Wild Caught
John Norris Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
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Matthew Barr: Just to start off, what are some things you enjoy about your profession? What are some things you enjoy about being a fisherman?

John Norris: I enjoy all of it. It just changes you. There's a lot of different things to do in fishing. I guess fishing just is exciting anyway. It's an adventure really. Fishing, that's what it's about, I guess. It's just an adventure. Every day is different. It's not the same old. We may go to the same places sometimes, but it's not the same old boring thing. You never know what to expect really. You hope you catch good catch, but not always true. Some days are better than others.

MB: Do you think there's some similarities between fishing and farming?

JN: I think there is. The fact that we plant seeds on the farm, and you don't know if you're going to come up or whether the crop's going to yield. The weather has to do a lot with it. It does the same thing with fishing. Of course, we don't plant new seeds, but we hope the weather will be right, so we have a good season. Too much rain, not enough rain, too cold for too long, too hot, it all plays a part in it.

MB: Okay. I guess in a way, you're hunting the fish or the shrimp, right? Because you don't plant the shrimp, right?

JN: No.

MB: So, I guess that's different in a way. I mean that's one thing that amazes me. How do you know where to look for? You can't just go out and drag a net anywhere. How do you know where to go and all that? I mean, I've been out with you a couple times now. How did you know to go there that time or those times in terms of where you actually decide to try to look for the shrimp?

JN: Well, where we work in, it's just certain areas that we can work. So, we check each area. We figure out how many boats, these boats coming out, and we kind of divide up what area we go into, who's going where. Some say, "I'm going to stop here. Well, I'll go down to the other place and try that." Whoever stops in the best place gets the most fish [laughter]. It sounds kind of silly, but that's the way it is here. But now, in Pamlico Sound, you just work all over the place mostly until you happen to look up on the right spot. Of course, there's other places just like that too. But there's so much rock right here where we work, it's just small areas that we can work.

MB: Now, I think we talked about this, that Buddy Davis – I don't know, were you involved with clearing the rock? Talk about that a little bit about how they – because you don't want to be pulling those big rocks up in the nets, right?

JN: Well, yes, I helped. I probably caught as much rock as he did. But we catch rock all the time out here where the wind moves it or the currents from the wind. It varies. Of course, it's not as bad as it has been. But the areas have widened out some because of the moving of some of it.

MB: So, talk about how you became a fisherman. How did that all transpire?

JN: I really don't know because I worked other jobs during that time.

MB: Actually, can you talk a little bit about some of the different jobs you've done? You mentioned before when we were on the boat that you worked in a plywood factory?

JN: I worked in a plywood factory. Of course, I was a fisherman before then. But let me just start from – we moved here to Sneads Ferry when I was fourteen years old. We had lived on a farm. Daddy started fishing because of his health, and we just fell in there with him; worked with him. Quit school and just started fishing. With working other jobs back in the early [19]60s, I just couldn't make a living working a job because the pay scale was so low. I had to work sixty hours a week to make $100 at the plywood mill when I could make three times that much fishing. $300 then was a lot of money, a week. So, I just became a fisherman. Another job I worked at Albemarle Paper Company for a short while. I just decided one day I was going to fish, make it or break it, whatever. Of course, there's been tough times and been good times too. I believe it was in [19]69, I moved to South Carolina and fished down there for about three years. Then I came back home, started working here.

MB: Well, speaking about here, talk a little bit about Sneads Ferry. I mean, that's going to be a big part of the documentary, is trying to get a sense of a fishing town. Are there a lot of towns like Sneads Ferry around, do you think? Or is this a little bit unique?

JN: Well, there's fishing villages all up and down the coast. You've got Morehead City. There are quite a few fishermen there. You've got Swansboro or some there. They're bigger places than Sneads Ferry. But on up in Pamlico Sound area, you've got more places similar to this. Up on the Outer Banks, I think there's more. But I guess all the fishermen are similar, but there's different things going on in these places too. Tourists are moving in more and more all the time.

MB: Yes. Sneads Ferry isn't a tourist town yet, is it? Or is it becoming that?

JN: I see more tourists because I think there are more tourists. There are more people than what it has been in earlier years. There are more people who live here now too. I would say, of course, the tourist helps our businesses like it does anywhere else. They buy a lot of our product.

MB: So, you were really young when you became a fisherman then.

JN: Yes.

MB: I mean, how old were you? Talk a little bit about that.

JN: Well, I started fishing when we moved here when I was fourteen years old in 1957. I believe it was the year we moved here. Right away, I stopped – then I'd done a lot of oystering in the wintertime after school. Summertime, I'd get on other boats, work with somebody else. I worked around the fish house some, whatever. There was never one on one specific boat or – just whoever needed somebody to go with down to that – blackfish, we used to blackfish a lot.

Sea bass offshore, it was just whatever was going at the time. But now, we're more or less confined to that one thing, or I am. Not really confined to it, but depend more on the one thing, shrimping now.

MB: Why is that?

JN: Well, it has to do with my equipment. It has to do with some of the laws they're making. Our shrimp – I think our shrimp seasons last longer now than what they used to.

MB: So, are the shrimp in pretty good supply for what you and (Z?) gather?

JN: They seem to be. Seems like we're having a pretty good year this year. Last year, we had a good year. Year before, we had a pretty good year. Of course, it varies even when it's good. I guess our equipment now has a lot to do with it too.

MB: So, when you go out shrimping, what do you actually do out there? Maybe take us through as if you were telling somebody who knew nothing about it, which we can assume the audience really is –I mean, honestly, me, before I started getting into this, I was reading some books about fishing. I'm just beginning to understand. But take us through, if you're going to do like a typical thing like you do around here, what time do you get to the fish house to take off? I mean, just take us through a little bit about – almost like you're narrating what we might see of what you're doing. Usually, like, what time do you get to the fish house to take off? Usually get there, what, around midnight or 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m.?

