

Wild Caught  
Connie Mason Oral History  
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Matthew Barr: As a place that I like to start, talk a little bit about growing up. Because you grew up a daughter of a commercial fisherman, so talk about what that was like. Here we are in Beaufort, and you grew up near here.

Connie Mason: Well, I grew up in Morehead City, but my father was from Stacy, North Carolina, which is right on Core Sound here in coastal North Carolina. By the time he was twelve, he was working on the water with his father and his brother-in-law. He grew up long hauling, duck hunting, anything they could do to survive. They didn't get rich by any means. My grandmother actually worked in an oyster shucking house in Sea Level. So, my father grew up, his mother would take him to his grandmother's house and drop him off, and she would go to work shucking oysters all day. By the time he was I think 18 years old, my grandmother had made the decision about his life that he would not be a commercial fisherman, that that was no life, that they wanted to have money and be better off. There was no security in it, because they had struggled so hard and so long. She said, "You're going to be something else." When he turned 18, they sent him off to Raleigh on a bus to King's Business School. There he got his training in accounting, and he became an accountant. But during the war years, he could not serve in the regular military services. So, he became a merchant mariner and worked on merchant ships for a long time. Then after the war, became accountant with some businesses in Morehead and provided very well for us. But I grew up listening to the stories of his formative years, fishing. There's nobody who loves fishing more than my father. It's in his blood. He told me this the other day. He's eighty years old now. He said, "I have salt water in my veins." He said, "If I could just get out of Core Sound again and get 1,000 pounds of fish on my boat," he said, "I would be so happy." See, back then it was the quantity of a catch. Wasn't how big the fish were, it was how many boxes. To this day, my father and other fishermen that I know too, those catches stay in their mind. They can tell you what the price was and how many boxes it was and where they made the set to set their nets. All those things were so important to them. But my father would also tell stories of working all night, bringing the catch to the dock and the fish dealer saying, "I haven't got a market. I haven't got any buyers." So, some of the unfortunate folks in the town, if they needed fish, they would come down. They'd give them what they needed. Then they start shoveling the fish overboard because there was no market, and they made no money. So, those were the kinds of times I knew fishermen had, growing up, just listening to my father during the Depression period.

MB: Wow. So, you grew up in Morehead City, which is a coastal town. What's the culture like? What was it like growing up in the town?

CM: Well, it was a small town. Of course, we would go to the beach only when my cousins from Chicago came down, and they wanted to go to the beach, [laughter] that kind of thing. But my father was always very good about, every weekend, he would take us what we call down east, which to me, down east meant from Bettie to Cedar Island. Those communities were called the down east communities. Now, our Chamber of Commerce has latched onto that phrase "down east." Anywhere from like east of Raleigh is down east now. But truly the real down east is from Bettie to Cedar Island, including all those communities. It was a sailing term. You could sell down and east. It's the same as the New England Down East. It was a sailing term. But he would take me and my sister every weekend and spend some time down east with our relatives there. His brother-in-law, his sister, his sister's husband raised birds, peacocks, and ducks and

had a duck pen. So, I learned a lot about living down east. Then she ran the post office too. So, I got a wonderful little community post office that had the bead work, woodworking, and the Lance cookie jars that you buy a single cookie out of and the bars where they had the post office behind the barred area. I couldn't go behind there to see my aunt because that was illegal. Because she was the postmistress and only she could go back there. I just thought that was very nice. So, we didn't go to the beach a lot. But I live right on Newport River. So, I grew up on the river, and my father would take me in our – we always had a skiff. We had a wooden skiff. He would always take me out. Before I could drive a riding lawnmower, I learned how to pull a skiff and paddle a skiff. I learned how to set a gillnet. He would take me out, gill netting in the river and a little clamming, not a whole lot. He wasn't a big clammer. I would do what we call chicken necking, catching crabs using chicken necks and squirrel bodies or some kind of wonderful bait, as a kid growing up chasing sand and mud fiddlers along our little shore there. We didn't have any neighbors at the time. Now we have neighbors, which is a big change for me. But one of the things that I enjoyed the most, growing up, is we had no air conditioning. So, we always had the windows open. In the summertime, every night, was the sound of the drones of the diesel engines of the shrimpers out shrimping on Newport River and the lights flashing. You could hear the men talking. You could almost make out the conversations sometimes on the river. So, it was wonderful to go to sleep by the sound of the drones of those engines and the sounds of the men out working. So, I've always felt very close to commercial fishing through other family ties too, have some family that run fish houses and who own fleets of boats and are big into the commercial fishing. So, it affects every aspect of my family, my mother's family, as well as my father's.

