

Wild Caught  
John Norris Oral History  
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
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Matthew Barr: Well, John, it is kind of a wrap-up from what we have had a number of interviews and just a lot of talk over the years as good friends. How are things going this year? This has been a tough year, I mean, for everybody. What is going on? What is going on in the shrimping – as a fisherman, what are some things that are concerning you with what is going on?

John Norris: Well, really, to start off with, the season was late. We didn't have a good spring season on the pink shrimp. Of course, it seems to have been getting slower each year for the last several years on the pink shrimp, which is our spring season. The expenses are up. Fuel is almost doubled in price. We're still burning the same amount we used to burn or more, probably, sometimes. The price of the shrimp is about like it was ten years ago or even less than it was then. We figured out one day to buy two-fifths of our catch to pay our expenses. The season was late getting started. I didn't go shrimping until June of this year. Usually, I'll start in April, last of March, first of April. Around Easter is normally when we start shrimping. But I didn't even leave the dock until June of this year to start shrimping. It was so sorry. Up to now, it's probably off half of what it was last year. Hopefully that it will get a little better this fall when our fall shrimp starts. I think weather probably plays its part in the amount of shrimp. Of course, as far as the shrimp, I have seen years it was slow in fishing. I don't know if it's been as slow as this year. But still, if we keep working, we're making a little bit, we stay with our head above water anyway. There's a lot to be thankful for, for being able to do that. We're hoping to get some wind and blow a little bit, so it'll stir it up. Maybe it'll help move things. It seems like even with the flounder fishermen in the river, it's been slow with them this year so far. I think clammers are doing pretty good from what I hear them talking.

MB: Some of those people are going up to scallop, like the Davis boys.

JN: I think it's probably two-thirds of the shrimpers are going up there scalloping, going up north. Now, they're doing good from what I hear. Of course, they've still got a lot of expense. They're allowing them to work every day. They're on a limit, but they're getting their limit every day, 400-pound limit or fifty bushels. So, it's a lot better than shrimping right now.

MB: What about all the imports? This has been going on a long time, but it seems like it is like, wow, this big Chinese, all the farm raised. What about all that?

JN: I don't really know how many is being imported. But I think one thing with the imports, the shrimp and fish that get imported in here is like the fast food. All the people got to do is go to the grocery store, pick up a pack of shrimp that's already prepared to cook. All you've got to do is put them in the frying pan. It saves them a lot of preparing. You go to the fish house and buy shrimp, you've got to head them, peel them, wash them, go through that process to get them ready to cook. But if you buy them at the food line, they're ready. All you've got to do is rinse them off, throw them in the cook or frying pan, whichever way you decide to cook them. Fish, the same way, they're already dressed. I think it makes a difference when both the adults in the family are working, the man and woman both. I mean, they're already tired. They don't have to go through the process of preparing food to cook. I think it plays a part in it. They're cheaper, really in the long run. I think that's what's holding our price down. A man I paid out with told me the day I went into his dock up at the Pamlico Sound, he told me – he said, "I buy them already packed, cheaper than I can pack them." But he bought my product anyway or the

shrimp. He was talking about buying the foreign shrimp. I guess he handles right many. But the man's going to go away. He's making the most money, I guess.

MB: But they are not as good.

JN: No. They've got a taste too, farm-raised shrimp. It would maybe be better if we were getting more stuff here. But I don't know what's going to come out of it. Hopefully, there'll be a better season this fall. I guess fishermen always depend on the next day. We'll do better the next day.

MB: Johnny Wayne would tell me, "You just never know what is going to happen out there."

JN: That's it, you don't. I mean, you can go one place today and catch nothing. You go back there tomorrow and do real good. That's fishing, no guarantees.

MB: That is for sure.

JN: [laughter] No guarantees.

MB: Of nothing. How much have you spent on maintaining this boat? Can you talk about it a little bit? People don't realize what is involved here.

