

Wild Caught
Richard Norris Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 00:20:25
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: Well, I've been out with you guys sometimes, shrimping. Talk a little bit about – taking it back as a kid – how you became a fisherman. You come from a fishing family. So, Richard, talk a bit about how you became a fisherman. Why don't we just start with that? How old you were. Take us back a little bit. That is what I was talking about with your brother, John, when we interviewed a couple of nights ago or yesterday, whenever it was. I mean, how did you become a fisherman? Did you always think you would be a fisherman?

Richard Norris: Yes. I just rode around, went with my daddy when I was three, four years old, trying to fish in the night and this, and working with John through the years growing up and this. I've always done it all my life.

MB: How old were you when you first started doing it professionally, like twelve or somewhere in there?

RN: Nine. I used to go with John on a boat he used to run and this with John [inaudible]. We started going fishing with him and [inaudible] sometimes.

MB: I really enjoy going out with you guys. What do you enjoy about your life as a fisherman? What are some things you like? Is it a sense of freedom out there? What are some things you like about it?

RN: Well, we try to work together and everything. You really got, what you'd say, really no boss. My brother owns the boat. We do what he says. You know what to do, and you got nobody on your back all the time or something. I reckon that's part of freedom, best I can figure. I've traveled a lot, fishing, working in Florida and this with my other brother. Just go from one place to the other when I was going back and forth, just fishing, doing different kinds of fishing and this.

MB: Is it different down in Florida, the fishing?

RN: Yes. To me, it was. It's not like here. In some ways, it is. In some ways, it's not. Shrimping down there is different because you make longer trips and everything. It just seemed like to me, it's a little bit different, but it's all basic, just fishing. If you get used to it, it's all fishing, I reckon. You really know what to do.

MB: One thing John, your brother, said in the interview, he said, "You never know what is going to happen out there in terms of –" I am not talking about in terms of danger or whatever. Is there something a little different that happens one day to the next?

RN: No. I never paid any mind. I reckon one trip's about the same as the other. It's just you got to shrimp. If you catch something, you catch it. If you don't, you don't. The next day, it's the same thing, over. It's just from one day to the next. You just have to look at it. I can't tell whether it's really no different, unless you get a good day or something. That would be different from the day before if you had a bad day.

[laughter]

MB: Do you have a family? Are you married?

RN: No, I am not married. The only family I got is just my brothers and my mom and then my sister. I never stopped long enough to get married.

MB: Well, that is kind of amazing that you work with your brothers. I mean, that is kind of unusual, I think, to have three brothers that shrimp together. I think it is kind of neat. You all seem to get along really well.

RN: Yes, we try to. Everything has its ups and downs, I reckon. One of them might wake up a little ill or something. You never know. But we don't get ill with each other. We just do what we have to do. That's about the end of it.

MB: Well, now, is it different when you go out for a longer trip? You guys are going to go out for a longer trip now, are you not?

RN: Yes.

MB: So, is it different when you go for a longer haul like that?

RN: No, not really. We don't stay all that long, about three days at the most. It's just no different. Like I said, basically the same thing every day, it's no different whether you go out for one day or you go out for three days to me.

MB: Is it different on the Pamlico Sound? Is that where you are going now?

RN: No, we're not going up there right now. I think we're going to work here along the beach.

MB: Where you are?

RN: Yes. At the Pamlico Sound, you work around the clock. You don't stop. But here, we'll probably anchor up in the evening time when it gets dark, and you go to bed. But at the Pamlico Sound, you just keep right on working.

MB: Why do you have to do that up there?

RN: That's just the way they've always shrimped up there, the shrimps there, twenty-four hours a day. If you find them, you don't ever stop. You get sleep, but you just keep dragging.

MB: Do you think it is pretty hard work? I know there is a lot of work that goes on there.

RN: Yes. Right now, it's pretty easy, but it'll get harder. You put in more hours in the fall because you're allowed to come in here at 6:00, 7:00, 8:00 p.m. and unload the boat and then get right back up at 3:00 a.m. and go on again for three more days, just according to how the shrimping is. Most of the time in the fall of the year, it's just a little bit harder. You do a lot of

late hours in the fall.