MB: Like we were talking about before the interview of, starting with the colonial period, how the fishing developed in this area from, say, Wilmington on through here.

CM: Sure. Well, I'll try to be succinct. That's hard for me. But I'll try to give a little overview of how I have read it and interpreted as a historian. The history of commercial fishing really was not documented or researched by the federal government until the 1880s. So, those are like the records that we draw on for our past collecting of data from the start. They had a different definition for commercial fishing than we would think of locally with us, who are in fishing towns, communities. To them, a commercial fisherman was someone who solely did that job, fished, sold the fish, and that's all they did. We were considered more subsistence fisher people, because we did not have any great markets in the colonial times that we were selling to, but we were fishing for subsistence, for our own use, but also for barter. There was a great bartering going on between the fishermen and farmers, and a lot of fishermen were farmers. The earliest and most profitable fishery in the state of North Carolina was the River Fisheries, the shad and alewives up at the Chowan and Roanoke Rivers. These were fisheries that involved steam flats with these huge nets. It was very labor intensive. During the spawning of these fish, they would go out and just bring thousands of pounds. In fact, before the fishery was depleted somewhat, there were so many fish in the river that you didn't even need a net. You could take a shovel. There were accounts of taking shovels and just throwing them up on the riverbank or buckets. So, there were a lot of these rare fish, and they were very important because these fish were salted or pickled. So, you could eat them year-round. They were very much the staple. In fact, they would eat these fish every meal. I mean, they got sick of them, of course, but that was the staple that kept them going in colonial North Carolina, particularly the northeastern part of the

state. The same can be said of the mullet in our area. The mullet fishery here was a fish that was pickled and salted. It became the mainstay for the local people and the mainstay for bartering. What they bartered for from the farmer, all the obvious things, but the main thing they were concerned about was corn. Corn was the source for your cornmeal to make your cornbread and to flour your fish to fry them and to make corn dodgers and those kinds of things. So, the mullet was the biggest fish in the middle part of the state and going down probably toward Wilmington also. There are a lot of fisheries that were historically valuable but now there's no market for, or the social taste have changed. For instance, I think sturgeon roe was very popular. But now, there's no call for that, or you can't find the fish anymore, the availability of the catch. So, the species have changed from colonial times to now of what is valuable.

MB: Okay. Well, Sneads Ferry goes back to, I don't know, 1730s, and people started to live there. I guess Beaufort, Morehead City were similar. Can you talk about just how the region kind of grew in that period or how these towns got settled? Of course, I guess Wilmington goes way back.

CM: Right. The Morehead City-Beaufort area, the fin fishing industry became so important that more fin fish came out of Morehead, Beaufort than any other area of the Atlantic seaboard. A lot of people don't realize that. In fact, we were talking about the mullet. There's so much mullet was shipped out of Morehead City that our newspaper became known as the Mullet Wrapper. Our railroad line that ran from here became known as the Mullet Line, because we shipped so much mullet out. When we have a change or shift in the wind from the northeast, it blows from the northeast, we call it the Mullet Blow, because that's when the mullets start coming in. Our rivalry high schools, East Carter and West Carter, when they play a football game, they're competing for the coveted mullet bucket full of hamburgers. So, it's still really entrenched in our culture. So, fin fishing, all up and down the coast, was very necessary. Then shell fisheries such as oystering and clamming were very important. In fact, Beaufort really was considered the southernmost range of clamming on the East Coast. But I do know that it did range down to the Sneads Ferry area also, and it became important to them. During the Great Depression, the federal government actually encouraged clamming. Because all it took was a 50-cent rake to go out and make a living. So, there were a lot of new clammers to the profession because of the Great Depression. But, down in Wilmington in the 1800s, is when the first shrimping became part of the commercial scene. By 1878, they were actually shipping shrimp from Wilmington down to ports in South Carolina and Georgia and up in New York and Philadelphia. This is how your development of gear, fishing equipment happens. At that time, they were using a skimmers net that was a piece of bent wood that had a net on it. We're talking about a diameter of about 10 feet. It was a huge net. You would just dip it in where the piece crossed. The shorter sides made a handle, and you would dip it in the water and skim out the shrimp. Then they used haul seines. It took a lot of men. You had to jump in the water. You had to surround the shrimp. Then you closed in the – made the corral smaller and smaller until you could hoist the shrimp into the boat. So, you actually had to get in the water. You had to find the shrimp and then surround it. But in, I think it was 1908, one of our North Carolinians fishermen developed the otter trawl, which is almost the same design that we use today with the funnel-shaped net, with the otter boards that holds the opening of the net open. He designed this, and it just revolutionized shrimping. I mean, all of a sudden you didn't need as many men, you could shrimp year-round, because you didn't have to jump in the water and risk hypothermia. It didn't

