

Wild Caught  
John Wayne Midgett Oral History  
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Now, Johnny, how has it been since you're your own distributor now?

Johnny Wayne Midgett: Yes, it's been a lot better. It's the difference in it isn't that I'm making a lot more money, it's just things got so cheap. If I hadn't sold it myself, I wouldn't have been able to make a living the last six or eight months.

MB: It really came down to that?

JWM: Yes. Oh, yes, it came down to that. Things just got so much cheaper, and fuel prices got so high you just can't hardly make it here lately.

MB: Well, Johnny, we were talking earlier – you've talked plenty and this won't take that long – but earlier, it's not a conspiracy, but this idea that somehow, it's all about the land what we've been talking about.

JWM: Oh, yes. I think it's been going on for fifteen or twenty years, maybe not quite that long. But I think there's a certain group of people that they've come up, and they want all the property. I think they've come up and made a lot of laws. What I'm trying to say is, they came down and saw that a lot of people had the waterfront property that fished for a living. They've come up with a lot of laws to try to take the land, is what they've done. They couldn't come and just take the land. So, I think they've got some special interest groups that's passed a lot of these laws at the state level to make fishing harder. Once you make it where it's not profitable to be in the fishing business anymore, it was an easy way to come and get the property. Because if you're not making any money with a fish house, you're going to probably be ready to sell it. That's exactly what's happened. They've tightened up on fishing regulations and fishing isn't as good as it used to be. Imports have come in. It's just an accumulation of a bunch of different problems. I think it was manmade, some of it. It was done on purpose to try to get the land. That's what's happening now. They're fixing to buy off all the waterfront property. Us people that fish for a living are just being pushed out. We're not even going to have nowhere to sell the product or keep your boat or anything. I don't think this stuff came along by accident. I think it was kind of done on purpose.

MB: Now, some of the people who were – now, we don't need to name any groups, but like the rich sports fishermen. This is going all over the country where somebody's under the name of conservation, they're saying, well, yes, but that's not really what they're after.

JWM: No. I don't believe they're after the conservation of the fishing. It's not just sports fishermen, I believe it was a lot of developers and just different ones that came down and had seen other areas that had developed and the money that was to be made off of the waterfront property. I think they've kind of set that in motion in this area now to just – I think they've just figured out a way to take the property. Because we're not going be able to afford to pay to keep it. They've moved in here, and they've built condominiums and big, fine homes. They're driving the land taxes up all around us so high we can't afford to pay them. It's just several different things that's happened that is out of our control, it seems like. I just don't think it's right that the fishing people are going to get pushed out.

MB: Ray Swaney, Sr. said this thing about, "Well, how can you have a country that can't even raise its own food? That's a weak country." Because if you can't feed yourself – that's the most basic thing of all.

JWM: Well, that's right. I guess he was right about that. Imports are killing us. Just people are importing from everywhere. It's not other countries doing it so much that bothers me as it is that the American people are doing it. They're using cheap labor overseas and abroad, pumping the product back over here dirt cheap. But what gets me about it is you put people out of work in this country, who's going to buy the product eventually? You take a man's job. How can he afford it? Doesn't matter how cheap the product is when it comes from somewhere else, how is he going to be able to buy? I just don't understand that theory. I guess it's all about greed.

MB: Which unfortunately is what drives everything.

JWM: That's right. Exactly.

MB: So, in a weird way, it doesn't have to be some conspiracy like in a movie where they all get together in a dark room and say, "Okay, here's what we're going to do." But in a weird way, it ends up kind of being like that without people having to do that. There's only so much land, period. But the land by the water is the most valuable land of all because everybody wants to be by the water.

JWM: That's right. I don't think it was a conspiracy theory in purpose. But once the ball got rolling, once a few people started building on the beach on Sneads Ferry, it's just turned into a snowball effect. Then there are a lot of people right here that want to sell their property. They think they can sell it and be well off the rest of their lives. But I don't think so because money has got a way of getting away from you. You sell your land, and you want to fish for a living. But you say, "Well, I'll sell my land and get out of debt, and I'll still keep fishing." But the point being, we're not going to have anywhere to tie our boats up anymore. Or you're not even going to have nowhere to sell to because every fish house on Sneads Ferry, with the exception of one or two – let's see, the Davis', they don't sell theirs; and Grant, he doesn't sell his. There are three other ones, I think. Well, no. Let's see. I know a lot of them are for sale. Most of them are for sale. So, we're going to be in trouble in that aspect in a few years. One of them is already sold.

MB: Sneads Ferry Seafoods, right?

JWM: Right. He said he had done sold it.

MB: It says, "Under Contract," down there.

JWM: Well, I talked to him, he said they had given him a deposit or something. And come April, they were going to finalize on the deal. So, that one will be gone. Then the neighboring fish house, Millis' Seafood, they want to sell theirs. They're going to sell. Everett, they told me that they would. If somebody came along with enough money, they would sell theirs. So, the three biggest fish houses right here on Fulcher's Landing will be gone. I just think our whole way of life is fixing to change in this area. It's a sad scene to me because I don't know what

people are going to do just with their boats. You can't take a 50-foot boat and tie it up in a ditch somewhere. You've got to have enough water to keep it and turn it around. You've got to have a big place. Once those places are gone, there's going to be nowhere to even keep your boat around here. Then your developers, they build a big condo or big, fine homes on these creeks. After they buy this property up, they don't want no old shrimp boat tied up there. It's just a way to get rid of us all, I do believe.