JN: Normally, it's about anywhere from between 2:30, 3:00 a.m. I usually, normally, will get up about 2:30 a.m. Sometimes, I have to go get my crew then I go to the boat. It usually takes fifteen to twenty minutes, maybe have a cup of coffee, and then we shove off. It takes anywhere from hour to hour and forty-five minutes, two hours to get to where we're going to work, depending on where we're going to work. Then sometimes, we may shrimp for two hours, and that's all we'll catch. Sometimes, we may stay all day. It varies from day to day.

MB: To actually catch the shrimp, well, what do you actually do? Take us through in terms of, okay, once you select where you're going to fish, then what do you do? Then what happens in terms of the nets and the whole procedure for how you do this stuff? If you could just kind of take us through a little bit about, in other words, how you have to drop the boom arm, the – what do you call the –

JN: Outriggers.

MB: The outriggers.

[laughter]

All right. So, if you could just take us through that. Not that we're doing a technical film about how to become a fisherman.

JN: I understand what you're saying. If I can get it in the right order. When we leave the fish house, we – when we go down the river, we put our outriggers down there before we get to the ocean. Some put their nets out on the outriggers or the doors at that time. But I don't. I'm a little bit different, I guess. When I get in the ocean where I'm going to work, I put my doors and nets out on the outriggers. Most time, we'll wait around until it starts breaking day and put our nets down on the bottom. We'd have decided where we're going to work. We'd drag our trinet, check it, see what we're catching, about how many we're catching, what kind of trash we're catching. Usually, pull the trinet about fifteen minutes. Our big nets, we'll pull from an hour to two hours depending on the kind of trash we're catching. When I say trash, I'm talking about seaweed or maybe small fish that we catch. Try not to catch too many of them and try to preserve as much as we can. After a time of dragging our nets on the bottom, we haul them back, dump our tail bags, and keep what shrimp we got. Pick out the good fish, keep them. Sometimes, maybe wait one drag, sometimes two, three drags, and then we return home. Just reverse the process.

MB: Right. Well, now the dragging – because that's an interesting experience to be in when you're dragging. I mean, basically you're really slowly pulling the net along.

JN: Well, normally, our towing speed is from about 2.5 knots to 3 knots, is about our towing speed normally.

MB: So, how long would a typical drag take actually? To me, it was kind of like being on a tractor on a farm. We were very slowly driving along. It's almost hypnotic after a while because you just slowly –

JN: Well, normally, we'd drag from an hour to two hours. Like I said, it depends on what we're catching in the trinet. That determines the length of our towing time. Sometimes the length of the bottom or the area that we were working in, we had to turn around in these areas. So, it varies. Sometimes, in Pamlico Sound or – well, not especially Pamlico Sound, but whenever we're working up towards Morehead where it's a little bit cleaner area, we can drag as much as three hours.

MB: Then once you're ready to pull them in, then take us through what happens then. Or could you also describe what the doors do?

JN: The doors are just wooden boards with iron on the bottom of them to keep them balanced and make them sink. What they do is open the mouth of the net, spread the nets open, and hold them open. The nets are funnel shaped, and it forces everything down in the tail bag. Really hard to imagine if you've never seen it.

MB: We have lots of shots of doors [laughter]. They're kind of hefty too, aren't they?

JN: Yes. They were varying in weight, from probably 150 to 250 pounds, depending on the size. My doors are 7 feet long, 40 inches high.

MB: Do you build the doors yourself?

JN: Yes. Sometimes, I buy them; sometimes, I build them.

MB: Which kind of brings me, as a fisherman, you have to be able to know how to do a lot of things, right?

JN: Yes.

MB: Can you talk a little about that?

JN: Yes. Well, all that rigging in that boat, I built it. I weld. I do mechanic work. I mend nets. I do carpenter work on the boat. Whatever needs to be done, I do it [laughter]. It doesn't matter what it is. Except, well, I don't work on electronics. I don't have that kind of equipment. I'm not smart enough for that either. I don't reckon [laughter].

MB: Well, I don't know who is smart enough. They just get a new one.

JN: That's it. That's the way it is now. Replace it.

MB: So, you know how to rebuild engines?

JN: Yes.

MB: How'd you learn how to do those different things? On a farm?

JN: No, through experience. If it quits, I try to figure out what makes it quit. If I've got to call a mechanic, it'll be here two weeks getting here to work on it. I can't afford to be down that long during the season.

MB: So, you have to make the money while it's – talk about that. I mean, in other words, you can't work year-round at the [inaudible].

JN: Not right here in this area, no. When it's there, you've got to go get it. That's like the farmer. When the harvest is ready, you've got to get it. I mean, you've got to bring it in. Our season starts about April with spotted shrimp or pink shrimp. It's usually a short season on them, which the last two or three years, we've had a minimum amount of spotted shrimp. Then the brown shrimp will run from, usually, the middle of June to about the middle of August or 1st of August. It'll kind of play out. Then the big brown shrimp will show up probably in September. We'll have a run of big brown shrimp. Then our white shrimp, they'll kind of mix in with them, and we'll finish the season out on them. Sometimes, it may cut off around Thanksgiving or – like last year, it may go right onto January, which last year was unusual. Never shrimped in January before.

MB: So, then in terms of doing all the repair work then, that would occur when? In other words, when do you pull a boat out and go through all the equipment?

JN: I usually take the boat out about March. It's about the best time to take it out. The weather's

kind of getting warmed up and gives the boat a chance to dry out in the sun. So, we can paint it and do that. Other stuff is just regular maintenance. Woodwork, we had to replace some wood on them sometimes, if you've got a wood boat, paint them. The net, mainly we usually try to get that done before the season starts, which sometimes, we build new nets during the season or have them built.