take as many crew members, and you were moving. You didn't have to find the shrimp. It just really broadened your area that you could actually do the fishing in. In the [19]20s and [19]30s, that's when shrimping really started getting going. Then with the development of ice and packing and railroads, by the end of World War II, I mean, shrimp just took off as being number one. It was kind of ironic that even in the 1800s, shrimp was looked at more as a bait and not something you would eat. The fishermen would get mad. There would be so many shrimps in the water. They would clog the nets as they were looking for mullet and spot. They would get so aggravated that – they called them bugs. "We got all these bugs in our net." They're just tossing them out. If they only knew that they were tossing away so much money, but at that point, there was no market, no way to get it to market. It was not socially acceptable yet either. It was not a social food. This affected all of Eastern North Carolina as it did to all of the United States. World War II, we had more money. So, people went out to eat. Really, shrimp was one of that seafood that you did not have to have a – you could have a delicate palate because shrimp is kind of bland, but it still has a unique taste. It's still seafood. It is very lovely on the plate, if you don't see it raw. [laughter] I think like 75 percent of America started going out to eat after World War II. So, with that exposure of restaurants to the shellfish shrimp, it became number one in the industry. It's beaten out now by the blue crab. The blue crab industry is now making more money for the fishermen right now.

MB: I didn't know that. It's interesting looking at how food changes culturally. So, after World War II, the shrimp became very popular.

CM: Oh, yeah.

MB: Where before, they used to look at it as trash.

CM: Yeah. It was like all of a sudden, there was an audience. There were more people to introduce it to. They had more opportunities to see it on a menu. Whereas before, maybe the local people and all the coastal people knew about it, but it was not until they started – really after World War II. I mean, that's when the numbers just became astronomical in the industry.

MB: So, I think that gives us some kind of context to see how this whole – and then obviously as these fishing communities grew, whether it's Beaufort or Sneads Ferry, whatever, then there were all the other aspects of boat building, for example. Can you talk a little bit about who would actually make these beautiful shrimp boats?

CM: Boat building is such an art, and people think about it as just utilitarian. But when you see them out on the water, there is a real beauty to them. They are ergonomically designed too, for the type of fishing they're doing. You can almost look at a boat and tell what kind of fishing that they're used to being rigged for. But the wooden boats, you can almost tell from region to region who built this boat. Because boats are built to accommodate the waters in the area and the water conditions that they will come against. For instance, Pamlico Sound is a lot of shallow water but also can be very rough. So, they might have a deeper keel, or they just have different designs, small designs, changes from area to area. Then the equipment that you use will change a boat design. Well, a good example would be, when the refrigerated hull came into play after World War II. Refrigerated hulls and radios became available to people on boats. They really changed