MB: So, is there any answer to it?

JWM: I don't know.

MB: Maybe the state could buy some fish houses?

JWM: Well, I thought that. I have heard of it in other places. Somebody told me that in South Carolina, that the state stepped in and bought some of these fish houses. I don't know whether it's true or not. But I heard that the state had bought fish houses just so that the fish and heritage would be protected, so that they couldn't – what it amounted to, it kept the people from selling the fish houses just for the money.

MB: Yes. As I understand, in other words, if you sell the fish house, it can only be used as a fish house. You can't put a condo there.

JWM: Right.

MB: If it's been there more than fifty years, there's a law here. If the fish house has been going on more than half a century, they can declare it a cultural heritage, so that they have to keep it going that way. They can't sell it and just make condos out of it.

JWM: No. I wish they could all stay in business. But they've told me that they've been losing money the last few years operating. You can't operate a business losing money for just so long. I understand that. But I think a lot of things have come along that's brought – it's like the imports just killed us. That's causing the fish houses not to make a lot of money because people are buying it where it's cheaper. Why drive to the coast and buy shrimp when you can buy them at Walmart, fifteen, twenty minutes away from your house already peeled, already processed, and cheaper? Even though you're not getting as good a product. Because a friend of mine had bought some of these imported shrimps at Walmart, and he let me try them. I wouldn't have fed them to the cat. They tasted terrible, and they were going on about how good they were. They just don't know what seafood's all about, anybody that can eat that mess, right?

MB: Well, yes. I think the other thing is that ultimately everybody wants the land. So, they divide and conquer the town. Because some people will say, "Well, yes, I have the right to sell my land here. I make a half million dollars." Then they get caught up by all that money. But then that money won't last that long.

JWM: No. That's right. That's just like my family has got a piece of waterfront property, and it won't sell for any amount of money. I don't care how much it is. It doesn't make no difference.

If a man said they would give me \$1 million for it, it's not for sale. Because I'm doing what I want to do. I don't need money to be happy. I'd rather have the land than the money. Money has got a way of getting away from you. You sell your land; you haven't got nowhere to keep your boat. Before you turn around, the money's gone. Then what have you got? Money is not everything.

MB: But in this society, it seems like it drives everybody.

JWM: Well, certainly it does. Everything's got so high. People are barely surviving. Trying to get by and then somebody comes along and offers you a million dollars, it would be hard to turn down. Especially when people are really in a hard shit.

MB: Some of the people behind this have been these powerful developers.

JWM: I believe so. I believe that. It's just like my father used to tell me all the time that when they put this bridge over here in North Topsail Beach, it wasn't for the people of Sneads Ferry. At that time in 1968, they put that bridge across there, and that was so they could open the beach up for development. Ever since the development started on the beach, it's just got worse and worse here. In the last ten years, it's really gone crazy like wildfire here. Our property taxes are going through the roof, and our waterfront property is getting sold. The pollution problem is getting worse. It's just one thing right behind the other. I think it was all in the works many, many years ago. It was done right. They lobbied the state government to set up laws and regulations and all kinds of mess against fishing just so they could end up with a property. It isn't about conservation of fish. It's about a special interest group that want the property, is what it's all about, I believe.

MB: Unfortunately, it looks like they kind of are going to get away with it.

JWM: Well, I don't know what you can do about it. But they sure have got a lot of it so far. Down to the southern part of us, down here toward Southport, Wilmington, they completely developed all that beach. Wrightsville Beach, you can't even go down there anymore. Figure 8 Island, they moved there, and they took it. You can't even get on that island. They've got a gate. They won't even let you go on the beach there anymore. I suspect North Topsail Beach will be the same way within a few years. If you don't live there, you won't even be able to go over there and look at the ocean anymore. It's just turned into a mess as far as I'm concerned.

MB: I was seeing some homes that were sitting in the ocean. They're condemned. They're sitting there. They're like islands there.

JWM: Right. They sure are.

MB: They never should have built those places out there.

JWM: No. I've seen them. They built houses there in 1987. When I was shrimping on the beach here, they built some of those houses. They weren't 100 yards from the water. We had a big nor'easter storm come in, and it washed those houses right in the ocean. Those houses should

have never been able to have been built down there. But development has gone crazy. Everybody wants every piece of beach property they can get their hands on. It looks like the EPA and their government or whoever who's always worried to death about beach nourishment and all that stuff, they would have not let them build on the beach like that. Then every storm comes on the houses get to what? They want the government to go in and repair for them, and the taxpayers have to pay for them. I don't think it should have been developed there anyway. Not because I care if they lived there, but I wouldn't live on a shifting piece of sand all the time.

MB: Absolutely. I was telling that to (Holly Gram?). I think they plunked these things right down and put a palm tree there. It's like, man, this thing is just a pile of wood torn apart.

JWM: That's right. I know, after Fran, I was crabbing there down in the creeks down here, which is right behind the beach down here. You had these creeks. Then you had this marshland. Then you had the ocean. Some of those houses down there after Fran, they weren't even there anymore. They washed them completely gone. They weren't nothing but plumbing pipes sticking out the ground. You could never even tell there was a house anywhere down there. I understand why they want to live there. Because it's such a pretty view and you're right on the beach. But I wouldn't live there, there's no way.

MB: I think that that's good, Johnny. Anything else you want to add?

JWM: No.

MB: That good?

JWM: Yes.

[end of transcript]