

Wild Caught
Angie Lester Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina
Length of Interview: 21:31
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Okay. Angie, I appreciate you and your family being willing to sit down and talk about things. I was telling you about what this documentary is about, which is, from an outsider's point of view – so, the way I got into the story is my wife's family have a place over in North Topsail Beach, which is where we just stayed last night, and I always noticed the shrimp boats going by. I'm talking about going back the last seven years. I thought, "Wow. It's kind of amazing. Here are all these beautiful boats." Over two years ago, I went to the Shrimp Festival, and I met John Wayne Midgett. I met Bernice Guthrie, who's kind of been a mainstay of the Shrimp Festival, I guess, for a long time and how to keep it going and all that. So, basically, I started thinking, well, gee – as I was finishing the last documentary I did, I thought this will make an – I think this is an important, interesting area. So, that's why I started to just meet people and talk to people for about a year before I started to film. So, now, I've been filming. I really started last summer, filming and going out with people like Mac and with Little Paul and Buddy Davis and Billy Davis and Stevie Davis, and just trying to show the life. What I was trying to show, it's really a portrait of a town. Harvey Bradshaw – all kinds of people. The main story is the fishermen. So, maybe to start with, talk about what Sneads Ferry means to you. I mean, you grew up here, right?

Angie Lester: Yes.

MB: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like to grow up in this town?

AL: It was interesting [laughter]. I was born and raised here. I moved away for a period of about ten years but couldn't stand to be away from it. So, it brought me back [laughter].

MB: Well, what was it about it that brought you back?

AL: The beach, the way of life down here is much more laid back than the city. I lived in Lynchburg, Virginia. It's just more easygoing down here. Not a whole lot to do as far as like in town, but to me, it's a better place to raise your children. The beach is close. It's a different lifestyle down here being raised on the water and the fishermen's life. We were raised clamming. We clammed for our school clothes. We headed shrimp. My uncle owned a fish house. So, we were always over there heading shrimp or doing something around the fish house to earn money. So, I kind of wanted my kids to grow up in that kind of lifestyle, not in the city.

MB: So, tell me about your kids. How many kids do you have?

AL: I have two children – two boys. One's eleven, and one's four.

MB: Okay. What are their names?

AL: Jamie is eleven, and Tristan is four.

MB: Oh, okay. I met Tristan.

AL: Yes [laughter]. He's a talkative one [laughter].

MB: Yes. He's quite interested in all our equipment here and everything.

AL: [laughter].

MB: Well, so, in other words, you've kind of gotten into a little bit, but let me ask you this. In other words, I don't know how big Lynchburg, Virginia is. Is that up in the mountains?

AL: It's between Roanoke and Charlottesville, Virginia. It's up there. It's at the foot of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

MB: Pretty country up there.

AL: Yes. It's beautiful up there.

MB: Yes.

AL: But Lynchburg is not a huge city, but it's bigger than what I wanted to live in [laughter].

MB: Well, I can understand about that. I live in Greensboro, but I lived for about five years in Miami. That's a pretty big city. Before that, I lived in LA for about fifteen years, and that's a really big city [laughter]. So, Greensboro seems like a nice small town. But nevertheless, Greensboro, it's got all things like a city. It's problems, crime, and everything. So, I guess –

AL: Right. Yes.

MB: Well, let me ask you this. So, in other words, is Sneads Ferry a close-knit town, would you say?

AL: Yes.

MB: I mean, talk about that a little bit.

AL: It's very close knit. Whenever something happens, the community normally pulls together to help whoever's in need. Just like when we lost our brother in December and his friend, Joey, the entire community pulled together and helped us. All of the fishermen were there and looked for my brother. One of my uncles, of course, found my brother. But all of the community, not just in the search for my brother, but in the days after, for the funeral and things like that. The whole community pulled together. The area businesses, they've helped us tremendously. So, it's a tight knit community because when one of our own gets in trouble, everyone pulls together to help.

MB: I think that's a very – it's becoming, unfortunately, kind of a rare thing what you just described. I mean, I think if somebody in Greensboro – I'm sure that happens every day, but nobody knows about it. You may know a few of your neighbors. But by and large, unfortunately, these days, people come and go. Even at the university where I work, there's twelve thousand students, about a thousand faculty, whatever. I mean, so, people retire or have

problems, get sick, and nobody really necessarily knows about it except immediate family. So, would you say that Sneads Ferry is more like a big family in some ways?

AL: Yes. We're like a big family. At my brother's funeral – at our family night at the funeral home, there were 284 names on the book, and probably, some people that came in didn't sign the book. It was all local people, friends and relatives and just the local community. So, that's kind of unusual in other places. You might have a big service like that. But just that many people from one small community like Sneads Ferry to pull together and show their support for someone who's lost a family member, that kind of speaks for the community.

