

Wild Caught
Donny Millis Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: All right, Donny. I appreciate running into you. I want to say that I deeply respect you. That's why I'm doing this documentary about Sneads Ferry. I've been coming down this area for about the last 5, 6 years. I was struck by how hard-working fishing people are. That's really the theme of the documentary, that this is a real community. Now, tell me about what we're looking at here in terms of this wonderful monument.

Donny Millis: Well, in the small skiff, there is Momma and Daddy fishing. They had been fishing and just came in. The boat on the right over there was Daddy's shrimp boat. It was named the *Edith M.* Over here, with a truck in front of it is Mama, which is known as the Shrimp Lady. She set across the high-rise bridge at Surf City. She passed away last month.

MB: So, now, the shrimp lady was known –

DM: She was known as the Shrimp Lady, Edith Millis.

MB: She was known all over the world.

DM: Everybody knows her. She sold shrimp to people all around the whole world, all around, everywhere.

MB: How many years was she involved in it?

DM: She was in it for probably, I would say, fifteen, a good fifteen years. Daddy used to sell shrimp with her. He would say she got the shrimp. Sometimes he would sit there all day with her until he got too sick. Then Daddy passed away. July 26th would be three years ago, Daddy passed away. Mama passed away last month. But when Daddy passed away, Mama continued selling shrimp until her health got too bad. She had cancer. It, finally, last month got her. But everybody that knew Mama liked her, and they stopped by there and buy a shrimp from her. They buy shrimp from her when the market goes on summer sales and get them cheaper. But they liked her because she was a talker. She'd talk with them and carry a conversation. They carried a conversation with her. I mean, they didn't ask the price. They told her how many pounds they wanted. So, she could have put any kind of price, it wouldn't have made any difference. They still bought from her. But she sold at a reasonable price anyway.

MB: So, she treated her customers like friends.

DM: She treated them – well, they were friends. They were all like, when they stopped by there, they would hug her neck. They were all like a big family, everybody that she sold to.

MB: What's interesting, Donny, you bring up the concept of family because one of the big themes of this documentary is that this is like a big family.

DM: Sneads Ferry is it's all – half of it is probably kin. I mean, Summers down the road, we're all kin. But Mama was known more so as, I say the shrimp lady, but she was known more by more people than what Daddy was. Now, local and like flounder fishing up north, Daddy was known because he was on the shrimp boats that were flounder fishing. As far as selling shrimp,

the shrimp lady's name, I mean, it's all over the United States. Anybody ever comes to North Topsail Beach or Surf City, the first place they'd done, let's go see the Shrimp Lady. That's where they went. Whether they buy a shrimp or not, they stopped by and talked with her. But before they left, she talked them into buying shrimp. She had a way of making you buy shrimp. If you wanted 2 pounds, when you left, you had 10 pounds.

MB: Well, let me ask you this, Donny. So, your dad was a fisherman?

DM: He fished all of his life. He was born in 1925. You see there on the tombstone, died in [19]97, July 26th. When he was five years old, he rowed boats out the creek. When he was five, before he even started school, he'd row boats out of the creek and fish. He helped feed his family. Before he even started school, he was helping. In other words, the fish he caught and all, whatever he got paid, it went right into the household, and it was took in his groceries.

MB: How about you?

DM: I've fished all my life. I mean, it's practically the same thing. You're just family and heritage.

MB: So, have you mainly been a shrimper?

DM: I've shrimped. I've fished. I've done it up one coast. I've fished from Virginia to Galveston, Texas, shrimped and all that stuff like that, commercial.

MB: Let me ask you this, Donny. Is fishing a way of life?

DM: Fishing was a way of life. It's getting to be – they say the turtle's endangered. The commercial fisherman is endangered. That's what it boils down to. They're cutting down. They're making so many regulations and stuff to where it's really hard to afford to pay the – for the stuff they're asking you to put on this, put on that. It's cutting the catch so much, TEDs, fish excluders. Our catch is down at least a third, if not half. It's down at least that much. Of course, the living's going up. With the price of shrimp, some summers, it's up too. So, you'll [inaudible] a lot with some summers. Some summers, the shrimp is plentiful. They're really cheap, and it don't add out. When shrimp is really scarce, the price is high. Then they kind of seem like you do better when shrimp is scarcer.

MB: So, sometimes getting too many shrimps isn't a good thing.

DM: Well, if you get too many, then there's no market on them. I mean, the market's flooded in. So, you have to send them to the breeder. You get breeder price; you get no price hardly. So, when you're not getting enough -- when you catch it enough where you don't have to send to the breeder, you're getting top dollar. When you have to send to the breeder, you're getting the low dollar.

MB: So, what do you think the future is going to be for commercial fishing?