MB: I imagine those nets are pretty expensive, aren't they?

JN: Yes. I just bought four of those though. I'm trying to think what we paid for the nets. Well, putting new tail bases on. So, that's, I believe about $700 a piece is what they cost me. I said those doors cost around $1,200 for four doors. Cables, we had to replace our tooling cables about once a year.

MB: So, there's a lot of expenses involved. You have to rebuild the engine. How often do you have to do that? Seems like a pretty tough engine.

JN: Normally, a rebuild job will last from seven to eight years. Of course, if it's mechanical, it could go anytime.

MB: Now, you're the captain, right?

JN: Right.

MB: Talk about how you became a captain. How does that work?

JN: [laughter]

MB: It's not like the coast guy.

JN: No. It's –

MB: – it's a different process. But talk about that. That was kind of interesting to think about.

JN: Well, as I told you a while ago, when I went to South Carolina, I didn't have a boat. So, I went down there and went to work on a boat. I worked on it about two years, and the guy I was working for decided to sell it. So, he gave me first choice, and I bought it. I kept that boat about three years. Of course, when I bought it, they made me captain on it. I don't have any captaining license as far as license. Then I sold that one, and I bought a bigger boat. Of course, the boat I got now, there's a partnership deal on that. I don't know if Tommy and them – I didn't, but Tommy and them may have told you we owned a boat together. It's a partnership. It makes it a little better. If I have a major breakdown, they help me out, and it makes it a lot better. Takes some of the responsibilities off me as far as keeping things going. I could probably make about as much bringing home money just running one for somebody else, not even owning it.

MB: It's good to have that partnership to share all the costs.

JN: Yes, because they never bother me. They never tell me when to leave or when to come back or where to go. Of course, if they hear somebody making a good catch somewhere, they'll tell me. They're really good to work with. Of course, I've been working with these – I even worked with their daddy thirty-five years or more, selling my stuff right there to them all these years.

MB: Pretty amazing to think back. So, you've been a fisherman for about forty years?

JN: At least.

MB: Just think how much seafood you brought in.

JN: [laughter]

MB: Thousands of pounds of shrimp.

JN: Yes.

MB: Does that make you feel good in terms of providing all that food for people?

JN: Oh, yes. Yes. Of course, I fished some up north. I flounder fished up there. I did good up there at that. But the laws now are so restrictive that I just quit going up there fishing. Just like I said, well I'm going to mainly stick with shrimping. Or sometimes in the wintertime, I'll pick up a job. Maybe somebody wants the engine overhauled, or some rigging built, wants me to do some welding, things like that during the off season.

MB: So, you stay busy with this stuff all year round then?

JN: Oh, yes. Payments don't stop, so I can't stop [laughter]. Or bills.

MB: That's true. They don't stop, do they?

JN: No.

MB: Even for Christmas, they get bigger after Christmas.

JN: They don't with me. I don't Christmas shop.

MB: You don't?

JN: No. That's what women do.

[laughter]

MB: You leave that to your wife.

JN: Sure do.

MB: Well, talk about your wife a little bit. Let's see.

JN: She's mean. [laughter]

MB: How'd you meet her? Did you meet her in town here, or was she a local girl?

JN: I was hitchhiking. She picked me up.

[laughter]

Basically, that's the way I met her.

MB: Seriously? You were hitchhiking?

JN: I wasn't really hitchhiking, but I was walking. I was in the Navy, and I came home. I had hitchhiked from Norfolk home. She was dating a friend of mine, and they stopped and picked me up. That's how I really met her, first time I ever saw her. I probably didn't see her again for over – it was over a year before I saw her anymore. In fact, I think the next time I saw her was the day I got discharged. Because I got discharged that morning and I got home that afternoon from Norfolk. It wasn't about five hours. But she invited me to go to church with her that night. So, I went to church with her. We dated for a short while. I left, was gone for about another year. I went to Florida for a while, fished down there, came home, and started dating her again. So, we ended up getting married, been married for thirty-four years.

MB: Talk about your children a little bit.

JN: Well, Evelyn is my oldest. She's married, got four kids of her own now. I put her through high school and couldn't get her to go to college. She got married just before she graduated. Her husband graduated. He works at a lumberyard. Of course, he's worked other jobs too. I think that's about the second job he's had. Then we had one child, our second child, Marie. She passed away at thirteen months. Samantha came along, then Liston. Liston is a commercial fisherman. I couldn't get him to finish school. So, I guess he's going to end up commercial fishing all his life if they let him. That's basically it about the kids. They're good kids. They're not causing me a lot of problems, just being kids.

MB: [laughter]

JN: They weren't bad as I was.

MB: Were you bad?

JN: No, not really. I don't reckon I was. About five years ago, I started pastoring a church. So, I've got two jobs.

MB: Tell us about how that call came about. That's a very important part of the story. We'll be

filming that tomorrow. It's a very interesting combination of being a fisherman and a pastor.

JN: Well, basically, the reason I was going to church is because of my wife. Of course, I went to church when I was a kid too. But I'd always wanted a Christian home. I came from a broken home. I won't talk about that [laughter]. I mean, it doesn't bother me that much, but I don't think it's that important. But anyway, I'd always wanted a Christian home, raise my kids in a Christian home where there was not any drinking or arguing and stuff like that. I don't know. I started teaching Sunday school, and it led from one thing to the other. The church that I've gone to since I've been married for thirty years, I ended up pastoring it. I got my minister's license in – well, what year? I got it back in the [19]80s. Of course, I had filled in for the pastor over the years as I taught Sunday school. When he couldn't be there, I would be there to take his place. It's just the way it worked out. I didn't ask to be pastor. When our pastor quit, we were looking for a pastor, and the church voted me and wanted me to be pastor. So, I told them I would until they got tired of me [laughter]. Of course, I love my people at the church because I try – I love all people. I really do.

