

Wild Caught  
Mack and Ellen Weese Liverman Oral History  
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Well, Ellen, why do you not talk about how many you have raised, what, three kids and – three kids, right?

Ellen Liverman: Two.

MB: Two. I am sorry. Well, in terms of the family, I mean –

EL: It's raising children in this kind of life is difficult in that they don't exactly have what other children have as far as the expensive clothes, expensive shoes, the cars. We managed to clothe them decently. They went to school regularly. They had their lunches at school with their friends. They got along well with them. It seemed as though Terry and Christine, they just knew that we were doing the best we could do with the resources that we had to fall back on. There was no complaining. Whatever mom and dad did, that's cool.

MB: Well, I have only briefly met Christine, I think, yesterday. She came by here.

EL: Right.

MB: But Terry, I spent a good part of today with. She seems like an awfully nice person, so it is pretty amazing that she knows – it was great to get the footage of you guys working together. That is kind of neat, father and daughter working together on the boat. I wonder how many people can really do that.

EL: Well, in years past, you didn't see girls on the boats with their fathers. They were more or less home with mom, and dad took their sons. But we only had girls. So, it worked out that the girls have been going with their fathers since – well, when Christine was two weeks old, she was on the boat with her father shrimping off the beach here all day long because I was sick, and we didn't have family to turn to. So, dad takes the girls with him on the boat. That's the way it is. He tended to a newborn baby, bottles, diapers, the whole works, and a three-year-old all day long, as well as trying to shrimp that day and own up to his responsibility as a provider.

MB: Pretty amazing. We will probably wrap it up here. I mean, in other words, I think I told you that what I am trying to do is kind of look at fishing as kind of like life itself. Like today, we were looking for those shrimp and suckers were hard to come to catch. You never know what you are going to get out there. It is kind of like life itself. Some days are good, and some days, the fortunes and faiths are not with you.

Mack Liverman: Well, you have some fishermen want to lie to the dock until somebody else gets a load of fish, then they want to go. Then some of us have to go practically every day. But my theory is if you wait for somebody else to get a load of fish, they've already got those, and you're not going to catch them. So, if you're there every day, you may be the one that gets the load of fish. We have a couple boats in the area. They'll lie to the dock two weeks at a time when it's (scrapping?). The first day a boat comes in with a good catch. The next morning, they try to beat you before you catch a fish or shrimp, whatever you're catching. I've never had anybody catch the fish that I sold the day before. That's my theory. If you're there today and the fish is there, you're going to get them. But if you're lying at the dock waiting for somebody else

to get them, that's one catch you won't get.

MB: That is an interesting philosophy. So, you have a tenacity that is remarkable. You were telling me yesterday, okay, you got that propeller in the back of your truck. This is an expensive business. This documentary film has some similarities where it is a labor of love. Now, obviously, we both are doing it. You are making money. You are selling the product. I would like to get this documentary sold and get my money back. I cannot make up for all the thousands of hours I put into it –

ML: Oh, no.

MB: – because it already has been thousands of hours.

ML: Yes. We can't get paid for the hours either. I mean, it's impossible. But I'll have two months that I'll put in sixteen, eighteen-hour days for two months. It is just not that much money, not at our level because we've got a small operation. You could get a decent job on the hill and make more than we do with a lot less stress. But we would be just like pinning an animal up. The thought of me getting a job on the hill where I couldn't get into the ocean, I mean that would be similar to a nightmare, just having one every night. It'd be unbearable.

MB: You would feel pinned up, like going to prison?

ML: Oh, yes. Yes. Well, I could do it if I had to. But somehow, over the last forty years, I've managed to put a meal on the table and shoes on my feet and clothes on my family. So, we've had each other in the hard times, we've had each other in the good times. I don't know any more you could ask for.

MB: Well, we just had quite a bountiful meal tonight, speaking about that. So, there you go in a way. Like we were talking about today about money and how important in our society, money has just become so all-important. People will do all kinds of horrible things to get it, including stepping all over each other. That brings up the idea that when we were trailing behind, (Buddy Davis?) was in front of us this morning, that there is somebody who truly is one of your generations. You were talking about the old days of Sneads Ferry when it really was more of a real community where people would really help each other.

ML: Yes. I think Buddy and maybe my older brother and John Norris, which you spoke to, they're the only three around here that's got more time in the fishing industry than I do. If I'm not mistaken, me and John Norris started about the same time. My older brother started a year before I did. So, the four of us have got over forty years each in the business. I think Buddy may have as much as forty-three or forty-four years in the business.

MB: But beyond the years is also that sense of community, right?

ML: Yes.

MB: In other words, you guys really do care about each other.