JN: I think somewhere around between 11- and \$12,000 I had spent up to June of this year.

MB: Can you say that again?

JN: Up to June of this year, I spent around – between 11- to \$12,000 on repairs. That's the engine repairs, taking the boat out of the water, painting the bottom of it, stuff like that. Some of it, we don't even count our labor. That's not including labor. We do our own labor. So, we save a lot by doing our own work.

MB: But you've got to put the time in.

JN: Yes, you've got to put the time in. It's all time consuming.

MB: So, you are not making money while you're doing that.

JN: Well, you're losing two ways, really. The boat is not working, and you're spending.  
[laughter]

MB: Kind of like making a documentary film, but a documentary film is a whole different – you can see all the tools right around here. What about what is going on with this town? We were talking at lunch. It is going crazy with all those real estate businesses. Suddenly, everybody wants to live here, I guess. Well, what about that? I mean, that's wild.

JN: I don't know what's going to come out of that. I know there's a lot of building going on, real

estate. Everybody's trying to buy up all the land they can buy up and build houses on it. I think what they're looking into is talk about there's going to be a lot of Marines coming in here to Camp Lejeune. They're going to have a lot of troops over here. That's more families for the area. So, they've got to have somewhere to live. That's what a lot of the realtors are looking for, as far as I know. It's just talk or hearsay.

MB: A lot of people have a lot of money where they have a beach in the intercoastal buildings.

JN: They've either got a lot of credit or a lot of money, one or the other.

MB: Huge places.

JN: Yes. A lot of that stuff, I don't keep up with. I just let it go by. If it doesn't concern me, I don't mess with it. [laughter] Of course, I reckon it does concern me, in one sense, look at it a different way.

MB: What we were talking about, with the taxes going up on property taxes, it could be difficult to live here for a regular person.

JN: Oh, yes, it's going to be. It is changing. Our property taxes have already gone up. It's tripled in the past four or five years, or it may be more than that. I really don't even know.

MB: What about this thing? Two or three fish houses for sale in town. That could have a major impact.

JN: It will have. It's going to have a big impact, in fact, when they close up because the commercial boats are going to have a limit. There's already limited dockage anyway. It's going to be more limited then. So, I don't know what's going to be the outcome of that.

MB: The Millises are talking about putting up big condo towers there.

JN: They haven't sold it yet. So, I don't know what's going to go up there. I got a feeling there will be some marinas put in for yachts and stuff like that. Of course, there's a lot of building going on like it is around here. There's going to be some yachts, and they're going to need space for them. We just may have to change our occupation. We may have to do work on yachts. [laughter]

MB: Well, I could be a bartender. If you think about that, what would people do if there was no fishing here? Work at a restaurant? I mean, just in terms of what you can do.

JN: It depends on what you can do. I think there's going to be some fishing that's going to go on. The guys that have got waterfront property do fish, and some of them do. They've got their own dock. They'll be okay. Because they can unload their stuff in a truck and carry it to a dealer somewhere or another and be able to handle it like that. I don't think this place here will be sold for a while. Of course, I guess money talks.

MB: They do say that. Well, you're talking about money like in the millions. Yes.

JN: Well, this place here is worth a lot of money. It's got good access to water. I don't know exactly how much waterfront property it's got, but you can take what it's got here and rearrange it and get a lot of boats in here.

MB: It just seems sad to me. I mean, I felt a lot of sadness in this trip because it is just like there is a whole way of life that could be, in a way, gone.

JN: I don't think it'd be completely gone. I think it's a tradition that's been here almost since time, and it's going to go on some, not as big as it has been probably. I think right now, the ones that hang on will come out of it okay, but there's a lot that's dropping out of it. There's a whole generation right now in just about retirement age. I think there's going to be fewer of the younger ones that get into it.

MB: We were talking about that just at the Riverview. A lot of the young people are not going into it.