MB: One thing that struck me when I attended the service last Sunday was that you brought in some stories or examples from your experiences at sea, maybe in the Navy or maybe as a fisherman. I liked that because it made it kind of clear in a way. So, do you sometimes find, when you're out there, that you may be thinking about what you may be wanting to talk about on Sunday?

JN: I say things I done have experiences that lead up to some of my messages, some things that happen and some things I go back in life with. Of course, out in the ocean, you do a lot of thinking out there when it's quiet. Quite a bit, of course, Jesus used things like that too. He used fishermen. He used farmers. He used all kinds of things when he was teaching.

MB: Okay. Well, talk about that. What was it like growing up on a farm? You did everything by hand, you were saying?

JN: Yes. We were tobacco farmers, and we had to set the tobacco plants by hand. We had to do all our plowing but with a mule, or just about all of it, very little tractor. Of course, my grandfather, he was an old timer. He believed in doing it the hard way I guess. But we didn't have the weed killers and stuff then in the [19]50s that – it made me sound old [laughter]. Somehow, I come from the Stone Age, but –

MB: [19]50s? I was around in the [19]50s.

JN: The grasses, we had to take it out and get it out by hoe or pull out by our hands and stuff like that. Or harvested the tobacco, we did it by hand, very few riding harvesters. But they still had to crop the tobacco by hand to ride on the harvesters. But the flower farm that we lived on for a while was basically the same way, did it all by hand. Had to get up early in the morning, and you had to take care of the seeds and process them for flower. Gladiolus, we used all the bulbs for them. But basically, mostly, I remember about the tobacco farming. To get the tobacco ready for the market, you had to grade it, sort it out, three or four different grades. You had to bundle it up in this grade and put this grade together, that grade. Of course, now, it's sold

on sheets from what I understand, tied up in sheets and carried to the market. It's all one grade now. Because I've not been on a farm in a long time. But that's basically it with the farming that I remember.

MB: Well, you look in very good shape. You've been doing physical labor.

JN: Pretty much so.

MB: I think in our country or our culture or probably around the world, I just hear people don't give enough respect for working people, people who work by real work. Because having been on the boats a few times now, that's real work. But it's not something you can do. You've got to pay attention too. Otherwise, you can –

JN: It's dangerous work. It's like any other kind of job. It's got its bad part. So, you need to be as safety conscious as you can be. When I worked in a plywood mill, we had very dangerous machines in there. If you weren't on the ball, you'd get caught on one of those machines just like you can on the boat. You get caught in the winch, or the line gets around your leg, drag you overboard, stuff like that, get tangled up in the net. Of course, I've never had a man go overboard yet.

MB: But you were talking about how you make sure the doors aren't hanging there, right?

JN: Yes. I thank the Navy for that because they made me a lot more safety conscious, I think, than what I would've been. They preach safety in you pretty much. Of course, that's been a long time ago too. Thirty-seven years ago, I got out of the Navy, but I still remember a lot of it.

MB: So, what'd you do in the Navy?

JN: I was a bosuns mate.

MB: Talk about what a bosun does or a bosuns mate did.

JN: We did a lot of ship maintenance, had to do with running the ship, line handling, refueling, bringing on stores or supplies, stuff like that, painting, cleaning. Of course, everybody's in there is part of cleaning, I guess.

MB: Did you enjoy being in the Navy?

JN: Yes. Great experiences.

MB: Did you get to travel some places?

JN: Oh, yes, probably more than what I would have in other countries.

MB: Where'd you go?

JN: Mostly, we went to the Caribbean, the islands down there. I never went to [inaudible] or a place like that. We've been in Puerto Rico, Jamaica, St. Thomas, Cuba. I don't know if I even know what the places are now. Canada, Nova Scotia, Bermuda, that's about all I can think of right now, places we went.

MB: Sounds pretty good. So, you really spent a good part of your life out at sea?

JN: Yes. I've probably spent half my life at sea.

MB: I want to get back to why that's so alluring. What is it? There's something about it. Because I feel it too when I –

JN: [laughter]

MB: – get out there. So, I feel kind of more calm for some reason. I don't know why. Maybe it's something about being out there in the ocean. But it takes away some of all my worries or whatever. I don't know. Can you talk a little bit about that? I mean, what does it do when you leave? Just actually leaving the dock is kind of neat. I noticed that with Mogie and Richard. They're all looking out, and they've done this a thousand times.

JN: It's always a new experience for some – I can't explain it, but it seems to always be a new experience. So, I don't know, relaxing experience or – seemed like we – especially to get out in the ocean at night. I don't know why at night, but it seemed like you get out there at night, and the ocean is real calm. It can be real calm, or it can be real bad. It's like anything else. But I remember one experience I probably will ever forget. I was running a boat up north for some other people, and we were working twenty-four hours a day. I was steering that night. So, of course, put it on automatic pilot. I just stepped out on the bow of the boat and took that time for my prayer time. It just seemed like I was just taken right away, seemed like the presence of the Lord was just right there. It's something I can't explain, how I felt at that one experience. But it's just a great experience. I think everybody will try it sometime, go in the ocean. Bad to get seasick. Of course, I've been seasick too. That's not a good experience. But I got over that some years ago. When I was younger, I'd get seasick just about every time I went in the ocean. But I get it. My system got used to it or whatever. But I don't know, I guess it gets in your blood, and you can't get it out.

MB: Okay. What about that, in terms of the blood thing now? Because everybody's been talking about that. Does it get in the blood? I mean, this is more than just a job.