the course of fishing because, number one, the fishermen could go outside their normal range, their normal region of fishing to look for fish. They could get help, radio back, talk to other fishermen, instead of having to go back on land, see all their fellow fishermen in the store, sit around the potbelly stove, and talk about where all the fishing was going on and how good was it and how did they catch them and that kind of thing. They'd hear the chatter on the radio about where the fishing is good. Then the menhaden fishery, which is, the menhaden fishing is not a really a food fish at all. But it was the oil and the high protein byproduct of the fishery. It brought in more money than tobacco at one point into the state of North Carolina. In fact, they called it (finney?) gold. It was right after World War II. It was the number one fishery, not food fishery, but fishery in the state of North Carolina. There were plants all up and down our coast for menhaden. But the menhaden industry used not only the refrigerated hulls and the radios, but they used spotter planes that would fly above, finding these fish. Because the menhaden swim close to the surface and they actually look like a black spot up in the air. The spotter planes go out, find the fish, tell them where to go, tell them how to surround the fish to make the best of catch. So, that really affected that fishery. The numbers started going astronomical. We'd never seen anything like that before. But boat building, usually done by people in the communities who knew the waters, who knew the fishermen, what they needed, and how they fished. The boats were taken care of. The cycle of a fisherman's life is, you do the fishing, but you have to take care of your rigs. You have to take care of your nets and all your equipment and your boat and your motors. So, a fisherman is not just a fisherman, he's a marine biologist. He has to know where these fish are. He has to be a mechanic because he has to take care of these engines. He has to kind of be a physicist almost to know about how to rig the planes of these nets and how to get all those things just right. Of course, he's a sea man because he's got to be able to read the currents and have a little bit of weatherman in him too, to know what's going on and how to read the water. I think one of the things that appeals to fishermen is that challenge of being all those things and having a relationship with that boat out on that water and making it all work and bringing it home. Because there's nothing that's going to put those fish in that boat except your own intellect, experience, and sometimes just luck. But it's all those things working together that make a commercial fisherman. He's got to love it. Most of them do because it's a lifestyle that's independent. They're kind of almost the cowboys, well, kind of the last frontier of the self-made person, going out, and you either make it or you don't. I think that's one of the frustrations they have with all the things they have to deal with today with regulations. They're just not used to that. But usually if the case is made, it's for their betterment, they will try to abide by all the regs that come their way. Because they realize that things are not as they used to be. So, they try very hard because they do not want to lose that way of life, and we don't want them to lose it either.

MB: We are talking about an industry that brings in – talk a little bit about how much money's involved with this.

CM: Well, a couple of years ago, when I was doing my research, commercial fishing brought in about a billion dollars into the economy of state of North Carolina. That's a lot of money, and that's a lot of money to lose. We want it to continue. Sometimes I just don't know where people think Red Lobster gets all that good seafood that they serve. [laughter] Particularly, I mean, some of these species, they cannot be domestically raised yet in aquaculture. I think that's a wonderful thing too, aquaculture. But it's something they're going to have to contend with.

MB: We talked, before we started the interview, about interviewing some of these veteran fishermen. I guess, if you were born into it, it would be one thing. I filmed this Davis family over in (Salisbury?). They've got about four shrimp boats. They can do everything, like just you're talking about there, engine rebuilders there. They've got their own fish house. It seems to be a pretty successful operation. Well, first, how did you even become a farmer if you didn't get born in – I don't know how you'd do that. But that would be a huge investment, building a boat.

CM: Absolutely.

MB: Plus, just how do you even know what you're doing out there? But how does the future look, do you think, in terms of commercial fishing?

CM: Well, I know a lot of people who are working on the behalf of the commercial fishermen to keep it going. One of the greatest characteristics of the commercial fishermen, that stubborn independent streak, that self-made person, actually works against them when trying to band together to make a case to government or environmental concerns. Because they don't naturally do that. Because that's not part of the psyche of being a commercial fisherman, to band together and to kind of lose your identity in a group. But I think that's changing for the better. So, particularly here in North Carolina, I think they're doing a great job, getting together, educating themselves, and educating the public and becoming very smart about how to avoid some of the things that have happened in other states and yet still showing the concern and the responsibility for keeping the waters and the resources growing. So, I'm real proud of our fishermen and how they've been working. When I grew up with my dad, when I was in high school, I took the very first marine biology course that was offered by our high school, taught by Judy Spitsbergen, a wonderful teacher that I had who actually worked here at the museum before I got here. I learned all about the life cycles and about some of the threats and endangerments. I would go home and tell my dad, and he would say, "Hogwash," da-da-da-da. But now, as those things have become more known to the public, general knowledge about life cycles and the ways we have to protect our resources, even my father knows that, yes, there are certain things we have to do because of the limitations of the resource. So, I think my dad is a good foil to look at from the old fisher person to the newly educated person who knows all this but yet sees that, yes, there's got to be some changes. But I think they're going to adapt. I'm real proud of our North Carolina fishermen for that.