MB: I mean, when you are dragging, I mean, basically you are pulling, what, two big nets on each side of the boat. Are there two nets or are there more than two nets?

RN: Just two nets on each side. Two 40-foot nets on each side of the boat. That's about as big of nets we pull. Some of them pull bigger nets and some of them pull smaller nets.

MB: Is it done pretty much the same way down in the Keys?

RN: Yes, pulling nets and everything because they pull four nets down there. That's basically how we got started up here, pulling four nets because we'd been down there working. When we got the boat and brought it back home, John decided to put four nets on them. We've done that around here, and then everybody else started doing it right in this area.

MB: Has the shrimping been pretty good around here over the last couple of years?

RN: Yes, yes. To me, it has.

MB: Have you done other types of fishing besides shrimping?

RN: Yes. I've micro-fished and stuff like that, sink netting along the beach here, flounder fished up north with John. Well, I'd say up north at (Blanche's?), along the Outer Banks. I've been up there flounder fishing with him.

MB: I am sure you have some high seas and stormy type weather and all that. What has that been like? Is there one particular situation that stands out in your mind?

RN: Well, yes. If you get caught in any, all of them stick out in your mind when you think about it. We got caught in, I'd say, a pretty bad blow up north. I think it blew 68 knots on us coming back around Diamond Shoals and this. We got on this side where it was pretty calm, and anchored up and stayed there overnight and got up and came on home the next day. But it was rough. I don't know how big the seas were. Just something that happens. I have never been in no 35- or 40-foot seas like I've seen on TV and this. I have never been in nothing like that.

MB: But you never know what is going to happen out there in terms of the weather changing, right? Do you follow the weather pretty closely yourself?

RN: No, I don't. John does. He listens to the radio. If it's going to get too bad, just come on to the dock. In a sense, taking no chance on it because you never know[inaudible] what happens. You just go day by day other than that and one day to the next.

MB: First, your winches and all that. You have got to be careful, obviously, around all that stuff.

RN: Oh, yes. You've got to watch what you're doing around there. If you don't know what

you're doing, you can get hurt bad with them. You can wind you up in. You can get your hand caught in. You're closed or anything. You've got to be careful and pay attention. You can't be sitting there with a rope on the winch head and be looking off onto somewhere else because it's a D-level mess. You can get your hand caught in it or anything. A lot of people, especially somebody who has never done much of it, they get looking at something, like a seagull or porpoises or something like that. They set their mind on that and then they just are not watching what they're doing. A lot of people don't think it's dangerous, but it is.

MB: I have a healthy respect for all that.

RN: [laughter]

MB: You get the slip on the deck. I mean, there are all kinds of things where you would be falling overboard.

RN: Yes. I did not fall overboard yet, and maybe I won't. [laughter] I don't want to fall overboard around here with sharks. They're bad.

MB: Well, talk about the sharks. You mentioned something where you could probably walk over the sharks. What was that about?

RN: [laughter] Well, you can't walk on them. But there's a (thick up?) there. They just try to haul your mess back. They bite holes in the tail bag and lose your shrimp and mess. You just can't do nothing like that. You just lose money by trying to work around them. They won't let you catch them to thin them out. So, they just take over certain times of the year, I reckon.

MB: Well, it sounds as if you see hundreds of them out there.

RN: Oh, yes. You see four or five hundred at a time up there where we're working at. I noticed that many anyhow. That's counting all of them, different sizes, different types. They just eat your nets up when you're trying to haul back the mess.

MB: I am sure it is a point of discussion with commercial fishermen. Are the rules and regulations changing the way things are, the businesses? What do you think about that?

RN: Well, with the rules and regulations they're putting on fishermen now, it's just harder. They're knocking us down on catching in the mess like that. In my opinion, putting things in your nets now, you spend ten, twelve hours trying to fix your nets and get them mended sometimes. Then you've got to go there and cut your net halfway open, put a turtle excluder in it. That thing can fly across the deck of the boat when it's rough and hit you in the head or anything. They're just making it harder. You've got to have this, that, and the other. Some of them, you don't even need it for nothing. There are certain things, but they say, "Well, you've got to have it." Like a whistle, if you fall overboard, that whistle is not going to do me no good.