JN: I think it does. I guess it gets to be a part of you. Like the boat, it's not just a piece of wood floating. There is a special attachment there. I know that the other boat I had, the *Cape Romain*, when I sold it – well, in fact, both of those boats – the first boat's name was (*Herman Dean*?). I came home and told my wife I was going to sell it. She didn't talk to me for three days. It upset her so bad. It became a part of us, a part of the family almost. I think she got more attached than I did too to the *Cape Romain*. When I sold it, it was the same thing. I mean, I guess it was like getting rid of a pet that you had around a while. The people I sold it to, took the boat down to Florida, the *Cape Romain*, kept it down there for a couple years, and they brought it back here.

She came home one day, and she was crying – Dorothy, my wife. I said, "What in the world's the matter with you?" She said, "You ought to go see what they have done to that boat." She was upset. They hadn't painted. They hadn't taken care of it. She was really upset. But a boat becomes, I guess, a part of your family. I don't know any other way to say it or put it. You baby them along. You paint them. You take care of them. It was different from our house. We lived in our other trailer for twenty-seven years, and it bothered us to get rid of it. We got excited about getting a new one. But it was different when I let those boats go. But I wanted to step up and do better, get a new one. The fishing part, I imagine it's something like farming. It just becomes a part of you. It's just a way of life, I guess. I reckon some things you can't explain.

MB: So, it's going to be a different thing every time out there.

JN: It's just a different experience, seems like, from day to day. Of course, I know we go through probably about the same routine, but it is just a little bit different, a little bit more exciting or something. Monday won't be like today was. Tuesday won't be like Monday. It'd be different. I may work a different place, or I may work the same place. But it'll still be different.

MB: One thing I noticed is that going out at 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. and you're going out to the ocean, and you're shining that big old searchlight out there along the banks, everything takes on a whole different look at night.

JN: Yes.

MB: It's like suddenly, it looks mysterious. Those trees there on some of those banks, it changes very much from the way it might look during the day. It's a night world out there. It's different. I mean, kind of makes it seem almost mysterious in a way, going out at night and the lights of the boats behind or – I don't know. Again, I guess that sense of, it's almost a spiritual thing sometimes that I feel sometimes out there.

JN: You can experience some spiritual experiences out there. I believe I told you other day, I kind of compare the ocean to life. One day, it can be everything calm and going good. Then the next day, everything's upside down, almost turned over, get rough bad. I think about the roughest experience as far as rough water fishing, I left Oregon Inlet one morning. The weather was pretty calm. But of course, we were given bad weather reports. So, me and a buddy of mine, we decided we were coming home. We started to cross Pamlico Sound, and as the day wore on, the wind began to breeze up. That night by 10:00 p.m., we were in almost hurricane full swing, coming across Pamlico Sound. It was rough. I'm talking about bad. We were over one wave and under one. Of course, the Sound is shallow. The sea gets close together. I think that's about the roughest experience I've been in the ocean when it was 50-, 60-mile-an-hour winds. But the seas are different. They're further apart. Of course, it still gets rough, but that Pamlico Sound experience is about the roughest one, I think. The water was about 6 or 8 inches deep in the wheelhouse where it came in around the windows and the doors.

MB: Did you worry about making it through that?

JN: I guess I worried. I was concerned anyway. When you think about it, you take a pretty

good beating in a boat like that when it's that rough. You never know what can happen.

MB: Because you have to be going down to the engine room and making sure everything is –

JN: Oh, yes.

MB: The pumps are pumping and everything. Can you talk about that?

JN: You've got to keep constant checking stuff, making sure the pumps are working. Of course, a boat can sink in calm weather. You may hit something in the water, a wood boat, or the electrolysis eat the nails up in it, and the board come off. But we got bridge alarms and stuff like that now hooked up. If it gets water in, it'd let us know. We usually carry two or three pumps. But like I said, we had to constantly keep in check. I don't depend on the bridge alarms too much. I'd rather look and see [laughter].

MB: I mean, everybody I've talked to have had some pretty –

JN: If you go to sea enough, you'll get caught in some rough weather. I mean, even if you pick the pretty times to go or the good times to go, it may get rough before you get back. The ocean can change in minutes. I mean, it can go from dead calm to 30-knot winds in just a few minutes. I've seen it do it. These summer squalls that we have, thunderstorms, winds can get up pretty high in then sometimes. Of course, I guess you see it on the land too. In fact, I know you do because we see it here.

MB: But you're on land [laughter].

JN: Yes. It's different.

MB: [inaudible] [laughter]. It's different. You're not in a boat. Well, like what happened when we were going out the other night, that boat got caught up on – it was just like instantaneously, could have been a bad thing. What if that was us? Were we next in line there?

JN: Oh, yes. I was first to start [laughter] –

MB: We were?

JN: Yes. We were first going down there. Then I said, "No, I think I'll let one of the other boys go first." That boat doesn't draw as much water. Because I didn't really know what the inlet was like, and it was shallow. But that inlet there that we go out in and out of, it can change in two days. I mean, it'd be totally different. You wouldn't think that the shores can change like they do. But they do that. Sand will shift around, especially if we have a wind today, 30-, 40-knot winds out of the northeast or the southwest or anywhere out of the southern really. It'll wash that sand in there and bank it up in places. If we get out the next day, we may run aground right on the inlet. Oh, mostly small inlets are like that. They shift around pretty much. Or there may not be any wind. It just could be wind offshore and send a big ground swell in here. Still, it'd be dangerous then.

MB: So, if a wood boat got caught, like that was, it could have been a serious situation.

JN: Yes, it could have. Really could. Mostly what happens when in the inlets, if a wood boat gets aground, it'd knock the keel through the boat and break it up. These boats are heavy. My boat weighs – I believe it's about 54 tons.

MB: Well, that is heavy. That's about 108,000 pounds.