DM: The future, I wouldn't recommend it for nobody. Like I said, it's an endangered species. Ten years from now, you're – New River, it's about like Florida. Florida is always about ten years – whatever they do, ten years later, North Carolina does. Well, there's no gillnetting in Florida now. No gillnetting in South Carolina, Florida. They're closing all gillnet. With this river, we can still gillnet. But ten years from now, less time than that, five years from now, you're not running a gillnet in the river. I mean, they're trying to stop it now. That's their next step. Well, shrimping, they're trying to get it where you got shrimp 3 miles offshore. We don't have any towing bottom 3 miles offshore. It's all rocks. So, what it boils down to, if they go to that, we're either going to have to leave here, go South Carolina or somewhere where you can get 3 miles or whatever, or probably say you rig out. So, your boat just – maybe by then I'll find something else to do. I'm getting too darn old already. But that's what it's boiling down to. Everybody into commercial fishing are completely out of business, is what they're doing. They're enforcing so many laws and regulations, fines on this, fines on that. They're running the commercial fishermen out of business.

MB: Just seems like the independent businessman can't do anymore.

DM: The independent man can. That's all I know is commercial fishing. I don't know anything else. I have no other trade. So, when they close all this, I guess it's the welfare line. That's the only thing I know. Because I don't have any other trade. If they close this river and closed it 3 miles offshore, then it's stand in line, I guess. That's the only thing I know.

MB: I hope that doesn't happen.

DM: Well, it's happening every day. It's just slowly happening. They'll close one thing. Then they'll close another thing. Then they'll gradually jump to something else. But they don't have enough sense to realize they're running their own self out of business. The Conservation Department has got like hundreds and hundreds hired. Well, if they close all this, they're not going to need them. So, what they're doing in conservation, by enforcing everything, [inaudible] enforcing it, they're running themselves out of business. The government gives them a certain amount of money each year. Well, okay, if they got, let's say, five hundred hired, if they got it all closed this and that, I didn't close it down. Well, we don't need you. We don't need two hundred. There's three hundred of them out of work, but they don't have sense enough to realize what it boils down to.

MB: Where's the seafood going to come from then?

DM: Well, most of it's imported. They like imports. They can buy it cheap. They can buy – like a restaurant, most restaurants you go to, it's imported shrimp. You've got a few locals that buy from fish houses and sell local shrimp. But the majority of them can buy them from El Salvador. I think Bush, the ex-president, he's got a shrimp farm. When they get the size they want, they scoop them up, and all of them is the same size, farm shrimp. So, they are trying to get to that more so than anything, is the way I see it.

MB: So, big business will take overfishing then.

DM: Fishing, like I say, is an endangered species. The turtle, he'll be here when we all go. A fisherman, if he fishes, if he calls himself a fisherman, he'll be a farmer. He'll be doing it on a farm because he won't be in the water doing it, unless you go too far offshore, they can't see you.

MB: But does it get in the blood, fishing?

DM: It gets in the blood like anything else. Anything you're used to doing all your life, you're going to continue doing it as long as you can. That's all you know. That's your trade. When they take your trade away from you, then when you get a little age onto you, you're too old to learn anything else. If you start out in a job that starts you at the bottom, you can't make it from the bottom. So, if you haven't already got a little nest egg, then you're history.

MB: Well, let's hope and pray that doesn't happen.

DM: It's happening every day. But there's nothing we can do about it. But that's what's happening. Conservation is running us out of business and running their own self out of business. They'll realize that when it's all done. Then they're going to think about it. When they got like, say, ten officers and they get cut down to two officers and all of them lay out of work, the ones that's not retired out of it, the ones that's just getting started, then they got to find them a different job.

MB: Then they'll get a taste of their own medicine.

DM: They're running us out, and they're running themselves out too. That's what they're doing.

MB: Well, Donny, could you show us the other side of the monument?

DM: Yes. This is the thing when Momma and Daddy were married, January 16th, 1949. There were five of us children: Randy, Billy, me – which is Donny – Katherine, and Kathleen, which is my twin sisters. At the bottom of it says, "Our Mama and Daddy have won the battle and are now in the arms of Jesus." Hopefully, they are.

MB: I'm sure they are. Well, it's a beautiful monument, Donny.

DM: Yes, and they deserve every bit of it. If anybody deserves it, they deserve it.

MB: It's nice that it's right here, right in front of the fish house.

DM: Yes, everything right here is all family-owned. So, it can't – nothing be touched or moved or nothing. So, it's all – the whole hill, across the hill, and all around is all family-owned. It'll stay that way.

MB: The families here are very tight.

DM: Yes. We're a close family.

MB: That's good. Because family is everything really.