MB: A whistle?

RN: Yes.

MB: [laughter] I have not heard about that one.

RN: Yes. You're supposed to have a whistle on your life jacket. If you fall overboard, you blow. If the boat is too loud, the boat is not going to hear that little whistle. I mean, I can see the light, but not the whistle. [laughter] It's just crazy laws they've got sometimes. I don't know what it's all going to come to.

MB: What do you think is going to be the future of commercial fishing? What do you think?

RN: It's going to get harder, I imagine. We've got a lot of people that's against us. They say we destroy everything. We get blamed for destroying things that we don't. It's like people on the beach. I mean, they think we destroy everything, but they're tearing up marsh grass and building houses and everything and running the turtles off the beach. They don't consider that. That's just out of the question with the people that make the laws and everything. They don't worry about them trucks running up and down the beach, but they try to put all the blame on us for killing turtles and mess like that. They just use that against us.

MB: Of course, I guess all those condo developers, they got a lot of money, right?

RN: Oh, yes. Yes, they do. It doesn't matter to them if they spend a million dollars, which we're not in no situation to spend a million dollars. But they came over on the beach, and then a hurricane come through and torn the beach up, the condominiums. Then we've got to clean the (tub?) and bottom up, tear our nets up and mess where they build all that mess on the beach. Then some of them try and say we need to get miles offshore, three miles offshore to drag some kind of condominiums and mess on the beach. Some of them do, not all of them. But the ones that complain about it, the way I feel about it, they don't like it. Why don't they move their houses further back inland? They don't like us out there on the beach. [laughter] I mean, everybody's got to make a living, but a lot of them try to put the blame on commercial fishermen, just trying to destroy our livelihood.

MB: But there are young fishermen like you listed like (John Sutton?). I mean, there is a new group of –

RN: Oh, yes. There'd be another crowd behind him, too. Probably like Liston's little boy, he was born and raised right here. He's going to grow up around here. That's probably going to be the first thing on his mind when he gets old enough to think, go with daddy fishing. That's what's going to happen.

MB: Does fishing get in the blood, do you think? It is more than a job, though, do you not think?

RN: Yes. It gets in your blood from what I've seen because you take a lot of people there. Well, not a lot, but I have seen some that just get out of service over here, and they just stay right here and fish. They might move away for a year, but some of them have come back. That's what they

do. They'll start fishing. I reckon they just like it or something. It gets in their blood, and they just can't go without it. [laughter]

MB: Is it in your blood?

RN: Yes, I reckon. I mean, it's the only thing I've ever done all my life. I mean, I've tried working over on base one time. I didn't like that. I was over there just doing construction work for about a month or so, and I didn't like that. Shrimping started. I thought it's time I had to go. I said I'd come back here and went back to shrimping for the summer mess. I just tried shingling houses one time with my nephew. I told him he could take that and go on with it. I'd rather be in the river doing something most of the time.

MB: So, do you feel some kind of sense of peace when you are leaving? I felt that when you leave the dock, you are out there going on out.

RN: Yes.

MB: I feel like you kind of leave the world behind a little bit.

RN: Yes. You stay here on the boat for two or three days at a time, and somebody catching a handful of shrimps. I mean, you could take off of it. You just finally say, "Well, we're going. It's about time." Then after you get out of it, it's like going over there and anchoring up. That's the best sleeping there is, in my opinion. Just crawl right to the bunk and go to sleep. It's just peaceful if it is not real rough or something. But other than that, it's just peaceful to me because you haven't got a crowd around you and a bunch of noise. That's about all the noise we get when we anchor up, the TV. But that's it. That's about all I can say about it. [laughter]

MB: Anything else, any story? You are a good storyteller, but you have got to be in the right –

RN: [laughter]

MB: Anything else?

RN: Yes. You've got to be in the right –

MB: Right situation for the right time.

RN: – right place. Yes, right situation. I do not have no stories to tell. [laughter]

MB: I know you do, but we'll do it another time.

RN: [laughter]

MB: Thank you, Richard. I appreciate it.

RN: Yes.

[end of transcript]