JN: I can tell you, that much weight, where that swell lifts it up and then all of a sudden it just drops, it's just like you pick it up and turn it loose. That sand's hard when it hits it like that. Even at a 6- or 7-foot drop, that much weight is really a bad lift.

MB: Gives you kind of a respect for Mother Nature, doesn't it?

JN: Oh, yes. Yes.

MB: Well, I think people like commercial fishermen or farmers and other people are much more aware of forces in nature. I think in our modern world today, a lot of people are very much removed from nature in a way. They don't even know where the food comes from. We could go on about all that, but – all the electronics and all that stuff is great, but it kind of removes us from our basic realities of food and life and physical, the power of nature. But you're very much connected with the physical world.

JN: Yes. What we provide for the food though is something that was put there by nature. God created it, and now, you've been forced to use it. But use it wisely because I guess some people don't. But if we don't, we'll deplete it. It'll all be gone. I think a lot of people don't understand nature, the way it works. I don't know if this fits into this or not, but we were getting ready for a hurricane. I don't remember which one it was. It was one of the recent hurricanes we've had. There was a man came down to the fish house. They'd moved everything out and the business was closed. Really, we were just tying stuff down. He wanted to know what was going on. I said, "We're getting ready for a hurricane." He said, "Well, I want to buy some fish." I said, "We haven't got nothing." Because we hadn't worked in a day or so anyway. But he said that he was staying over at the beach. I said, "Man, you can't stay over there." He said, "Why?" I said, "Well, we're going to have a hurricane here in just a matter of hours." He didn't know nothing about no hurricane. I don't know where he was from, said he had never been in a hurricane, and he was going to stay on the beach. But I don't think he stayed. I think they made them all leave. But a lot of people don't – they've never been in anything like that. They don't know. That's all. Maybe like I was. I remember when I was just a kid, and we would come down here to the beach before we moved down here. I'd say, "I never want to go in the ocean." I said it many times. I remember saying it. Now, I think, well, look where you ended up [laughter].

MB: You spent most of your life out there.

JN: I spent most of my life out there or a big portion of it and love it. I really do.

MB: Well talk about why you love it.

JN: That's a good question.

MB: So, why do you love it? What is it about it?

JN: I guess the adventure. I don't know any other way to put it. It is an adventure.

MB: Well, now, talk about working with your brothers there, Mogie and Richard. That's kind of neat. We tried to get lots of footage of you guys working together. You all make a great team, and you all get along real good. It's kind of neat to work with your brothers. I wish I could work with my brothers. I certainly couldn't do anything on the computer.

JN: [laughter]

MB: But I wouldn't know what he was doing. But what about that?

JN: Well, we get along good. I can say we more or less worked together most of our lives, especially Richard. Richard has worked with me since he was just a kid. He's forty-three. I'm eighteen years older than him. I'll soon be fifty-eight. But they've not always worked with me. Last year, Mogie was running a boat for somebody else part of the time. But we've been to Florida together and worked down there. South Carolina, worked down there. We fished up north together. Boy, we had a lot of fun together fishing. They helped me do a lot of work on the boat.

MB: So, they too know a lot about all the different things about –

JN: Oh, yes. Yes.

MB: Well, how about the future of all this stuff? How's it looking, do you think? Well, your son will become one, Liston. How's the future looking in terms of things like regulations and all that business? We haven't really touched on that too much. But are the regulations getting –

JN: Well, they're getting more strict. I don't think they're doing enough research on a lot of the regulations they're making. I think it should be researched more before they make a regulation. I think it should be more of experienced people making the regulations than what they are. They go get people that don't know anything at all about fishing and regulating. Of course, I think they do a lot of things. I don't think I'd be very good making regulations on politics or politicians because I don't know anything about them. I don't think we need politicians making regulations on us. But of course, politics isn't about anything you get in.

MB: So, do you have an optimistic view, in other words, the future of – talk about Sneads Ferry, is this a way of life?

JN: It will be for some. I think as far as the manual labor is going, people are getting away from that quite a bit. I see the younger people don't want to do the manual labor. Most of them want

to sit around computers, I guess, take it easy [laughter]. Of course, that's great if they can do it. I mean, if you can make a living out of it, fine. I don't doubt nobody trying to get at it easy. But I'd say our job is a lot easier now than what it used to be too, as far as fishing. There's been a lot of stress taken out of it. We had the new equipment. When I was first running boats, I only had a compass and a radio. I didn't have no little – nothing telling me what course to run, how long it'd take me to get there like I do now. The GPS, I can just about pinpoint when I can get to a place. But it was just run by a company, set me a course, and figured my time. Of course, I got pretty good at it, I guess. But I never got lost. Always come back [laughter].

MB: Well, of course, if the computers don't work, you can have some people who are totally dependent on the computer, and then they [laughter] wouldn't know how to get back if they didn't know the old system.

JN: They may not know [laughter].

MB: I mean, you're a captain, but you have a lifetime of experience to back that up.

JN: Yes.

MB: I guess that's how somebody becomes a captain. They know enough to – you talked about fishing as a professional. Why is it that people do sometimes have these wacko ideas, stereotypical ideas, sometimes negative stereotypes about fishermen? I mean, part of the purpose of the documentary is to show – I'm not making propaganda here, but I want to do a very positive thing that has all respect for – because I think it's a very noble profession. I felt the same way about carnis. Not just because I was one, but I felt that the carnis had gotten a bad end. They were far better than what people thought. The carnies had some things that – they had a sense of community. You guys do too, right? Don't you all?

JN: Yes.