JN: No, because they don't see it as a way of life anymore. It's going to be more or less a part-time thing with them, a sports type of deal.

MB: But somehow, ultimately, it will keep going.

JN: It'll survive. I'm sure of that, somewhat.

MB: Here?

JN: Yes. I think a certain part of it will survive. It's not only here. It's all up and down the coast this is happening. South Carolina is doing – places where there used to be fish houses, they're closed. There are no fish houses there anymore. It's just basic dwellings for people to live. So, it's going down. Florida, places there where it used to be shrimp docks where the shrimp boats tied up, there'd be yachts there now. Key West, Florida was one of the biggest places where shrimp boats are docked in Stock Island. I don't think there's any dockage there for shrimp boats anymore in Stock Island. Although they're still shrimping out there in the part of Key West. So, I think it'll be the same thing around here.

MB: It is amazing, since I started filming five years ago, how much everything is different now.

JN: It's changed a lot in the last five years, tremendous. Property is probably going up over 1,000 percent. There's not a whole lot left. I guess there's more than I really think there is left. But there's not much waterfront property left, anyway.

MB: It's amazing if you go up 1,000 percent, suddenly people –

JN: It's going to have more than that.

MB: – discover what happened.

JN: It'll peak out regularly and level off or go downhill or up. I don't know which way it's going to go.

MB: How about you? What are your plans, retirement-wise? Are you ever going to retire?

JN: I'm just going to fall over dead. [laughter] I'm going to go as long as I can. I'll probably change and go to a sailor's boat. I'll probably go to a little boat and pastor the church until they get tired of me, for as long as I can, whatever I have to do to survive as long as it's legal.

MB: You love pastoring the church.

JN: I sure do. I really do. I enjoy it.

MB: You do wonderful work there.

JN: I love fishing.

MB: You've got your wife and your children.

JN: Yes. I've got seven grandchildren, I think seven or eight. I've still got a lot to look forward to. Enjoy the grandchildren.

MB: Well, it is important to be grateful for everything we have and not what we don't have.

JN: That's it. I think if we're grateful for what we've got and we start counting it or start trying to dwell on the negatives, we'll find ourselves going downhill anyway. We need to dwell on the positives and count our blessings.

MB: So, somehow the fisherman will survive just like he always has from the very beginnings of time. I always thought about Jesus and the fisherman, what you were talking about, the Sea of Galilee.

JN: Yes.

MB: I mean this goes way back even before farming.

JN: It goes way back. Yes. We're talking a lot about shrimp and how it's gone down. But Mr. Lonnie Everett, who started this fish house here, I heard him talk about that there were times they couldn't even sell shrimp. I mean, nobody would even buy shrimp. Then when they started selling shrimp, they would boil them and put them in little bags and sell them on the street like selling boiled peanuts, that's how it got started in this area. I've heard about how good in Wilmington is selling them. This is back in, I guess, the late [19]30s and [19]40s, before my time. So, they survived. It's come up from there. So, there'll be something. It seems like it's always had been for fishermen. We'll find a way. We may have to discover new ways, new

methods, new places. Those younger ones that's coming along, they've got to have something to work for. They've got to have a leader somewhere.

MB: Well, that is encouraging. That could be true. I think the story is not just about fishermen. It could be about a lot of things. Because a lot of jobs are getting lost too, not just fishing, but farming, a lot of factory jobs.

JN: How much has the car industry dropped over the years from foreign cars? They've had to learn to deal with that. So, we're going to have to learn to deal with this other stuff with the imports. I don't know how true it is, but it says, statistically, that we only produce about 20 percent of the shrimp we use here in the United States, and with fish. So, I don't know. That's something that's just been – come up in the last few years. People always eat fish.

MB: Well, is there anything else you want to add to this? This has been great.

JN: No. Just keep going and hope for the best. If you ever give up, you had it. [laughter] We are not going to raise no white flag yet.

[end of transcript]