MB: It certainly does. Speaks very well for it. I remember interviewing Little Paul (Huey?), the clammer. Apparently, he had had a massive heart attack and was airlifted to Duke Hospital. His wife talked the same thing. When he got back, the community came together.

AL: Yes, they did. Little Paul's my cousin. When he had his heart attack, he was the main provider in the household. The whole community pulled together and helped them monetarily so that they wouldn't lose their home and their vehicles and things like that. So, they really pulled together and helped him in the same way that they did our family when we lost my brother.

MB: So, what was the actual day when this tragedy happened?

AL: Well, my brother and his friend went out crabbing on December the 17th. That was at a time when there was a storm. It was actually the same storm system that come through Alabama that I think eleven people died in Alabama from the tornado. Then it came on up the coast, and my brother and his friend had gone out crabbing. We're not sure what happened, but they got into trouble. That was on December 17th. On December the 18th, we didn't really know anything. My mom kind of suspected that something might be wrong because my brother always called her in the morning. When he didn't call her that Monday morning, she kind of thought something might be wrong. But we didn't find out that they were actually missing until 4:00 p.m. that day on the 18th. As soon as the community heard about it, there were probably 150 people at the bridge down there at the marina every day helping look.

MB: Wow. So, there were two. There was Luther, right? Or Hot Dog?

AL: Yes.

MB: He was called Hot Dog.

AL: Hot Dog. That's my brother. They found his friend, Joey, the very first day. They found him floating up by the bridge, not very far from the bridge. Then they found my brother three days later.

MB: So, they had the sheriffs and everybody?

AL: The sheriff, the water rescue teams, the local volunteer fire department, volunteer rescue squad. Probably, anywhere from a hundred to two hundred people from the community over the

three-day period that actually got out and helped, whether it was helping do the ground search or the local boys in their boats and stuff looking, going, and searching for any signs or whatever. Then some people in the community brought biscuits and coffee because it was cold down there. So, they brought coffee and hot chocolate and things like that every day.

MB: So, now, your family's been involved with fishing for a long time. Can you talk a little bit about that? In other words, the Norris family, I mean, I know having filmed with your uncle – with John. But in other words, talk a little bit about the fact that this is kind of a different thing. Two people really being involved for generations in a way of life. When you think about fishing – well, when I filmed the (media?) – that new church at the community center, a month ago, they were talking about Jesus and the fishermen. I mean, this is one of the most ancient jobs on earth in terms of fishing, maybe even before farming, really. Because people were able to fish before they could farm.

AL: Yes.

MB: When you think about, it goes back to the beginnings of human existence in terms of – and talk a little bit about, in other words, your family, in other words, has been involved with fishing a long time, right?

AL: Yes. As long as I can remember [laughter]. So, my dad was a fisherman. All of my uncles pretty much were fishermen. My uncle, John, has always had a big boat ever since I can remember. I mean, I remember when I was a little kid, barely being able to climb onto the big boat. He would take us out in the river and things like that. All of my brothers are commercial fishermen, whether it's clamming or shrimping, whatever season it is. I can remember eating a lot of fish when I was a kid [laughter].

MB: There's nothing better than real fresh seafood.

AL: Real fresh seafood [laughter].

MB: A lot of people don't even know what it's like, actually.

AL: Yes.

MB: I heard a statistic that half the seafood eaten in this country comes from out of the country now.

AL: Yes.

MB: So, a lot of people, they're tasting more the breading or whatever, than anything else. Because it doesn't taste like real fresh stuff does.

AL: When I lived in Virginia, we would go to Red Lobster up there for Christmas and little get togethers and things like that for our employees. They were always talking about how wonderful the seafood was – the fresh seafood. I always just had to laugh. They didn't understand that,

like, this isn't fresh seafood [laughter]. I was born and raised on fresh seafood. This isn't fresh seafood.

MB: There's a big difference.

AL: There's a huge difference.

[laughter]

MB: That's very true. But if you don't know, I guess you think it is. So, your family's been involved for a long time with fishing. In other words, well, talk a little bit about your brother. Paint a picture of what Hot Dog was. How did he get the name Hot Dog? Everybody's got monikers around here. There's Hot Dog, and there's – I've heard that now I can't remember anybody. There's a whole bunch of them. But how did he get the moniker? How did he get the name Hot Dog?

AL: Well, when my mom was pregnant with him, my dad's uncle always took her back and forth to her daughter's appointments. He would stop and get her a hot dog on the way home. She was right close to her due date, and that particular day, she ate two or three hot dogs. He told her that if she ate those hot dogs, that it was going to make her go into labor. He wasn't driving her to the hospital in the middle of the night. She was going up having a little hot dog. She went into labor that night, and they took her to the hospital. He just hung the nickname Hot Dog on him, and it stuck [laughter]. He tried to outgrow that name for years, but it just stuck with him.

