

Wild Caught
John Norris Oral History
Date of Interview: May 1, 2002
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 00:22:16
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Well, let's just start off with what we're just talking about with what's going on right now with prices for shrimp.

John Norris: Well, the buyers claimed that the imports have really hurt things. They claimed the administration was in. They had an import deal where China pushed in a lot more shrimp into this country. Our steel workers too were talking. They were in a mess. I guess George Bush has helped them out somehow and other. They talked about the price of cars are going to go up or whatever. But they were sending a lot of shrimp in this country, farm shrimp, cheap. Chinamen's annual income is like \$500. We can't compete with that. It's just got us in the mess. The price of shrimp is cheaper now than it's been over ten years. In price, everything else is up. I think the import is hurting everybody. It's not just the steel people, it's just too much of it in the seafood. They use steroids to grow their shrimp and hog sewage to feed them. Here we are catching natural shrimp. It's going to be tough to make it if we can. We're just going to see. We're all in debt now. Everybody is in debt. Borrowed money to work on these boats and fed the economy. Whether the economy feeds us back or not, we'll see [laughter]. It's going to be tough.

MB: Well, now, has the import deal gotten worse in the last couple of years?

JN: Sure, it has. Sure, it has. It has just got bad. They were sending shrimp in here frozen, packed up tails, for like twenty-six, thirty tails for like 3.80 a pound. Well, we normally get – the boat gets around \$6 for twenty-six, thirty tails a pound. So, that's like a big difference. It's never been that bad. Like I said, inflation has taken everything else up. So, we shall see.

MB: You've been a fisherman for many, many years. Can you talk a little bit about how you got into it? Then I want to bridge into your son. He's now into it, being a fisherman. It's a proud tradition.

JN: Well, I got out of the Marine Corps in 1980. I spent four years in the Marine Corps, Camp Lejeune, across the river there. I was overseas most of the time, but I got out here, Camp Lejeune. We bought us a 15-foot skiff with a forty Mercury and started fishing. It was a difficult task. There's a lot of good people around here that helped me. If it weren't for that, we would never have made it. My son was born then. He was raised on this river and ocean on these boats, literally. He learned to walk on the boats. I guess the fruits you're fed when you're young are the fruits you eat when you're old. Those were the fruits he was fed. So, he decided to do it. I mean, I'm proud of him doing it. I'd rather him be a fisherman than a politician or some of these [laughter] – a lawyer or something. But I just hope things are – get squared away to where they're not hard for him as it looks like it might be getting.

MB: Mike, are there many other young men or people in the town of Sneads Ferry – which is a real fishing town – who are going into it like your son is? Do you think?

JN: Well, there's a few. There's enough. Jonathan Yopp, he's doing it. He's a good young man, good Christian man. He's doing it. Steven Edens, he's in and out of it. I'm not sure. He was raised in a church and all too. His mother and father are really good people. There's enough in this area. Down in South Carolina, I don't really see too many young people doing it. Most of

their fishermen are thirty-five years up. Up to the north, I see some young people getting involved with it. It takes a special kind of person to do it. You have to be able to get up off your rear end without being told and all that. It's nothing – you've got to have some self-driving. If you don't have any drive, you'll never make it. Most of all, you've got to want to do it. You've got to have a desire to do it. You have to want to. I mean, it's a good living for me. I really enjoy it. I don't really like working on these boats, getting ready to go. But once we're going, I'm very happy and content. It's like pioneering, learning all the time. Every day is a new adventure, which I trip fish. A lot of these men around here are day boats, and that's fine. That's what they like to do, and it's good. I'm a trip person. I enjoy going and staying, for two or three days anyway, or just going up and down the coast at different places or going away offshore, just having a good old time. I mean, it's work, but it's something I love to do. I'm very fortunate and blessed.

MB: So, you wouldn't trade-in the life you've had and continue to have for anything else then.

JN: No. No, I wouldn't. I was meant to do this. I'm convinced the Lord put me here to do this because I love to do it so much. I did not want to come here to start with when I was in the Marine Corps. I made arrangements to not even come here, but the general said I was going [laughter]. So, I came. I cussed all the way going down main street in Camp Lejeune. But I met my wife, and I had my son here. I've been around the world twice before I was eighteen literally. I wouldn't live anywhere else in the world. I'm very happy to live in North Carolina. Thank God that Jesse Helms has been a senator here for so long. He's kept the state old school state. It's one of the best states there is in a country to live in as far as I'm concerned. I hope it stays the way it is. I hope it doesn't change too much, but we'll see. We'll do the best we can.