MB: So, they're tough, and they're adaptable.

CM: Oh, yeah.

MB: So, it will survive then?

CM: I have to say yes, because I can't imagine the world without them. I really can't imagine Eastern North Carolina without them. I can't imagine my family not being able to fish commercially. I mean, I just can't imagine it. So, professionally, I know all the people that I know that are working with different agencies and things are saying, it's iffy, and it could happen, that it could be a bygone way of life. But I just can't accept that. I just can't do it.

MB: So, why are they saying it's iffy though?

CM: Well, there's a lot to that question, Matt, and I can't really get into that. I think there's a lot of politics involved. There's a lot of money and politics. So, I can't really talk about that.

MB: Well, it's funny being on the boats with the shrimpers and everything. I love those boats. They're beautiful. The clanking and those winches which are gnarly machines and –

CM: [laughter]

MB: – stay away from that sucker. But it's dangerous work. It also has kind of a nineteenth century feel to it. You got these ropes groaning and the way they can work in sync when they're bringing the outriggers and the doors are going, dropping into the waves. It does remind me of a nineteenth century activity, and that way is a throwback thing. It's probably one reason I like it because I'm very attractive to being kind of more retro. The cargo is the same way. A cargo is an ancient thing.

CM: Exactly. Yeah.

MB: I'm worried about the cargo's future. How does a cargo compete against Disney World?

CM: Exactly. Yeah.

MB: These are independent people. We live in a culture where big business tends to dominate. We have one tomato. They have these shrimp farms in Ecuador now that can raise shrimp cheaply. It may not have any taste to it, but –

CM: [laughter]

MB: – this is, unfortunately, there is something about that independent spirit. I don't even know what this question is or where I'm going with this thing but –

CM: Well, I was going to say that fishing is the number one most hazardous occupation according to all the insurance charts. It is the most dangerous occupation there is. So, when those men go out, I mean, they literally don't know. Sometimes they might not come back. It's just a part of the job. I think everybody has seen *The Perfect Storm* and experienced that. I thought they did a great job with that movie. But we lost a shrimp trawler, the *Josephine*, in, I think it was 1998. I've been working, through the Maritime Museum, with Pat Elliott, one of the mothers, of Michael Elliott, one of the crewmen. Listening to that family, that bereaved family – okay. She was in a terrible storm, and she just got pulverized. I mean, this is one of those large wooden trawlers that the storm was so bad, the weather was so bad, another trawler saw the *Josephine* almost go over on a wave before they made it back to port. So, they know that this boat was just completely rolled and bashed on the shoals of Cape Lookout. We have a part of the boat here and some of the artifacts from the boat, and I'm working with the family to put up a small exhibit about the boat. But it just brings home, as you hear these families who are



bereaved – I mean, a terrible way to lose a family member. But their family members wouldn't have done anything differently. They loved fishing, and that was their life. They couldn't imagine them doing anything else.

MB: Yeah. I mean, that level of danger could turn on a dime. I mean, we were going out at 3:00 a.m. last week, and we were actually next to go out. But John Norris, very wise, there was something that he didn't feel comfortable with, some instinct maybe. So, he kind of turned, and a steel boat went on ahead and went aground right in front of us. They were getting pounded. The waves were coming over the side. Because they had dredged there, and the bottom changes. You could hear on the radio what they were saying. The whole fleet was going out, and they were very concerned with – that's right then and there, that was a very dangerous situation. It would have been us. We could have been pounded apart. The boat weighs 54-four tons, gets slammed on that sandbar a couple of times on those waves, and the thing with [inaudible].

CM: Oh yeah.

MB: That will be it.