DM: That's all you got. When you lose your family, I didn't realize it meant so much. You lose your daddy, it's tough, but you always got mama to lean on. But when you lose mama, then you've got nobody to lean on. Then that's when it's really tough. Which, if Mama would have gone first, it would have been tough. Because Daddy couldn't – he couldn't have gone on without her. I mean, she made him what he was. The fish house and all, she worked there seven days a week. They built the fish house in 1969. She made the business. She built the business. Then when they retired, they went on the beach. They were bored. They went on the beach, and they sold a lot of shrimp over there. They were bored, and they made good money at it. But it was more of get out and stay busy instead of just sit in the house or travel. They enjoyed that more than they did anything else. They were workers. The day Daddy died, a week before he died, he went into a coma. He got up with his morphine bottle. He had a bottle of liquid morphine. My other brother, Randy, took him fishing. He drank that liquid morphine. That night, about 11:00 p.m., they left the house. They didn't come back until 12:00 p.m. the next day. He shut his motor off right in the middle of the river and looked all around. He said, "I want to look at it one more time because I'll never see it again." That was the last time he's seen it. Mama had ovarian cancer.

MB: Let's see, we were talking about your mother and ovarian cancer.

DM: I said Mama fought ovarian cancer over seven years. She fought, fought. She lost her hair four times. She wore wigs and turbans and all that stuff. But she refused to die. She said she wasn't going to die. Right on up till she did die, she refused to die. Nurses come to the house. They checked her. They found no pulse. They couldn't understand it, said, "Why is she breathing? We don't know. We don't even have a pulse." Well, she lived two days with no pulse, is what they said. They said how her heart was beating, they had no idea. But she come to one time and looked at all of us and says, "I'm not going to die. I refuse to die." But at 10:30 – 12:30 p.m. on a Saturday night, I saw her catch her last breath. All her family was gathered around her when she caught her last breath. Like I say, if there's a heaven, she's got her front-row seat, and Daddy's sitting beside her.

MB: Now, let me ask you this, Donny. Your grandparents, were they also fishermen?

DM: They lived right here on this hill where the graveyard is at now. They had a house. The old family house was right here where we at now. They were also fishermen. All of them as far back as you go was all commercial fishermen. Grandpa, he was seventy-six when he died. But that's all he ever did. My uncles and great uncles, all of them were – everybody was – well, the whole Millis family was commercial fishermen. We've lived in Sneads Ferry all our lives, all of us. I've heard Daddy and my uncles talk about, years ago, they would catch mullet and salt them down, put them in 55-gallon drums, and haul them to Wilmington, mule and cart, nothing but dirt road, to Market Street. They'd trade fish for hams from the farmers, stuff like that. So, it goes back that far. Then when they finally did get old Model A or Model Ts, they would meet them. The road wasn't wide enough, one would have to pull off the shoulder where the other one could pass. But they were hauling fish way back then before they got the cars. Because they were hauling a mule and cart to Wilmington.

MB: So, I mean, there have been a lot of changes over here.

DM: Yes, there has.

MB: So, what are some of the changes you've seen in your lifetime here in Sneads Ferry?

DM: I used to know everybody who lived here. Now I might know one out of ten. I mean, it's like you got the Marine Corps base right across the river here. They come down. They like it, and they stay. But when they stay, they don't like this. They want to change it like it was when they were up home up north. So, what they do, they come down, they like it and stay. The first thing they do is like, "Well, we don't like this right here." They want to change it like it was up north. So, I asked him, "Why didn't you move up north? Why didn't you stay up north? If you want to change this up north, why didn't you stay up north?" I mean, if you want to come down here, you like it the way it is, leave it like it is. But they don't want to do that. They're winning the war on that part, looks like. So, I guess we're going to have to get out there about 10 miles in the woods and grow peanuts and eat, the way it looks.

[laughter]

MB: That's pretty tough, Donny.

DM: Well, I'm telling it like it is.

MB: You are. I appreciate it. Because maybe this documentary is going to be on the statewide PBS, UNC television. They did my last documentary, which is a whole different topic, about carnival people. But it was a look at the carnis that showed a lot of the stuff that people think about carnis is not true. They're a family, and they can do everything. They can build those rides. Well, they can do everything. All those stereotypes people have about people are wrong. It's the same thing, I think, here to an extent.

