Wild Caught
Mack Liverman Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
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Matthew Barr: Now, I don't know. I mean, I don't want to take up too much of your time but tell me a little bit about how you got into being a commercial fisherman, how long you've been at it, and a few things like that, just to give us a little backgrounder.

Mack Liverman: Well, my grandparents and my parents were fishermen. My mother and my father were fishermen. I've been doing it since I was in preschool, with my father. I've been doing it on my own for about forty-one years. It's just like anything else in the fishing industry. If you're going to make a go of it, you've got to be a family. You and your crew have to be tight knit. You have to work together on everything. If one person has a grudge with the other, they can make the work so hard on one person, they can't handle it. So, that's the main thing. Everybody works together, and everybody helps each other. When we're working, there's no captain and no crew. It's myself and whoever is working with me. I think that's the way it has to be.

MB: Same question I asked (Johnny?), does fishing get in the blood?

ML: I don't know whether it gets in the blood or not, but it is in your heart for sure. It's a love just like the first girl you meet when you're a teenager. You fall in love with shrimping, and there's nothing else. I can't imagine ever doing anything else. I've tried working on a public job for about three weeks when I was in my early twenties. I signed off on that as I couldn't handle it. This way, I'm my own boss. When the weather will let me work, I work. Sometimes we push it to the extreme and work when we shouldn't. But if you have a family emergency, you don't have to ask anybody, "Can you have a day off?" If it's the crew's family or your family, it's just automatic, you take care of family. That's one thing about fishing so attractive, I think.

MB: Well, speaking about family, is Sneads Ferry kind of like – not like other fishing towns? Is there a kind of like a sense of real community and family here?

ML: In years past, definitely. In the last few years, we've had people moving in from all over like every coastal community has. You don't have quite as close-knit community as we did several years ago. But in the fishing industry, I think you still have it.

MB: I think it's a wonderful thing. That's one of the big things on the documentary, the sense of community. What is it about fishing that draws people together?

ML: Well, I think everybody fairs the same. You don't have – this man has a lot more than the other. Everybody flourishes at the same time. Everybody does without at the same time. If one family loses a family member at sea, they all pull together and try to help that family member through it. That's more common than average person realizes.

MB: I guess going through the ups and downs, it can be a tough job. Obviously, it's a very hardworking job. How many days a week do you work generally?

ML: I work seven days a week when the weather's permitting. We have a season on shrimping, and we have a season on oystering. But we don't have a season because when we can't oyster, we shrimp. When we can't shrimp, we clam. When we can't clam, we either catch spots or

mullets. Our job is seven days a week, 365 days a year, weather's permitting.

MB: I don't think a lot of people would tolerate that [laughter], probably myself, but that's a lot. It's physically demanding work. I mean, it's a dangerous work too?

ML: Right. Well, my wife tells me I never take a day off. I'll stay to the dot, but I'm still on the boat working on the boat. So, I never get a day off [laughter]. Well, you don't think of the danger. I mean, if it happens, it happens. You be as safe as possible. But if you're not willing to take any chances, you're not going to make a living in this business. We do our best shrimping when it's too bad to be there.

MB: I guess anytime you're out on the ocean, you can be a mile from the shore, and you can still have problems?

ML: Right. A lot of people have a misunderstanding. They think "Well, you're a half a mile or a mile from the beach, what can happen there? Thirty foot of water and ten-foot seas, no matter where you're at, you're not going to survive it unless you're lucky.

MB: Have you been through some wild seas?

ML: Oh, yes. I've had two boats sink out from under me. I had one sink twenty miles offshore and not another boat in sight, and it is blowing seventy miles an hour. But we were fortunate. We run the boat with the engine completely submerged under water for four hours until we could run it on the island. Me and the crew survived, but the boat didn't.

MB: Where did that happen?

ML: That happened in Key West, Florida.

MB: Wait a minute, you run it for four hours, the boat?