CM: Well, I think Dr. David Griffith of East Carolina University, wrote the book, *The Estuary's Gift*. It's about fishing families in North Carolina. One of the things that he points out about the fishermen is, they are the ones who are out there every day. They are really the best ones to gauge what's happening to the environment. They are the ones that will know what area, what small creek is being polluted. They're the ones that are going to know when the bottom is shifting around. They're going to be more sensitive to the environment than any of the governmental agencies that are out there monitoring the environments because – the government knows that too, because they are asking for the assistance of the fishermen in getting samples, sampling fish, water quality, all these different things. So, if we lose our fishermen, we're going to lose really the bodyguards of our waters because they have a vested interest. They're the ones who are out there and really are patrolling and knowing what's going on actually out in those waters. I think something you said triggered that in me, that I thought that was a good point that he made in his book, that they are really the best monitors we have of our coastal environment and particularly our waters.

MB: Yeah. I'm thinking about how going on clammers and crabbers and shrimpers, that they literally created some of the shrimpers along North Topsail Beach where they drag – there's a lot of rocks out there; they pull up for years. They pulled up rocks. They created these, kind of, channels. Because they know, literally, foot by foot, a lot of the sea bottom and the river bottom. With the clammers, they know all about it. They are, as you say, incredible marine biologists. They have an intimate knowledge of the life cycles and, literally, the topography or the underwater topography of these areas. That's really amazing. It's been built up over years and years and years.

CM: Yeah.

MB: It's truly an amazing thing to think about. They don't just go off and pop and start dragging out of nowhere.

CM: Right. It is an amazing amount of knowledge that's only gotten – some passed on from generation to generation and then just experience being there. It's not easy. You just can't go out and be a commercial fisherman. [laughter]

MB: Well, also, yeah. I mean, some of them start when they're ten, twelve years old. So, by the time they're forty, they're had a career already.

CM: [laughter].

MB: They're still young. Maybe a little weather-beaten, but still. I mean, Johnny Wayne Midgett is a crabber and has become a good friend. He started when he was twelve, and he's thirty-two. So, he's got twenty years.

CM: In high school, we had a fellow who was a great shrimper. He was wonderful. He did it so well, made so much money. He was quite the truant also. Our principal, John Nelson, who has a lot of respect for fishing and loves our area too. His family was involved in fishing. But he also knew the value of education. He felt so strongly for this fellow. He wanted him to graduate, even though this guy was going to be a fisherman, that he ran him down through some neighborhoods. But finally, the guy ran and got on his boat and left the principal kind of standing at the water's edge, just saying, "I'll be back with my catch later." [laughter] So, I mean, it just shows the draw of these people. When you're a fisherman, if the shrimping is good, forget school and go on fishing. That was something that just came to my mind when you're talking about their [laughter] devotion to it.

MB: Yeah. I guess in terms of the danger, I mean, that certainly puts a burden. It's kind of like being married to a policeman or a fireman or anybody who works in a dangerous – day by day, just a simple slip, one thing can be – I've talked to people who were lost at sea. All kinds of things have happened. Every single one of them, most of them have had major situations. This one said, "If you go out to sea consistently, you're going to get into it sooner or later."

CM: Yeah. It's very dangerous. I lost a cousin who was clamming. He and a friend had pulled up their boat on the shoal. His dog was in the boat. They were clamming. The tide was coming in, and he hadn't paid attention. The boat came loose and started floating. It was cold. The water was cold. The dog was real upset in the boat that he was going away and his master was still on the shoal. My cousin started taking his boots off and his clothes off, and his friend said, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm going to go get the boat." He says, "You can't do that. It's freezing." He says, "I'll get to the boat and come back, and I'll dry off. Well, you keep my clothes." He jumped in the water and swam. He didn't make it to the boat. Hypothermia got him, and he drowned. Another cousin of mine, her husband who was a big commercial fisherman in our county, he was out just fishing for his own pleasure, doing some mulleting, I think, off of, I think it was Drum Inlet, and one of those freak waves – and this happened, people don't think they do – but this freak wave, because they had some people on shore actually see it happen. I think he had like a 20-, 30-foot boat, just this freak wave came out of nowhere and just picked up his boat and just flipped it over. Of course, all the gear just piled on top of him. They had no idea what was happening, and both of them died. This was just a couple of years ago.