MB: That's a great story.

AL: [laughter]

MB: So, now, was he your younger brother?

AL: No, he was my older brother.

MB: Your older brother.

AL: He was the oldest of the four, then me, and then my brother, Scott. Then my brother, Stevie, is the baby.

MB: So, talk about just some of your memories of him, just memories of growing up in Sneads Ferry, and what was that like?

AL: Well, we were buddies. I mean, we were close in age, and we did a lot of stuff together. We were forever the – me and Scott and Hot Dog would go around to Lonnie's fish house. We would swim down there. We'd wade out and go clamming and things like that. We had a good time when we were kids just growing up together.

MB: Do you think Hot Dog always knew that he was going to be a fisherman?

AL: It was in his blood.

[laughter]

We say it's in their blood [laughter]. He tried several times to get out of the river, but something always drew him back to it.

MB: Now, don't they call that going on the hill?

AL: Yes.

MB: [laughter]

AL: He went to the hill quite a few times, but he always went back out there.

MB: So, there is a very powerful appeal of the water –

AL: Yes.

MB: – to the fishermen.

AL: Yes. All of all of them. I mean, I don't know any of them that have gotten away from it that hasn't gone back to it. I mean, I don't know. It's just something that they can't give up. I don't know why [laughter].

MB: Well, what do you think it is?

AL: I have no idea [laughter]. I did it when I was a kid. I mean, I clammed for school clothes and headed shrimp and things like that. But it just wasn't for me, I guess, because I'm a female. But now, I have a cousin. Have you ever met my uncle, Charles?

MB: I don't think so.

AL: My daddy's brother, his daughter, she channels nets. She clams. She does all of it with them, and she loves it. She has a public job now, but she'd rather be doing that. Because she has a child now, her husband doesn't want her to do it anymore. But she'd rather be out there with the guys, shrimping and clamming and things like that than she would at a public job. So, it's in her blood too [laughter].

MB: It's not just the men.

AL: It's not just the men [laughter].

MB: Yes. The Millis fish house, there's some women that work there. They can handle those

crates pretty good too.

AL: [laughter]

MB: They heft them up with no problem.

AL: Yes.

MB: Well, so, in the aftermath, I'm sure there has been, obviously, a terrible loss for you.

AL: Yes, it has.

MB: But has the healing process been ongoing?

AL: Yes. It's something we have to deal with every day. Because we live pretty much where, or with what took his life. I mean, the river. I mean, I know it was his time, but now, I look at the river in a different way. Sometimes almost like an enemy, but I know it's not. We've had several friends that's lost their lives in the river. One of mine and my brother's close friends lost his life in the ocean. It's always been hard. It's a challenge every time they go out there, just like, I guess getting in a car. But you just never know. It's something we have to deal with every day.

MB: Well, I've heard the statistic that it's the most dangerous job in the country. It's even more dangerous than mining, apparently. Because you get in a car, then you're on ground. But obviously, in the water, you can – I almost drowned myself. It'll be two years ago this July. I got kind of rip tide out there, and a Marine pulled me out. I was about to take the big drink. I mean, it was unbelievable. I mean, it went in slow motion. It was like a weird dream almost. I did every dumb thing. It was almost night. There was nobody around. I got caught in this threshing machine. I couldn't get out of it, and I didn't know what to do. I just panicked, and this guy saved my life. But you never forget that.

AL: No, you don't.

MB: I still am leery about that ocean a little bit because it scared me. It scared me half to death. It's humbling. In fact, we're going to go over, and I'm going to have dinner with – I've become good friends with the Marine DJ. He just retired from the Marines for twenty years – who saved my life. I mean, I wrote a letter to the general at Camp Lejeune telling him what happened. He got a medal for it. Took the Marines a year to process the paperwork, but –

[laughter]

– you know.

AL: Yes. Well, it was wintertime whenever we lost my brother, and he's very good swimmer. Had it been summer, we feel – it's really not the water, I don't guess, that took his life. It was the cold, more or less, because of being so cold. He had had back surgery about five months prior to

his death. So, who knows? That may have had something to do with it.

MB: Now, in terms of, in other words, looking at the bigger pictures of faith and God and all, I guess we just have to accept life on life's terms and what happens. I mean, have you, I'm sure, thought about some of those issues in terms of –

AL: Yes.

MB: – the why question and all that.

AL: The only comfort we can find in it is that my brother loved the river. That's what he lived for. I mean, he would've had it no other way. He died with his best friend, or one of his best friends, doing what he loved. So, I guess we're fortunate that he was somewhere where he wanted to be when he passed away. He wasn't killed in a car accident. He was right there in the river where he always wanted to be. So, that's the only comfort we can find.

MB: Okay. Well, I think that that's really great. Excellent. Appreciate it.

AL: Okay.

[end of transcript]