in, that people donate or that we buy. I also do curatorial work and do research on different historical aspects of Onslow County.

MB: Can you tell us a little bit about your – in other words, you're telling me before what? Do you have a background in history or –

PH: Yes. I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in History from UNC Wilmington in 1986. Then I went to ECU and did some graduate study in American Studies and Museum Studies, everything but the thesis so [laughter] – still working on that. It concerns Onslow County as well. It's a history of – or actually, a study of widows and orphans in Onslow County during the colonial period.

MB: Great. Last time I was here, they gave me a copy of that book by –

PH: "Onslow County" by Alan D. Watson. He was one of my professors actually in undergraduate school. He's an excellent professor. He's written many county histories of North Carolina, mostly eastern North Carolina. This is one of the ones that he did, and it's very good. It's very comprehensive.

MB: Well, speaking about history, can you kind of take us through a little bit of a backgrounder of how Onslow County came to be settled? Take us into the colonial stuff when White people first came to settle this and all that, the dates, and so forth.

PH: Okay. Yes. White settlement did not begin until about 1713, because of the perceived threat of the Tuscarora Indians in this area. When they were defeated at Nooherooka – which is present-day Greenville – in 1713, it kind of opened the way for White settlement, which in this area, a lot came from neighboring states. We did have some immigration from foreign countries such as from France, but most of our immigration was from states like Massachusetts and

Connecticut.

MB: So, can you talk a little bit about how – like I mentioned before, Sneads Ferry is the concentration of it – Morehead City and how these towns began to spring up? The earliest aspects of fishing, I guess, how that came in upon here?

PH: Well, I think that fishing has always been with us here. The Native Americans do a lot of fishing in the area. We're very, very dependent upon shellfish. Because when the archaeologists do digs here, they will always find these huge shell middens. They're several feet deep, which proved that they were very dependent upon the shellfish. Then when the settlers came in, they also did eat a lot of shellfish as well. However, they also supplemented that with regular fishing. Most of the settlers did not come here for fishing though. They came here to engage in a naval stores industry, mostly, and farming. So, fishing was kind of an ancillary endeavor to the farming and the naval stores industry.

MB: You'd mentioned before about the oysters – what is it the oysters on the New River and all that? Can you talk a little bit about how commercial – which I see when we were at the Maritime Museum in Beaufort yesterday, I think it was that commercial fishing was one of the first, or the first industries in the country. Can you –

PH: I'm not sure it was the first industry in Onslow County, but one of the things that the watermen were interested in after the Civil War was the promotion of the New River oyster, which was reported to be very tasty and much larger than the average oyster. These oysters began to be sold in places such as Wilmington, where the elite there would order them for balls and parties. Their fame spread as far as Boston, when the R.R. Higgins Company entered the New River oyster in the Boston exposition, where they won a rating of excellent. From then on, it was kind of uphill for this area in the oyster department because they established the New River Oyster Company in 1891, where they set out bushels and bushels of oysters in Stones Bay. They thought they had something going here economically, although it really only benefited a small portion of the watermen and the fishermen. Mostly, the outside investors were the ones making the most money. Then in 1897, we had the Eastern Carolina Piscatorial Association that came into being. They also were doing the same thing. They were planting oyster beds. They were buying shore property so that they could engage in this pursuit. However, this whole industry was brought to a very sad end in October of 1899, when Onslow County received the brunt of a huge hurricane, which turned up all the oyster beds and filled them up with mud and silt and effectively ended the investment in this area in the oyster industry.

MB: Well, I mean, in your work as an historian, could you talk a little bit about just the fishing aspects of the region?

PH: Okay.

MB: So, we're going to be [inaudible] this afternoon some of those (waterfalls?) still photographs of fishing. Have you done much work in the fishing area or in other words, in the –

PH: We did do one exhibit on hunting and fishing in this area. I have to say that our focus was

probably a little more on the hunting than it was on the fishing, because we just had more resources for that. I could say some things about [laughter] the fishing industry, but I don't want to take away from Lisa who wants to talk about that herself [laughter] about –

MB: Well, that's all right. We overlapped a lot, so go ahead.

PH: Okay.

MB: I mean, don't worry about that. I mean [laughter] – what I'm saying is that we're going to get a lot of overlapping material here, and then we have to stitch it together in the edit room in terms of what to –

PH: Okay.

MB: – use from a person. I actually like to have one person kind of bridge. One person started to say something and then the other person –

PH: Okay.

MB: – will have to finish it or –

PH: All right.

MB: – whatever.