MB: I mean, when all that was going on with that boat out there, everybody was on the radio, right? Talk about that a little bit. In other words, the fishermen, if they're seeing somebody in trouble, they're not going to watch it, right? They're not going to wait for the highway fish patrol or –

JN: You may not get rescued if you did. But as far as helping each other, they're get good at it. We kind of help each other out, look out for each other. Of course, if anybody's in trouble, we'll get anybody. It doesn't matter whether a fishermen or sport fisher. We save a lot of our sport fishermen if one gets in trouble. In fact, I've rescued several sport fishermen. I rescue them [inaudible] break down or – I picked a guy up last year. His boat had turned over. Kept him on the boat with me until somebody could come get him. I couldn't get in right then. I just stayed there with him, with his boat until help came. I got a swimmer off one of the buoys in the inlet one time that was near – he said he wouldn't be there. He'd have drowned if he'd been there a few more minutes because he couldn't hold on much longer. So, it is not just the fishermen. We're willing to help anybody. But we're pretty much a community. We pretty well stick together. I guess that's what you were looking for.

MB: Yes. How about the town itself? Is the town of Sneads Ferry –

JN: Well, I'd say we're kind of clannish [laughter]. I don't know if it's as much as it used to be or not, but I think the fishermen are. If you bother one fisherman, you bother them all. If Marine whips one fisherman, he's got to whoop two [laughter]. Of course, it'd been a long time for me with that too. I had to stay home.

MB: So, you think the future will be more mechanized, and the young people don't want to work and do that?

JN: It's not that they don't work, I don't think. Now, some of them don't. Of course, some of my generation didn't either. They got better jobs or easier jobs. I think that's what they're looking for now, maybe where they don't know have to work as hard and that. I don't blame them. I would too, I guess. But the guys that fish for a living and really want to fish, they put up with it. What you really need to see – I don't know if you've been with anybody, they use a pair of oyster tongs and clam tongs. You need to get somebody to take you out there and show you.

MB: The tongs? I got the rake with –

JN: The long rake?

MB: Yes. That looked like pure labor.

JN: [laughter] The tongs are too.

MB: I bet.

JN: I had to hang them up because of my shoulders.

MB: You used to do that?

JN: Yes. I did ten, twelve hours a day. Time passed, I have caught 60, 70 bushels of oysters in one day with a pair of tongs.

MB: Well, that is not exactly modern technology.

[laughter]

That's one of the amazing things about fishing. It's so ancient in a way.

JN: Some of it really is.

MB: But even like –

JN: We have gotten away from the oars and the sails [laughter].

MB: But if it weren't for that, how different would it be? You'd be dragging a net? Even the winches, they're motorized. They look like right out of the nineteenth century, you know, clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk.

JN: We run those winches a long time. That winch on my boat's about twenty-five years old. But I keep rebuilding it over. It rattles, but most of them do.

MB: I have a lot of respect for it. I try to stay away from it.

JN: It will hurt you.

MB: So, it is a dangerous job. There's no question.

JN: It is, yes. It is not as bad as the Alaskan crabbers. But did you ever see that documentary? They can have it. I wouldn't even think about working. Our rough weather is pretty compared to theirs, from my experience, my fishing.

MB: But getting back to, why do you think it is people don't have a lot of – let's put it this way, should have more respect. But it's highly complex. All the tides, the currents, the moon position, there's a lot to it. Talk a little bit about that then we should probably wrap up pretty soon.

JN: I think it's a sense of understanding. I don't think they understand really what we're doing and what it's about. I think you got people that's against anything or everything. If it's not their way or not what they like, then they don't want anybody doing it. That's my thought. But fishing, some people have got the understanding we're just out there killing everything, destroying everything. But we're not doing it. We're pretty preservative. I realized that we kill some stuff as far as fish, but we don't destroy everything that we come in contact with as some people think. You can kind of look at that like the loggers or the lumber people, where they're just killing the whole forest. They could. But if they preserve it and conserve things, like they should, the forest will be there, same with the fishing. If we kind of look after it, it'll be fishing as long as we're here. I think it's just a misunderstanding mostly. There's a lot of bad propaganda, I think, going out about it.

MB: But it's provided a good living for you –

JN: Yes, it has.

MB: – and your family. You've raised kids. Are you glad that Liston has become a fisherman?

JN: In some ways, I am. Of course, he'll keep the tradition going, maybe. But I was hoping he wouldn't have to work as hard as I have. That's what I think too. If I could then I probably could give him something to eat. But that'd be about it. I'd like to fish where he wouldn't have to work as hard because I know what it's like. Of course, he enjoys it. I guess he's got it in his blood [laughter] like cancer, [laughter] can't get it out. Of course, he would go with me when he was

little. Days it was real cold, he'd be out there with me. I mean, when he was just three, four years old, been out in the rain with me, summertime with me. I guess I brought him up that way. I tried to make him sick of it, but it didn't work. [laughter]

MB: Well, he looks pretty strong.

JN: He is.

MB: So, there's a bunch of young guys in town here who are going to go into it or are into it.

JN: A lot of young ones are, sure are.

MB: Yes. There are not necessarily a lot of jobs where young guys who don't have a lot of education actually make a halfway decent living. I mean otherwise, what kind of jobs are there for them? They're not a lot necessarily anymore.