DM: Well, they push us out of business. I mean, it's just a matter of time. It's going to – I don't know. Well, like I said, that's the way I know how to put it and put it plainly. The turtle is not endangered. The commercial fisherman is the one endangered. We've got more holes in our nets now. Used to, if we got a hole in our net big as your fist, you swing doors to the side and fix that hole. Now we've got turtle excluders, holes – a flap this wide, shooting shrimp out of it. Then you've got a fish excluder. It's about like this. It's used to shrimp out. So, I mean, there's no winning. There's no winning. Used to, we had a hole that big, we wouldn't even set out. Now, you have to drag it. We pull our trinet, used to, if we say we got 100 in trinet, say we get 200 pounds of shrimp. Now we get a 100 in trinet, we might get 50 pounds of shrimp. So, it's hurt us that bad. But they say the turtle. Well, people can eat turtles. Some people do eat them. Some places you can order a turtle. But if you catch one here, you're supposed to lay them on deck, stomp his stomach, do all this and that, make a report out, turn it in. If you catch too many of them, all it's doing when you report it, it's pushing you further offshore, pushing you further offshore. Because the turtle comes in and lays his eggs with the beach over here. The condos have pushed the beach hills down. So, the turtle doesn't have no place to lay his eggs anymore to

start with. Commercial fishermen didn't do that. Developers did that, building condos. But if they find a turtle on the beach, the commercial fisherman is blamed for it, the shrimper. He got hung in the gillnet and drowned it, or commercial fishermen culled it, like that. They found one on the beach the other day, laid the blame on commercial fishermen, found a big hook in his mouth. But that was pushed aside. But the commercial fishermen got blamed for it. When they found a hook, they just hushed about that, a big shark hook. Well, a turtle bit it. When it did, it killed her. It broke the line, but still, it choked the turtle. But the first thing is commercial fishermen.

MB: Well, it's amazing. Of course, the developers have a lot more money.

DM: Well, that's the deal. They got more money than the commercial fishermen, and you know yourself money rules. If you've got money, you can do anything you want. If you work day-for-day for your money, you've got enough money to do nothing. You can't fight them. You survive and pay your bills. You eat. You might save a little bit, but you can't go fight a man that's got millions of dollars. He'll tell you when and where, and you can buck him. He'll throw the lawyers in there, and he'll keep on pushing sand dunes down. The turtle, he's looking for a place to lay his eggs. Where's he going to lay them at? He's going to come in the river, go up summers, and lay up. Because the beach, they pushed the beach down. They write them tickets, and they tell them bulldozers keep right on pushing. But we can't do nothing about it. We don't have the money to fight them with.

MB: They have all those high-powered lawyers.

DM: They've got all the lawyers. They got all the money. You take the people who can build condos and condos, they've got plenty of money. Commercial fishermen don't have the money to buy a condo, let alone build a bunch of them. So, we fight another losing battle on that side. There's no compromising with them either. They're like, "Hey, you're nothing," is the way they look at us. In their eyes, that's what we are, nothing.

MB: But you put the food on the table.

DM: They don't care about that. They can get it imported. They'll still get food. So, they don't care.

MB: Even though it's tasteless.

DM: It has no taste. That's like artificial crab meat. I mean, you can get a store and buy it, but you aren't eating. It tastes like rubber bands to me. You can chew it all you want to. The more you chew it, the bigger it gets. I don't know. The young generation – I'm getting to the age now where I haven't got – by the time it comes all in effect, everything gets too tight when they close everything, I'll be old enough. I'm forty-six now, so I am not going to have to see the real bad part. I'm seeing enough bad part now. I must see a lot more bad part. But the young ones coming up now, that's depended on the river, they're really the endangered species. They're the ones going to suffer. The young ones got to put clothes on their back and feed them, thinking they would do it, expecting -- a lot of them don't have no education. A lot of them are high

school dropouts, fishing. They're not going to – they don't have no trade or trade they got fishing. Then that's done. Well, like I said, they're going to be on the welfare line. That's where they're going to be. So, they got – talk about welfare, welfare, I mean, looks to me like that's what they're trying to put everybody on. That's why they're working on commercial fishing.

MB: But I think it's also true not just fisherman [inaudible], crabbing.

DM: There's crabbing. You're right.

MB: I'd love to go out fishing with you. I want to show the different types of fishing. I want to show the clam and the different types of fish and the crab and the clam and the shrimp.

DM: I'll show you the mullet and spot fishing. I mean, I got nets for that though. I can take you up there and show you that. But used to we could make one run and catch as many as we catch now in probably ten runs. But there's all you retirees, like, off-base, they come here, and they buy a house. Every one of them goes and buys a bunch of set nets. They don't fish them. Just run them out and set them. The next day, they go fish them up. That's hurt the commercial fishermen, the ones that do it for a living. Well, they got a big income coming. That's their hobby. But they buy a license. We can't say nothing about that. I mean, conservation, all they care about doing is selling licenses. They get the money for the license, they're happy. They don't care who they sell it to. They don't care who they hurt.

MB: Okay. We've got to stop.

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