ML: The engine was completely submerged. We had about a two to three on the boat. She was completely full of water. We had every pump going – we got in a gale of wind, which wasn't forecast. We beat a plank off the bottom. So, we had all our pumps going just to maintain. All this happened within a thirty-minute period. But we lucked out.

MB: So, what was the other situation?

ML: While we were in the Gulf of Mexico on another occasion, transferring fuel. We pushed the knuckle off to side the boat. At that time, we were lucky the coast guard was close enough to bring pumps to us. We didn't lose that boat. We were about thirty miles offshore at that time. But it was a dangerous situation. You think of all the things you didn't do with the family the trip before when something [laughter] like that happens.

MB: Well, speaking about family, talk about your family a little bit?

ML: Well, I think I've got the greatest family in the world. I met my wife when I was fifteen years old. When I was eighteen, we got married. We've been married thirty-five years. We have two beautiful daughters, and three grandchildren. We all love each other. There's nothing one of us wouldn't do for the other. So, I don't think you could ask for any better than that.

MB: As we were talking earlier in the day, your family is the number one thing in your life.

ML: Right.

MB: Did that also affect in terms of the kind of fishing you want to do? Can you talk a little bit about the fishing you used to going down?

ML: Oh, well, we used to work in the Gulf. I did eight- and ten-day trips, and as much as twenty-eight-day trips. That was a little strenuous on a young marriage. But when our children started coming along, it didn't take me long to realize I couldn't raise my children and they go on all the time. So, we made a decision to move back home. This is where I was born and raised. So, we made a decision to move back home and get by with little less so we could spend more time together. After thirty years of that, I'm glad that's the choice we made.

MB: But you do keep some long hours because you got up and – take us through your typical day.

ML: Well, a normal day. When the weather is right, we get up around 3:00 a.m. and get to bed at 10:30 p.m., 11:00 p.m. at seven days a week. If we turn that for something like that, sometimes we get two hours sleep at night. Sometimes we don't get any. If the weather is too pretty, it's too calm, then our days cut by half. But as long as the weather is rough to shrimp or catching good, we put in all the hours. But I'm only three hours from home. So, if I'm needed there, I can be home within three hours. That's the good part.

MB: So, then like today, the shrimp are boxed up right then and there, right here at the fish house. It's kind of amazing, I think, that the food that fresh going right to market –

ML: Right.

MB: – or to a restaurant. So, even though you're working seven days a week, but you get to see your family every day?

ML: Every day.

MB: That will be all different from seeing them every – because you were saying before, even when you come back from say, an eight-day trip, you'd have to work on the boat on the dock. So, even when you come back, you wouldn't necessarily have much time to see your family far much longer?

ML: No. They come to the boat with me when the children were in diapers. When I was in the dock, they spent time with me. My wife had them when I was gone. When I came in, I carried

the kids with me. They were raised on the boat from the time they were in diapers to – well, even now they go shrimping with me. When I need a crew, and I can't find anybody right offhand, I will call one of my daughters on the phone. She's up at 3:00 a.m. and ready to go.

MB: So, surely your daughters know the whole routine?

ML: They do the whole thing.

MB: Talk a little bit about (Scooby?). He's quite a character.

ML: He knows that. I think he loves it more than I ever did. He's 10 years old. There's very little he doesn't know about. His curiosity is just amazing. Anything he don't know about, he'll find it in a book. If it's not in a book, he'll find somebody. They'll answer the question for it. He's not scared to work.

MB: I can surely see today.

ML: [laughter]

MB: He missed the wastebasket with the water bottle. Before I could get up [laughter], he already picked it up.

ML: Yes.

MB: He's a great kid.

ML: Yes. He's my oldest grandson.

MB: Do you think there's still some sense of community in Sneads Ferry?

ML: I think there will always be some here. Until maybe when all the older people die off, it will lose more like every community does. But the fishing family still have it. Maybe not as great as it did forty years ago, but it's still there. When people talk bad about commercial fishermen, they all feel the same impact. That if he talks about shrimpers are – is not good for the environment, well, then all the rest of fishermen feel like it's a slap in the face for them to do so. There's still a lot of community togetherness. A lot of people around here don't even fish, but they're raised around the fishing families. They give us great support.