So, anytime you're out on the water with a boat, I mean, you're taking your life into your hands. It is a dangerous place to be.

MB: Another thing that I've done extensive filming with a shrimper who's also a minister. He does tie in the sea stories with the [inaudible].

CM: With the sermon, yeah.

MB: Yeah. We filmed the sermon, Sunday, actually. I felt, when you leave the dock – I'm sure you've experienced this – there's something that seems to kind of happen where you kind of leave some of your worries and all the clap trap of – there's a peace out there.

CM: Right. There's a focus. You have to focus on what you're doing. So, you can't be worrying about anything that's happening on the land or that life back there. Because you have to pay attention. But it's also so beautiful out there, and it is peaceful. You could focus on just this one thing, getting those fish.

MB: Well, I'd like to hear about how you became involved with the Maritime Museum and what you're doing now and all that a little bit.

CM: Well, I graduated from East Carolina University. I graduated with a teaching degree. Of course, they save student teaching until the last semester. So, I decided that's not what I really wanted to do. So, I became a ranger with Cape Lookout National Seashore in the interpretive division, which means I would talk to the public about the natural and cultural heritage of Carter County and the outer banks of North Carolina. I got a real education, I think. I became very appreciative of my own culture. When you live someplace, you don't really think of yourself as a culture. This is just home. This is where I am. This is where I live. With more exposure to talking with people from other places and with doing the research and putting together programs for public presentation about our area and leading tours and that kind of thing, I learned a great deal about what I represent in the world and what our culture is here. They trained me in the collection of oral history. So, for about six years of those eight, I talked with people who lived down Portsmouth Island which is just across the inlet from Ocracoke and got to know all the people who used to live on the island. Because I'm a singer too, they would share with me not only their stories, but some of the songs that went with them. So, I've done a lot of research into area music and musicians and the lifestyles too and the culture. So, with that background, then they also gave me some training in collections management, the care of artifacts. Because the park had a small collection of image archives and artifacts from the Portsmouth Village and the lighthouse area. In 1980, the job here at the North Carolina Maritime Museum, for collections manager/historian/folklorist came available. I wanted to do that and so glad I did. This has been a wonderful experience. I used more of my research skills, and I do a lot of writing. I write a lot of copies for exhibits and brochures. I get to do a lot of research. I mean, everything's interesting. The only thing I've had trouble with is outboard motors. I'm not an outboard motor person. [laughter] I have no interest in it, and it made it kind of hard to do because I kept having to refer to other people. Because even the literature, if you haven't been reading a lot and if you don't live outboard motors – it wasn't in my blood. But that's the only thing. But I have had to research the Life-Saving Service, the Revenue Cutter Service, the Life-Saving stations and how

they merged into today's Coast Guard and boat types and the commercial fishing exhibit and dealing with a lot of wonderful resources here at the museum and people still doing some collection of oral histories. So, it's been great for me personally. It's been very enlightening. It's been a real growth experience. I really feel like I have given back to my culture. Because I really feel like some of the things, some of the people I've interviewed just wouldn't have gotten interviewed. We've saved some of that. The more you do, the more you need it done and how much you're losing too. But it's projects like this that will help document people and places. God forbid that things fifty years from now would've gone badly for us, and [laughter] this will be the only document – just the documentary evidence of a lifestyle that used to be. Hopefully that won't be the case. But it's just been great for me. I've enjoyed my time with the museum.

MB: That's great. So, do you house the oral interview history here, the tapes and the –

CM: Yes, we have. Yeah, we sure do.

MB: – the archives?

CM: We had a folklorist on board for a couple of years as a part of a grant. He did a bigger collection. Me, I do it kind of haphazardly because I just wear too many hats, and we're all just kind of stretched here at the museum. But it's never a dull moment. [laughter] We're always doing something. We have three educators here on staff, and we do probably more field trips and more special events considering the number of staff we have. It's just incredible. We all work really hard. We've got a great exhibits designer who we all work closely with, and Dr. George Shannon, our new director, just giving it all he's got. He's very enthusiastic and very supportive of us, of the staff. We just got into the Department of Cultural Resources. So, we really feel like that was where we should have been at. We were in the Department of Agriculture for years. As the only museum in that department, it was kind of hard to explain why we needed special paper clips [laughter] and archivally safe pieces, when trying to go through budgets.