MB: Well, speaking about change, Mike, what about the town of Sneads Ferry? I mean, you've been here for quite a while. Now, did you grow up in a fishing town?

JN: No, I grew up in Michigan. I'm from Michigan. I was born in Toledo, right down the Michigan-Ohio line. I was raised mainly on farms and stuff. I used to sneak my daddy's boat out and go fishing on Lake Erie quite a bit. I blew up a motor, and the Coast Guard reprimanded me [laughter]. But I just so happened to come here. We used to, on the weekends, put out little nets and stuff on little boats. I mean, what kind of boats they were, they're just little boats. It's just something that I really enjoyed. Then we started making nets. We couldn't really catch enough to sell to a fish house. We had to clean them and carry them on the basin and sell them [laughter]. We didn't catch enough to sell to a fish house, too embarrassed.

MB: So, now, did you teach yourself how to do all this?

JN: Well, a lot of things, we learn by trial and error, the hard way. That's why there's a lot of young men or men my age around here that take for granted what their fathers and grandfathers had taught them. They might have an attitude, a little bit of arrogance maybe, like different ones don't know what they're doing or whatnot, but they were fortunate to have that wisdom inherited to them. But there again, I have had a lot of help from people like Earl House. I don't know if you've ever heard of him. He doesn't fish anymore, but he's a very pleasant person that helped a lot of people around here. Captain Louis Midgett, who doesn't fish anymore, he got hurt bad.

He helped me a lot. There are several men around here that have helped me, looked out for me. But there again, I had to do a lot of pioneering. A little bit hard-headed in the early years and had to learn the hard way in a few things. I hope my son isn't as hard-headed as I was, where he can learn or take the wisdom maybe that I've gotten, going with it to make things easy on him.

MB: I've heard that you're an incredible worker, that you can go twenty-four hours a day, day in, day out –

JN: Well –

MB: – like at Pamlico or whatever.

JN: Yes. But I don't do that anymore. It's not a very wise thing to do. I used to work like that. But I got in a bad accident one time, and it was my fault. The reason why I did it is because I was working too hard, not getting enough rest. I made a bad decision, and I killed a good friend. I try to get at least four hours of sleep at night. Everybody's dealt a different deck of cards. People need different amounts of sleep. Some people need eight or ten hours, some people need two or three or whatnot. I get four, five hours, I'm good. It's always been that way for me and my father, his father too. But I don't advise anyone to work twenty-four hours a day. I don't think it's very good for you, your health, or for the people around you. You might be a little cranky too.

[laughter]

That coffee stuff is just too much. What I'm saying is I don't do that anymore. I used to go at it pretty hard off you. I'll go hard enough now. I had an incident happen last winter where it showed me the light on that. I had it in my mind that I was always going to lie down at 12:00 a.m. 12:00 a.m. came, and I laid down. We were catching shrimp real well. It was in January. It was our first trip of the year. I think we had like \$25,000, where there was a good trip. I laid down at 12:00 a.m., and I slept until 4:00 a.m. I got my four hours. I got up. I felt good. I went back to work. A friend of mine was offshore, [inaudible], and I called him up. I was inside. I found some shrimp. He wasn't at the wheel. He had his crew at the wheel. I asked him was he doing anything? He said no, he didn't have but 40 shrimp. I told him it was a little bit better here where I'm at. I was inshore probably a mile and a half. He never came in there. When we hauled back, he had three or four baskets, and I had like fifteen or eighteen baskets of shrimp. Then when he did get up, I told him that it was better in there. But if he'd gotten some rest, he'd have been at the wheel instead of his crew. Because there's crews and there's captains. A good crew man, a lot of times, isn't a very good captain. A captain has got a lot more responsibility. If that captain would have heard me say that, he'd have his rear end in there with me, I assure you. He'd come right in there. He'd been with me. He'd caught more shrimp. So, he'd been better off just go ahead and rest and get sharp and alert and attentive, and he'd [inaudible] money ahead. So, I'm just going to [inaudible] to that. I'm going to get my – unless I'm making 10-, \$12,000 a day or something, I might push it. I don't know. But if I'm catching so much, I can't sleep or something like that, I guess I'd have to keep working. But I'm getting so much older now. I don't care about money. I just don't care about it. I'm content with what the Lord's blessed us with. I get all my debts paid. I'm satisfied and grateful.

MB: Well, now, what do you think of the future for this town and for commercial fishermen, like on the East Coast or in the United States? Well, how do you think the future is shaping up for people?