MB: We could spend days talking about this. I mentioned to you the film I did before about carnival people. It's a whole different thing. Why is it that people have this sometimes-negative image about fishermen?

ML: It's just poor information. What you're doing here is one of the greatest things in the world. You're going on a boat. You're seeing firsthand. Even though you've been two days, you don't have the full picture. But you have a better idea than anything you've ever imagined, I'm sure. If you would like, I'd like for you to come go with us again and get a broader picture. Every wind

shift brings a different situation. Every cold front brings a different situation. I think the people who's doing all the bad publicity – which is really hurting commercial fishing more than some realize – if they would just take time and go on a boat and see firsthand, their whole image of commercial fishing would change. We're not a bunch of gangsters out to (rape the earth?). We're trying to make a living and preserve what we can. Because if we don't preserve something today, we know we won't have anything tomorrow.

MB: I think the media has done a very poor job.

ML: I think so also.

MB: What about regulations in terms of that whole deal?

ML: Well, they're regulating a lot of us out. There are several kinds of fishing I've done all through my life that I'm not even allowed to do anymore, because now you have to make a certain amount of money at certain fisheries or do it so many years in a row in order to hold a license. So, it's flounder fishing for summer flounder, I'm not allowed to do that, because I went six or eight years I didn't do it. I'm not allowed to catch black bass because I didn't catch a certain quota at the time they had a quota system on. It's like at all through the fishery. They are doing more damage by regulating. Because if you can't make a living doing one thing, you will go to something else. When that drops off, you'll go to another fishery. But they're putting you now – or you've got to stick to one fishery, regardless where you make any money or not. So, it's a lot harder impact on that individual fishery. If you were allowed to move on to another, well, this would have a chance to come back. That's where the regulation is really hurting us and hurting the industry.

MB: Well, we see young people like Johnny going up, but what about the future? Is there going to be a future generation people to take?

ML: There will be somewhat of a future, but not the way of life that we grew up. It's going to be regulated to the point the only trawlers you'll have in another twenty-five years will be big, company-owned trawlers. The little individual people like we are, we'll be phased out, because we just won't be able to make enough money to fight the government and the people that's pushing for it. I've heard a lot of people talk about fishing boats as eyesores. They move to the south to see the shrimp boats and the commercial fishing. Now, they have the beaches cluttered with condos, and now our fishing boats have become eyesores. That's the people we're up against, the people that's got the money. They spend more on a luncheon than we make in a month. That's what we're up against.

MB: Money talks. Money talks, unfortunately. Of course, who's going to provide the seafood if – this is one of the last bastions of free enterprise in terms of –

ML: Well, everything now is leaning more to imports. Over half the seafood in this country is imported in from other countries. If we have a good season, our market goes hardly anything, but the people who buy them in store pays the same price. They can import shrimp cheaper than we can actually catch it.

MB: But it's not as good. I mean –

ML: Oh, no. It's not as good. My wife has a retail market. She retails shrimp. We've had people come by and didn't even know what they were looking at because they've never seen a fresh shrimp, never seen one with the head on. That's right here in this country. You would think everybody knew what a fresh shrimp was, but they get the Argentina shrimp that I wouldn't eat, not if I had a choice. If there's nothing to eat, I would try it. But people who's ever eat fresh seafood wouldn't eat stuff like that.

MB: Because the seafood has absorbed all the flavors and everything, all the freshness of the sea like a salmon.

ML: Right.

MB: It's a whole different thing. It's more bland to have a farm raised –

ML: Right.

MB: – anything than something that's been wild.

ML: Right.

MB: Well, there's so many other things to cover, I think. Well, thank God, they're people like Scooby and Johnny coming up who want to make this their life. But it's a serious situation, I think, in terms of the future. I hope it's different. But I don't know how different it would be if you want to be a farmer either, or for that matter, if you want to own a bookstore, how could you fight those huge chains?