MB: Jim Graham.

CM: Yeah, he was great to us, yes, Commissioner Graham.

MB: [inaudible] I interviewed him.

CM: Oh, yeah, he is wonderful. He is wonderful. It was great to see him when he comes down and visits. But now we're in the Department of Cultural Resources, which they understand what we're going through, our needs when we talk about exhibit space, all those things that – that we speak the same language. So, we're really looking forward to a long and good relationship with them.

MB: I think we've covered it pretty well in terms of overall history and the context of the – I guess, to me, what's interesting, the town like Sneads Ferry is not the only – there are a number of towns. But Sneads Ferry still seems like a real "fishing town." There's tourism there. It's all a bit off the beaten track. It's a working town. Now, some Marines live there because it's right

across this bridge from Camp Lejeune. What's amazing also is the number of families there who go way back. It's not ingrown but to me – I mean, I lived in L.A. for fifteen years, Miami for five years. I've been around here and there, especially in states like California and Florida where people can move. There's nothing to move. But these families have been here thirty years. I'm like, my God.

CM: I think you can take Sneads Ferry, and if you could scoop up Sneads Ferry, you could replace Sneads Ferry with any of the small villages down east, Bettie, Otway, Stacy. Because they're not tourist places, but they are working towns. I mean, they are communities that are mainly water-based fishing communities. That's what everybody talks and everybody understands. They might work off somewhere on the base, which is one of the biggest employees we have, Cherry Point, or schoolteacher or some kind of subsidiary. But everybody's somehow connected to that fishing industry. So, I think Sneads Ferry is very representative of a lot of little communities like that all up and down, not just down East North Carolina, but little places like Inglehart and all those communities that are Pamlico, Hyde, Dare County on the mainland side, not the outer bank side, but that are getting ready. The farmers out there and the fishermen are usually the same person. They're having trouble with the farming now. Most people are starting to sell off their farms. We can feel them in the air. The property developers are going to start coming into that area really soon because the farmer can't make it. They can't make it on fishing. They can't make it on farming. So, it's the small family farms, not corporate farms. So, all those communities are going to start changing drastically within the next, maybe even five years, but certainly in ten years. So, we're in a period of transition. Things will not be the same. There's going to be some drastic changes.

MB: Well, we hope that that culture will survive all those changes.

CM: I hope so too. We've got a lot to lose if we do lose it. So, I think we've had a cultural awakening in the past ten years because of the work of Folklores in our area, the Arts Council, folks who've come down who've taken an interest. Dr. Karen Baldwin from East Carolina University, Folklores has come down and done some work and my work and people like Karen Amspacher with the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and the National Park Service, talking about culture and resources and I think all those things. Because what we've all been doing is trying to educate people. Our natural resources are very evident. It's those cultural heritage that is so overlooked and overshadowed. That's the thing that we're trying to bring up is the cultural and make it as important as the sand dunes and the grass, the beach grass and all those things. The cultural is just as important as the natural. We're just trying to bring that up to par.

MB: Well, great. Is there anything else you want to add?

CM: Great having you at the museum, and I hope everybody comes to see us at the North Carolina Maritime Museum. [laughter]

MB: All right. Now speaking of which, what exhibits do you have going now at the – I want to take a little gander around, obviously.

CM: Most of the things in here are long-term exhibits. There are no such things as permanent

exhibits anymore in the museum field. But we have "The Sea Shall Not Have Them" which is the Life-Saving-Lighthouse-Revenue Cutter Service-Coast Guard exhibit. We have the recreational boating, the boat building industry of Barbour boats. Ski boats, we have that represented, some outboard motors, the natural history [laughter] with the aquariums. We've got America's first industry, commercial fishing, which, that's the last long-term exhibit that I've worked on. We're getting ready to do the – you saw the dive bell.

[end of transcript]