ML: Oh, yes. Even the fishermen who don't get along generally, if they get in trouble, especially at sea, everybody's willing to do what they can to help. Nobody wants to see anybody lost at sea or a boat lost. So, even if it's somebody you don't really care for on the land, when you go to sea, there's a kinship. You put your problems aside to look out for each other. What goes on the dock is different than what goes on in the ocean.

ML: But getting back to the propeller, and then you were saying that you are going to bring the boat up on a rail one day or whatever. In other words, that has got a grand there or maybe more. (I do not know?). In other words, you are looking at a constant outflow of money.

ML: Oh, yes.

MB: That has got to be pretty stressful to have to – and then you do not know when the money is going to come in (to pay for it all?).

ML: The stressful part is when you know you can take just \$2 or \$300 that, in return, can make you several thousand. But if you don't have the \$2 or \$300 to invest, then you don't make the several thousand. Sometimes, you can invest that money, and you still don't get out. But regardless of how much you make, there's always some new equipment, a new type of net, or you have a hurricane or sharks or something that's always tearing up equipment.

EL: Or new regulation.

ML: Yes. The regulation is our biggest thing. We've just had to learn to live with people in the Midwest. The country makes rules that we have to live by here on the coast. The most water they've ever seen was in the bathtub. They make the rules for us.

B: [laughter] So, I mean, that is a lot of stress, though, to have that money going out all the time. Then you must have a real sense of faith. I mean, you just went through twenty-five days where no money was coming in because of the clutch problem, right? You put three grand, a lot of money in that clutch. Now, hindsight is twenty-twenty, of course. We all say, "Oh, we could have, would have, should have." I do this all the time. Like the Carlin documentary, I could have had a national showing on PBS. But I was not willing to cut to an hour at that time because I just finished it after seven years. So, now, I might beat myself up later. It is too late now for that. But I got to live with that and learn from it. But I guess what I am getting at is, where do you think this sense of faith that you have comes from and tenacity?

ML: I think fishermen are dreamers to a point. You always dream of that big school of fish or that big catch of shrimp. If you can make enough to survive between the big schools, you've got something to dream for. But what would this country be today if you didn't have dreamers? I think most fishermen have to be to survive.

MB: So, it is not just money or (as a treat?)?

ML: No. I've been shrimping over forty years. I never remember a time saying, "I could have

made a thousand dollars today if this net hadn't broken. Or if I went to another place, I could have made a thousand dollars." I say, "I could have caught 100-pound here or 500-pound yonder, or I could have caught 1,000 pound." Never mentioned money because money is not it. The name of the game to me, as always has been, catch the best product, the prettier the fish, and as many as I could catch. Well, you had to have money to survive, but that's never been on my mind when I was fishing. I like to catch pretty stuff. I don't like a bunch of junk. I like to catch as many as I can without mama getting the crew on the boat (any more than I have to?). Enough of that comes with the job.

EL: I think it's pride.

ML: Yes.

EL: Pride in being a human being, pride in being a provider. If you're proud of what you're doing, then the faith comes along. Someone told me one time that pride was a sin. I think there's a kind of pride that is not sinful. I think there's pride in just being a good person, doing the best you can for your family. I think it's okay for a guy or a woman these days to go on a shrimp boat or any type of fishing boat and say, "I'm going to do the best job I can, catch the best product I can catch." That's it. Money is not the topic of conversation. When you hear fishermen talking, you hear them talking pounds or the one that got away or the school of fish they missed, they weren't on time, they were too early. Very rarely does money come up in the topic of conversation.

ML: Yes. I think most fishermen (really?) think they know something that no other fisherman knows. I think every fisherman think, "Well, I've got a little knack that nobody else has ever figured out, and that's going to get me through the times they can't get through. I know a little fishing hole, or I know a little different approach to the fishing." I think every fisherman's got that in them whether they want to admit it or not.

MB: Interesting. Interesting. I think this gets it. Is there anything else either one of you wants to add to the story here?

ML: Well, I think in this whole thing, we've failed to mention the good times. I think it should be mentioned because we've all had good times. I think that we've all been blessed. Whether you're religious or not religious, we've all been blessed. I think it's so much bad news going on, and we have so much trouble with the government and everything putting regulations on it. We all should stop once in a while and just think of the good times we've had. Just to live our age, you've had to have good times. I think we all should be thankful for those.

EL: Two incidents come to my mind, the Christmas of 1971 when Chris was a year old. He went flounder fishing and risked life and limb just to get Christmas for the kids. When he came home Christmas Eve night, he had a borrowed truck. He drove about five or six hundred miles. The back of the truck was filled with Christmas presents. He'd managed to catch some flounder and make enough money to buy Christmas for the children.

MB: Just at that moment. It is a great story.

EL: Oh, it's a true story.

MB: No. I know.

EL: He brought a rocking chair home and toys for the children.

MB: [inaudible] children.

ML: We still had the rocking chair.

