

Wild Caught  
Shannon Huie Oral History  
Date of Interview: July 19, 2000  
Location: Unknown  
Length of Interview: 12:35  
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Now, should I call you Shannon?

Shannon Huie: Yes, that's fine.

MB: Shannon, tell me a little about growing up in this fishing town. Just kind of get started, what was it like growing up then?

SH: When I was young, my grandfather had a fish house. Then things, I guess, were different because there were a lot of fishermen that could work then that aren't even alive now. But then it seemed like things were more fair. But now, the way things work, it's constant gouging. You get gouged on prices.

MB: So, what are some of the things that are unfair?

SH: Well, the fact that you'll go and you'll work all day long to catch, let's say, a thousand clams and you get in and they've decided to drop the price on you. Knowing full well that when that truck gets to the fish house, he's going to get the same price that he was getting this morning and he's just decided to pay you a penny less. He can call everybody else in the community, or as far as you can take your clams, and everybody else will drop their price, not because they have to but because they can. That's the main problem. Whenever you get ready on an opening day, you get one day because everybody from Salter Path to Wilmington show up in New River. It's not big enough for five boats to set in to start with. You have 50, 150 to 250 boats in one little area, and they just kill it. To add insult to injury, whenever you get in, you're not even going to get half the price as you were going to get when you went out. Most of the shrimp that are caught leave the community anyway. Everybody from Salter Path take their shrimp to Salter Path, everybody from Wilmington take their catch back. So, it doesn't really flood the market around here because all the fish houses prepare for opening days. So, they've already got everything they're going to get sold at regular price. At most, they might take a 5 percent drop in their price on an opening day. They knock off 60 percent to the fishermen. So, they make up their 5 percent, another 55 percent more. It's a cycle that's pushed most of the fishermen out of business. You can't survive and do it. I grew up and it was really all I wanted to do. Even the whole time I was in school, it was always a second job doing it growing up. Then now that I have a family, I can't do it anymore. It's not reliable anymore.

MB: So, you were saying before we started interviewing that you have the heart of a fisherman.

SH: Oh, yes.

MB: Talk about that some more. That is really important stuff.

SH: Well, it's the freedom of being able to go and do as you please. You don't have a boss to answer to, only yourself, and what you can make is what you get. But it's come to the point now that it doesn't work that way because you don't get honest pay for honest work anymore. It's just whatever they decide you need. We've talked about it at fishermen's meetings, but there's nothing that they can do because you have to prove that they're purposely setting the price. They can basically work their way around it. It's one-sided. You have people that move here that

don't even live here, didn't grow up here, don't know anything about the river. They just know that they want to be in it. Whenever they get in it, they want what's yours. Nobody really has a right to be in the river any more than anybody else. But you have people that move here, they decide they're going to be on the fishermen's association. They're going to make rules for people that have lived here all their lives, but you can't work like that. They have enough money when they move here, that the fisherman barely makes enough to start with. So, anybody with a little bit of money, they can roll right over you. I won't go into exactly who those people are, but the community is full of them.

MB: So, your dad has been a commercial fisherman all his life?

SH: All of his life since he was a little kid. Actually he was born here, so he's done it all his life. My mom, they divorced when I was young. So, I've lived away part of the time and here part of the time. But anytime I've ever been here, I've always worked with him my whole life. So, I grew up in the water, basically. I can never remember not being able to swim. [laughter] You know how that goes. But it's a good life when it's good, but when it's bad, it's really bad. Because it doesn't matter what you do, you have to pay all your bills on time. They don't care if it storms for a month or if you can't catch clams. Bill collectors don't care. That's why, as a full-time job, I'm a plumber. But all my spare time is either working on his boat with him or working in the river with him, whichever it is. You spend as much time working on your equipment as you do working in the river. That's a kickback. So, I've become a pretty good mechanic over the years. I've picked stuff up from him and everybody else. But it is a good life though. But determination and hard work doesn't make it in this business anymore. You either have to be established and already have money or be able to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with no breaks because you have to make the money when you can make it. You can't say, "Well, I'm tired or I don't feel well." You just have to get up and go. If there's money to be made, you have to make it. But the fishermen in this community won't band together. I've noticed that down south, like in Florida, and a lot of the Gulf states, they've made so many rules that they've had to put a license cap in North Carolina because of all the fishermen leaving their communities there. The fishermen in Sneads Ferry and – well, really the east coast as a whole, from Georgia up, they won't look at what's happened to them and they won't do like the fishermen in the north have done. They have a co-op to where the prices are set. Everybody makes the same thing. It's a whole lot easier for the community. Down south, the sports fishermen have moved in and basically banned every livelihood that the commercial fishermen had and run them out. All the industries there are now geared towards tourism rather than the commercial fishing. Here, the same thing is happening. The people from up north move down or out west, not just to pick on northern people, but they'll move in over on Topsail Island, pay insurance for a year, hurricane will come and blow it away. They want annex Sneads Ferry and make us pay their property taxes as if this community doesn't have it hard enough as it is trying to make a living because most everybody here is either a fisherman or they work locally. Not very many people would leave further than Jacksonville or Wilmington. Most people that live here work close, if it's not in the river. A lot of my friends that we used to piddle in the river when we were younger have other jobs now, but I still see them in the river in their spare time. But most people can't afford to do it fulltime anymore.

MB: So, do you think your father's generation may be the last – not to put words in your mouth.

In other words, if you had your druthers, would you want to be a commercial fisherman, if it was fair?

SH: If it were fair, I wouldn't do anything else. My dad, his generation is the last. Now, it's going to be a few people with money will own most of the boats. What's left of the commercial fisherman, coming up and getting older, they will all have to work for somebody else. So, it'll basically become a job, just like any other job. It's set up to where that the people that have the money, keep it, and get the money from the people that don't have it to start with. That's the way they work it. The golden rule is he who has the gold makes the rules. I've learned this by growing up with my father and just seeing the way that he tries to help people, especially people that move into the community, getting started, and they don't know anything about it. My father is one who will take them aside and show them how to shrimp, how to set their nets, and how to do this, and how to do that. Then after a few years, when they get established, all of a sudden he's in their way. That's the way it's worked. That's the way it's always worked. Where you have people that aren't from this community that are commercial fishermen fulltime, they come down here. On an opening day, the fishermen that live here can't even get in the river because there are so many people from everywhere else. But it's come to the point that each little local community has their own fish houses. Most times, a group of fish houses in the community will get together, and they'll set the prices. It's completely independent of what they get. Most facilities, they can freeze their shrimp and keep them, so it's not a matter of it spoiling. You can submerge and (freeze?) shrimp, and they're as good as fresh and keep them and ship them even further to get the prices. They get more for what's at the fish house. They either pay the fishermen the same or less. It just depends on how they feel.

[end of transcript]