PH: Well, I think that the fishing industry, it was in competition with the sport fishing industry. It's what happened after the turn of the century. This area was kind of discovered, so to speak, by wealthy businessmen from Goldsboro, from Charlotte, from Raleigh, also as far away as New York. They would come all the way down here because they had heard this was a great fishing and hunting ground, which it was, mainly because it was so rural and undeveloped that there wasn't much urbanization here. So, there were a lot of fish still in the water and a lot of birds in the sky. So, they would come out and spend weeks out here hunting and fishing. I guess, by word of mouth, it just passed around that this was a great place to come. In fact, one of the people that used to like to come here was H.H. Brimley, who was the first director of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. This was one of his favorite places to come and hide and fish. He was a great naturalist. Oftentimes, he would take some of his catch back to the museum and have it mounted. So, he had a party that would come with him usually to the Onslow Rod and Gun Club, where they would do all sorts of hunting and fishing pursuits. But later on, they started to feel as though there was a competition between the sportsmen and the people who were trying to make a living, fishing. They felt like that the sportsmen were taking so many fish out of the water, that it was taking a little bit of their livelihood away from them.

MB: I see. I think there are still some of those tensions going on.

PH: [laughter] Yes.

MB: In other words, you've lived in this area for a long time. I mean, this is kind of a non-historical question. In other words, a big part of the culture here is the coastal aspect. I mean, it's very different if we were in Clinton or someplace inland or Greensboro for that matter. In other words, what are some of the aspects? In other words, how is the – coming from a historian maybe – in other words, obviously, fishing and the maritime aspects of life here are very important. I mean, go out to (Beaufort?) or Morehead City or Sneads Ferry, the sea is very much a part of the life here. So, can you talk a little bit about that? I mean, how that's affected things, I mean, I guess?

PH: Well, I think that we probably say it really well in our exhibit, which is called "The Water & the Wood." The main incentives that people have for coming here were those two things, the natural resources of the woods and also the waterways, because settlers always wanted to sell near major waterways, and waterways that they can navigate in small craft, which was easy to do in the New River. Then they could also go out into the ocean and fish there. So, yes, it's always been a really important aspect of settlement in Onslow County and why people came here and why they stayed here, actually.

MB: Maybe we can think about this in terms of how it will narrate in some of the (stills?), but what are some of the images that you pull for our filming? What are some of those images you showing us?

PH: Well, I think they show us a lot about teamwork. It took a lot of men together to bring in these catches. A lot of those pictures will show how many people it took just to bring in a catch. I mean, you see them all putting the nets out together and bringing the fish in and then later on, salting the fish to put it up for sale and things like that. So, I think that there's a lot of camaraderie that goes on in fishing, and the fishing community in general.

MB: So, were they close-knit communities, these fishing communities?

PH: I think they still are very close-knit communities. I think that although Onslow County isn't all that large, I think that the fishing communities kind of have their own world, so to speak. That they've all known each other for years and years. Some of those families have been there since the colonial period. They're very much aware of that. They're very proud of their heritage and how long they've been here.

MB: That's one thing that we've really noticed filming. I mean, I've been pursuing the story for almost a year now since the last shrimp festival, which will be this weekend at Sneads Ferry. It's just like some of these families – it's truly amazing that they go back twelve generations of they all – this person is married to that (person's cousin) [laughter] and all that stuff.

PH: They all know each other pretty much. It's pretty remarkable, really, and like they are special in a way. They are a little bit different from the group that lives a little farther inland, I think – I mean, different in a nice way, in a good way, in a positive way, because I think they do have a lot of will. I think they have a lot of will to withstand hard times and to keep going when things don't always go their way, because they've had to contend with so many weather-related

problems out there and things aren't always perfect. They do have a very strong will, I think.

MB: That's very true. Like farmers have to have –

PH: Determination [laughter].

MB: – a tremendous amount of determination.

PH: Yes. They have a lot of determination and will to hang in there when the going gets rough.

MB: Well, it's a dangerous job too. It always has been. I mean –

PH: Yes.

MB: – in terms of at sea, all kinds of things can happen.

PH: I think so. Yes.

MB: Well, is there anything else that – I think this gives us enough to kind of wedge through some of the photographs and so forth. If there's anything else –

PH: Okay.

MB: So, just out of curiosity, you guys will see that – I think it's kind of amazing museum that –

PH: [laughter]

MB: I mean, not a lot of counties, to my knowledge, even had some pretty impressive institution you guys have.

PH: Well, it's a pretty diverse collection. If you were to look at the listing of everything that we have in the collection, we have over 3,000 objects. They range from farm equipment to quilts. It is diverse. We like it that way, but we just want to make sure it is a good reflection of life in Onslow County. We'd like to cover all aspects of Onslow County from the agricultural to the maritime. We do have some maritime items in our collection like fishing gigs and hip waders and seine nets and all kinds of things like that, that we have in the collection that reflect the maritime heritage.

MB: Well, I think that does it. Thank you.

PH: Well, I hope that wasn't too terrible.

MB: That was fine. That was good.

PH: [laughter]

MB: You can unclip the mic.

[end of transcript]