ML: Right. It's like we said all along, you've got to love it [laughter]. It's got to be in your heart. It's got to be in your blood, or however you want to put it. The average man on the street, I don't think could fight and struggle as much as you would have to without loving it.

MB: Well, I can relate to that while I'm doing this documentaries.

ML: [laughter]

MB: It's a great way to spend money.

ML: Yes.

MB: About 10 million hours doing a film [laughter] and "Hey, that was a nice film. Thank you." It was seven years of my life [laughter]. Because I haven't made a dime off it, but I do them. It's a labor of love –

ML: Right.

MB: – to try to tell a story like this that needs to be told.

ML: I can understand how you can get into doing something like this.

MB: Well, what else can we give [laughter]? But documentary filmmaking, you can go out and have a great time on a shrimp boat.

ML: [laughter]

MB: We filmed an alligator the other day. [laughter] But anyway, I think that covers it really great.

ML: Okay.

MB: Thanks.

ML: I'm glad to hear.

MB: Oh, my pleasure. We're going out again.

[talking simultaneously]

MB: Oh, really.

ML: [inaudible]

MB: We're good. We'll talk about what you just said about that moment when you jumped down in the engine room.

ML: Well, it was the scariest moment of my life. I had just been in the engine room, probably ten minutes earlier. Check the boat if everything was fine. Me and the boy on the boat sat in there talking when we heard it. It sounds like an explosion. I jumped up and jumped in the engine room and come in chest deep of water. If we didn't have the engine running at the time, it would never crank. It's because the batteries went under water and the lights went out [inaudible] immediately. We were in total dark in the middle of the storm. Even though you're scared, I couldn't even talk. I still have to keep enough senses to keep the boat afloat. That's a hard task to do. For ten or fifteen years after that, I had dreams of it at night. I'd wake up with cold sweats. I was there all over again.

MB: So, take us through it. So, how do you get through the – so, you're chest deep in water. Now, what happened?

ML: Well, we had two pumps on the main engine. We had three electrical pumps. We had air-cooled motor that had an inch and a half pump on it. We kept them running. The seas were so bad. The water would wash on air-cooled motor and shorted out and it would cut off. Then you

could see the water rising in the boat. So, I'd have to dive down, go in the engine room. We had it build up high and spray the lighter fluid on air-cooled motor to dry the sparkplug in the water. I had to crank it up and get the pump going. Then I had to come back at the hole. You can't wear a life jacket because there's no way you could go under the bulkhead. The way the boat was arranged, they just took a bulkhead and cut a small hole in it to go from the engine room to the bow of the boat. You had to go down through that hole in order to get to the engine room. We went like that four to six hours before we ever found a shore, we could have a [inaudible] on.

MB: Was this in the middle of the night?

ML: Oh, 11:00 p.m. It was about 6:30 a.m. when the coast guard got to us. The coast guard past us, and we had some paper bags on the boat. When we got on the shore, we were about knee deep of water on the deck of the boat. Most of the wheelhouse was out. We set some paper bags on fire, so the coast guard will see us. Then they come back and give us a hard time about not burning any lights. We got off and got on the coast guard boat. Then they wanted to just come back and put an anchor overboard, which we didn't have an anchor because we had to cut it loose. That night the wind was blowing so hard, we couldn't go to anchor. It gets to seventy-two knots about ten minutes before we beat the plank off the boat.

MB: What was this other one that your wife was mentioning about pilothouse?

ML: Well, we were up north flounder fishing and got caught in the southeast gale. We're about eight-five, ninety foot of water and had the sea washed across the boat. I was standing in the cabin, which had the doors on the side. The sea washed me out of one side of the wheelhouse, flying across, thrown on the deck on the other side. We had pipe rails around the cabin. That's the only thing keeping me from being washed overboard. That's pretty common up north, maybe not that extreme, but that type of weather is common that they're working. We try to forget those times [laughter].

MB: Great. Now, how did the plank –

[end of transcript]