JN: Well, in today's world, and it was pretty much so when I would go look for a job, first question they asked you, "Did you finish high school?" It's hard to get a job if you didn't. Mostly, what I had going for me is that I had been in service. That helped a whole lot. Because when I was looking for jobs, Vietnam was opening up. A lot of young people were going to Vietnam, and it was leaving some job openings then. But it's different now. I think that as time goes on, it'll be much more different. It'd be where you just about have a college degree. If you get a good paying job, you do it, unless you know somebody. If you know the right people, you can get a job. But if you ever tell them – around here, I've been in places that I needed a job. "What'd you do before you came here?" "Well, I commercial fished." "We don't want you." I've been told that a lot of times. Why? Because they said the first mullet jumps, you'll be gone [laughter]. That's the way they looked at it, and probably it was so. My last job that I had, a public job, was Albemarle Paper Company. But I got up that morning, my wife was pregnant with Evelyn, our first baby, and I had a flat tire on my car. I jacked the car up, and that old bumper jack, as most of them would do, stripped out. By the time I got the tire off the car, it'd stripped out. The car almost fell on me. I had a pretty good temper – twenty-three years old, twenty-four years old. We were living close to the water. I threw the jack out in the water, told Dorothy, I said, "I'm never going to do nothing else but fish if I starved to death." I think she had to get to the hospital that day. She got upset with me because I told her I quit my job. I went somewhere and got me a jack, went back, fixed the car, or put my spare on. So, I had to get a jack. But somebody else had already taken her to the hospital. So, I had to go get her. I came back home, dropped her off. I was going to go get a tire, totaled my car. This is all in one day now. So, that egged me on not to go back to work. I went a couple of days, didn't have any way to go to work. I was driving 35 miles one way to work. At the end of that week, I just went and told the boss man, I said, "I've come get my paycheck. I'm through." I've fished ever since. That was 1968. Of course, like I said, I'd fished before then, and I knew what it was about. But I didn't ever go back to a public job. That's where me and hers ended up. I always wanted a big boat. I got that. Wanted my own house, little piece of land, I got that. Got a family. Now, I guess that's about the end of the story. You see where I'm at now; boat's paid for, my land's paid for, and I'm paying on this double wide, if I live thirty years.

[laughter]

MB: I just bought a house in Greensboro, and I realized, a thirty-year mortgage, I'll be eighty [laughter] when it's paid for. I'm like, boy, that's going to be interesting.

JN: I'll be eighty-seven.

MB: Oh, man.

JN: But it's not going to take us that long to pay for it.

MB: Yes. [laughter] That's kind of a long ways down the road, but still, it's kind of weird to sign up for a thirty-year mortgage.

JN: It was for me.

MB: Especially when you look and see how much money's going for the interest. It's like two and a half times what the house is worth or something, which is an interest. It's unbelievable. But still, it's the only way you get to buy the house. So, you do it, still better than renting. Well, that's an incredible story. It also did remind me, what happened when you got hit in the face with that jack?

JN: I've had a couple accidents. One of the trawl doors hit me on the foot one time, and it jammed the lower part of my heel between it and the winch. It didn't break any bones, but it could if it had hit me up on my ankle. I was thankful for that. I was out of work a couple of days. When the jack hit me, I didn't lose no time on that, just a couple hours. Face was sore. But that's about the only accidents I've had. Yes, skin's a little bruised up a little bit.

MB: But you haven't had any people on your boat that have gotten hurt on your boat.

JN: No. Now, Marion got hit pretty bad when he was on Charles's boat. Charles was one of our brothers. One of the blocks broke and hit him on the head. I think he cracked his skull. It took, I believe he said forty-some stitches to this place up in his head. We've been pretty fortunate right here in this area. There's been a couple of fishermen drowned here since I've been fishing, and a couple that's gotten broken bones. I guess Louis Midgett was about – other than getting drowned, it was about the most critical. That was his daughter there at the café, the heavy girl. I told you he never got over his injury completely. I think it just took a chunk right out of his head up in here, somewhere over in which side it was on.

MB: Well, I think we've covered a good area of stuff. I think we've covered it all pretty well. I'm sure I'll think of some things right after we leave.

JN: Oh, yes.

MB: That always happens [laughter]. Is there anything else you can think of to add? I mean, I guess the only thing might be just back to when you became pastor. Do you think sometimes

about what you may be talking about in the church when you're out there on the water?

JN: Oh, yes. I probably think about that as much as I do fishing. I enjoy that too. I didn't think I would, but I do. When I got into the ministry, I wasn't planning on pastoring the church. I was just going to fill in for the pastor, maybe preach at another church on occasion. But you never know. You never know. Of course, I don't think the church ever expected me to be a pastor either. But it's really worked out good. I've made my mind up two or three times to quit, and I just don't quit. I keep going back. Because I think I made my mind up to quit fishing. I said, "I'm not going to fish no more," but I'm still in it.

MB: So, you'll probably be in it your whole life, don't you think?

JN: I'll be there until I retire. I don't know. I'm not going to quit fishing. I'll keep right on fishing. But when I get older, I'm going to start withdrawing my Social Security, so I won't have to work so hard. I'm not very long off. Kind of looking forward to it because I like to go at the creek with fishing poles sometimes [laughter]. I like to bass fish a little bit.

MB: Well, you just can't get enough of this stuff. I was about to say, what does a fisherman do when he retires?

JN: He goes fishing [laughter].

MB: Maybe become a recreational sports fisherman, right? [laughter]

JN: I enjoy to get off by myself and take a fishing pole. I don't care if anything bites it or not. I said I guess I do, but there's times I can't be by myself out here. Now, everybody here needs their self-time.

MB: Contemplate things.

JN: Yes. Think about what next big move we'll make.

MB: Okay. Well, I think we got it. Wonderful interview. Thank you very much. It's great.

JN: You 're going to let me know when that's going to show on TV?

MB: Of course.

JN: All right.

MB: I'll like to film you working on the boat. I'll be here for – well, this trip, I'll be here through next Sunday, week from tomorrow, and I'll be coming down. I mean, I think I have pretty much a good part of what I need now. Because I don't want to overshoot. I don't want to end up with just way more footage than I know what to do with. But there are a few more things I need to get.

JN: On a boat and eat them?

MB: Mack Liverman talked about that. I went out twice with him, and I thought, "Oh, boy, we will film that." [laughter] But they were too tired to do that at the end [laughter]. So, we didn't do it.

JN: It depends on the mood we're in.

MB: Yes.

[end of transcript]