JN: I don't know. I feel that Mr. Helms is – we've been fortunate to have a senator like Mr. Helms. As everyone knows, he's going to retire, so I'm not sure about it. I'm not worried about it. I feel that the fishermen would be somehow looked out for. I feel like we'll be all right. But we have a hard time with associations. Our association here right now, we're not doing too well. We had a hard time getting participation in it. A little personal thing would come up, and someone would hold a grudge or some kind of foolishness or – it seems like we just can't get it put aside. There have been three completely different personalities in charge of this association. Three completely different age groups, and it's the same old story. People have negative comments to say. These people have donated their time and effort and have done impeccable jobs. I mean, all three of them work extremely hard. That would be [inaudible], Johnny Wayne Midgett, and Tom Bergess. All three of them have been personally ridiculed [laughter] and personally worked really hard and done an impeccable job. Every time I've heard someone criticize them, I've asked them, "Well, would you be the president?" They would say, "Well, no, I don't have time," but they have time to criticize. But the point being is, if you have strength in numbers and if you can't get people to put their personal stuff away and pull together on issues, it's going to be tough. I mean, I noticed in South Carolina, they're doing a lot better, the south chapter is, South Carolina Shrimpers Association. But they have been regulated so much that there's no more small boats. This boat right here is 58-foot and 50 tons. It's a small boat down there. All their boats are bigger boats, twin motors. The small boats have just been literally regulated out. Now, they have highly professional people, I would say, that are extremely diligent and attentive. They've got sense enough not to ridicule or just negative so much. They're wondering what they can do to help. The wives are getting involved. It's a lot better. I hope it doesn't come to that here to where all these smaller boats are regulated out, because that was how I got to where I'm at. I'm not saying where I'm at is anything. We're small boats really. If you look at the industry as a whole, this is a small vessel. But we had a 15-foot skiff. Then we had a 17-foot skiff. Then we had a 24-foot dory. Then we had a 28-foot boat. Then we had the *Lady Kay*, a 40-foot boat. Then we had this. I hate to see it where the smaller boats were pressured so much that they got unmotivated and quit. Because then there wouldn't be a good understanding of the fisheries as a whole. I think that's important to understand. Just because that fellow is in that little boat, his young ones need to eat too. The Lord loves his young ones just as much as he does ours or yours or anyone's or Donald Trump's or Ross Perot's or anybody's. We're all equally cared for. If you ever were down there in that level – I'm not saying it's down, but I mean just kind of those steps, working your way up, you can appreciate it more. My son learned to walk up the New River. My wife and I and him spent many a day and night up there. I think it's just a shame that it's closed – or they're going to close here on the 15th. These men have been making good money up there. I think they should be allowed to keep working. There's no reason to close it. But it's the regulations. It's just part of the future. It's the trend, I guess.

MB: Do you think regulations are favoring bigger operations more than –

JN: Oh, yes, sure they are.

MB: – smaller ones? Or it's kind of like big farmers versus small farmers. Would that be a good comparison?

JN: The smaller commercial fishermen – I don't want to sound like I'm calling them smaller. I'm just saying with the smaller investment, he doesn't really make the money that it takes to have the time to be attentive at all these meetings and everything and all of this. He makes a living. He goes out diligently and works hard every day and all this and takes care of his family. It's a good thing. This is a good – provides a service for the majority of the nation. He's transferring the resource to them, the consumer and on. It's all part of it. If they ever do get regulated out, we will all be weaker because of it. Because we do have strength in numbers, and that's just less numbers for our strength. But if they're not attentive at these meetings in voicing their opinion on certain issues, I'm afraid, yes, they will be terminated in time. I mean, I hope not. For the most part, they're extremely good people. They get up off their rear ends at night or in the morning and go to work and feed their families.

MB: So, for you, as a fisherman with a family, a lot of your son's first memories were on the boat, right?

JN: Right. My son learned to walk on the *Miss Roxie*. She's not even floating no more. It was up the New River. He was pulling flounder nets into skiffs before he could walk. He was in diapers. He'd see his mother and father be pulling in our flounder nets. That's a testimony that our children don't listen to us, they imitate us. He'd crawl up to the bow. Because he's seen us pulling in the nets, he'd start pulling the nets in. He told me he wasn't going to do this for a living [laughter]. He said it's too hard work, and he can make a lot more money doing something else. I said, "You're exactly right." He sure can, and it is hard work. He went to school for a few years and decided he wanted to do this. I said, "Well, that's fine too. You do what you want to do." Well, I told him offshore, off Cape Lookout one time. We're off there pulling in some trout, and I told him that – boy, he told me how he loved it off there and everything.

[end of transcript]