MB: Let us go pick it up again with a rocking chair. So, he brought home a pickup truck full of  
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EL: He had a rocking chair there. It's full of presents. I mean, toys for the kids, a rug for the floor, a rocking chair to rock the babies in. Then the following Halloween was even greater. I was a little upset with him because we didn't have enough money to buy a Halloween costume for our children. We missed Halloween trick or treat that night. The next day he came home, he took pillowcases and made bunny costumes for the girls. The day after trick or treat, we were out trick or treating that evening because we finally had a costume to put on the children. [laughter] People say so what, but we didn't miss the holiday. He made sure that we didn't miss it completely, that the children were put first and foremost, even though it was a day late.

MB: Well, the Christmas she was speaking about, I brought the presents home. The 20th day of December, we were supposed to have a wind shift the following day. We laid it where it had us for two weeks. The weather was bad. So, my crew quit because they wanted to go find something to get their kids for Christmas because none of us had made any money. So, I had to come home and try to find a crew. I got up with another fellow, and he said he didn't have anything for his kids for Christmas. I said, "Well, come, go with me. We'll get something for Christmas." We went to work twenty-four hours, and we had a breakdown. In that twenty-four hour period, we shared \$800. That's how we got Christmas. We've done it in a twenty-four hour period. For two weeks, we never made a dime. Didn't know where we were going to even have Christmas dinner, but we didn't give up. We kept going, and it came to us. I think people who don't give up, it will come to them. It may not be tomorrow, and it may not be the 20th of December. But as long as you struggle and you stick together, you'll survive. They both head for the sea. You can take a fisherman away from the water, but he'll always end up going back to sea [inaudible]. He's born on the beach, but his first instinct is to head to the sea. When you say something spontaneous, you can try to say it as many times you want to. It never comes out the same.

MB: No. That is true. That is true. That is why you try not to —

EL: I guess so.

MB: So, Governor Martin came here. I remember red tide.

EL: Well, he came down, and he was surrounded by people from the local school systems and from local legislators and other politicians. They were having an impromptu news gathering down at one of the marinas. We had sat in our home for three weeks, trying to figure out what we were going to do with fish, clams, oysters. Everything was dead from the red tide. Again, here it was. It was the fall of the year. We weren't making any money for the winter. Matt says, "I think (by golly?), I'm going to go down there and tell the governor straight up what I think of this whole situation." He was here to make a show in hopes of making people believe that he was down here to help the fishermen, but in reality, he wasn't. It was just a political thing. Matt walked right up to him, TV cameras going, cameras flashing, newspaper reporters. He told him, he says, "Governor Martin," he says, "I don't mean to interrupt you, but" he said, "I've got something I want to tell you." Maybe it had an impact because a week later, there was enough aid here. It wasn't money as far as cash, but we got commodities, we got food stamps, we got a lot of people that could help the fishermen in their time of (trouble?) involved and made them more aware of the situation. I think it was Matt's first public speaking appearance. From then on, he's –

MB: He took over the governor.

EL: Straight on. Straight on.

ML: He was just another man. He had a title, but he didn't have any more needs than the fishermen around the land. They had children. They needed food for their families. I didn't speak to him so much for myself. Because we were fortunate we had a freezer and stuff. We had food. But there's a lot of families who didn't. I'm not much for speaking in public, but I just heard enough for the politics that I wanted the people's word put in.

EL: But the response was overwhelming. You just wouldn't believe what a few words at the right time would mean. I mean, kids, if they were sick, they were getting medical treatment. Food was being brought in. We had the county come in. Thankfully, it helped people with light bills. I mean, electricity was being cut off left and right. People just – they'd be without lights for the entire winter. I don't think the governor really realized the impact the red tide had had, not just on the Stump Sound area but for all of coastal North Carolina. It impacted businesses, grocery stores, laundromats.

MB: Because they were not making any money.

EL: No. Well, the fishermen couldn't spend money in the wintertime.

MB: We do not have any money. That brings up about, we were talking about before is that the winter really is a tough time for people.

EL: It's extremely difficult. I mean, we had small children during our first years and everything. I feel for the parents. I mean, you go to a doctor's office now, you're looking at sixty bucks minimum, then you're looking at prescriptions. I know a lot of people that have to have medication, but they do it out, so their children can have the medication they need to heal with and everything. It's sad sometimes to see that. But we made the sacrifices. The people that

come along with us at that time, they made the sacrifices, and we survived. The new generations coming behind us, they're going to survive. It's just going to be a really tough time. They're going to have to make a strong commitment to either stay with the industry, fight for it and continue their livelihood like they do, or they're going to have to go elsewhere. There are two choices, either move with the flow or find somewhere else to be.

MB: Anything else, do you think?

EL: I think I said too much already.

MB: No, no.

ML: No. [laughter]

MB: Well, this is great. This is great stuff.

[end of transcript]