

NOAA Beaufort Lab Oral Histories
William (Bill) Hettler Oral History
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Location: Morehead City, North Carolina
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Interviewer: JS – Joseph Smith
Transcriber: NCC

Joseph Smith: Joe Smith here. It's March 13th, 2023. We're in Morehead City to interview Bill Hettler, longtime employee at the Beaufort Lab. With me is Bud Cross, former director at the lab. Bud will start the questioning of Bill.

Ford Cross: Bill, thanks for agreeing to do this.

William Hettler: Oh, sure.

FC: We're looking forward to getting your history on tape. Why don't you kind of start, where were you born? Where'd you go to school? Just kind of work your way to the lab at this point through.

WH: I'll do that. I can do it pretty quick. Born in Chicago. Moved out of there when I was three to Texas. Break out of the World War II, my dad was in the Army. We went to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, lived on the base. So, I started there when I was about four as a kid and grew up in San Antonio, went to San Antonio schools. Then I went to University of Texas, got an undergraduate degree and got an ROTC in the Navy Commission as an ensign. Went to the Pacific. I married Loretta as soon as I graduated. We could not get married until – if we were still in school, we couldn't get married. But we were in love and so the day after we got my degree and I got my commission, we got married. Got in our little car, went out to San Diego to a training school for new ensigns, six weeks, then went to San Francisco and flew to Hawaii. We spent two-and-a-half years in Hawaii, and I was on an LST, which is a Landing Ship Tank. It's a transport vessel. The job of us was to ferry women and children over to the other Hawaiian Islands for vacations. So, we'd load up the decks with kids and parents. The fathers were not there. They were in the war. They were doing their duty. Take the people over to the other islands like Hawaii or Oahu or — not Oahu, we were on Oahu. Then come back. We were just making that run constantly. I said, "I can't stand this." After six months, I said, "This is getting tiresome." I ran into another naval officer who said he was on a survey ship, and he didn't like it. They were going to WESTPAC, Western Pacific. I said, "You want to trade jobs?" So, we worked out a switch with the Navy. I got his job, and he took my job, got on that ship, and I went home. [laughter] I said, "Loretta, good news. I'm off the ship. I'm on another ship. Good news." I said, "The bad news is I'm leaving for WESTPAC tomorrow." So, [laughter] next day, I got on the ship. "Bye-bye, honey. I'll see you in a year."

FC: Oh, my God.

WH: It was almost a year. We were surveying. It was a survey ship. We went over to survey the Gulf of Siam, back and forth. They knew some kind of war was going to break out somewhere over there, which it eventually did in Vietnam, back and forth. So, we [inaudible] survey lines, 50 meters apart and about 3 miles long, back and forth, back and forth, for six months, back and forth. Man, that was – [laughter] So, one day, we got a break. They said, "Okay, you're through with that. Now, we want you to go to the Indian Ocean and do a little bit of work over there." So, we went over there. They said, "Oh, by the way, when you go through the Sumatra Straits, you might get attacked by pirates. So, you need to carry this big deck gun." So, we were going through there. Nobody attacked us. But we were ready. I was a gunnery officer. We were ready to go. Nothing happened. Anyway, I got out of the Navy eventually. I

had six months to go by assignment. So, I was stationed in Pearl Harbor. It's a naval base. I was just doing office work, and I didn't like that. They needed a volunteer to go down someplace in the South Pacific for a special secret assignment. "I'll go." So, I went down there. I was one of two officers in charge of a few enlisted men and about a hundred Gilbertese natives who lived on an island called Christmas Island. There's two of them. This one's in the Pacific. The mission was to be observers for ten nuclear bomb blasts that were being dropped from the air and exploded 30 miles away at dawn. We were supposed to keep all those natives in line so that they wouldn't go blind. If you're out there in the middle of the night and you happen to be looking up and this thing goes off, you're going to go blind. So, our job was to make sure that they were all covered up. They were in tents, or they were in the houses or whatever it was. So, I did that for six months. Funny thing, after those nuclear bomb tests, I started getting melanomas, cancer on my back. We had to face away from the explosion, even though we had on shirts and dark glasses.

FC: How far were you from the blast?

WH: Thirty miles. Ten nuclear bombs, I'm probably one of the few people alive that's seen ten nuclear bombs.

FC: I'll be darned.

WH: Believe me, when they went off, it was an interesting experience. You're standing there. You saw the light from behind your head. Then about thirty seconds later, the sonic boom, the boom from the blast, got to you. It would knock you flat. It went, "Boom!" like that. You just about fall over. It would suck your breath out, even at that distance. I said, "Man, I hope I never get one of those things closer." It was something. So, my job there was to keep the other few people, the other few military people busy. I was a fishing officer. So, I had a PT boat at my disposal. We would have fishing contests, trolling. We'd go out there and catch – man, we caught all kind of big fish, king mackerel. I can't even remember what they were. But [laughter] had fish fries all the time. Booze was cheap. Coconuts everywhere. [laughter] It was a good time. So, after that, I came back and said, "Well, I've got to get my act together and get out of the Navy." Then I went to graduate school, University of Texas again, two-and-a-half years in graduate school, got my degree. I said, "Now what?" So, I happened to get a flyer for a job somewhere in Beaufort, North Carolina. [laughter] So, I loaded up the car with Loretta and my dog, little Shetland Sheepdog in the back. We drove from San Antonio across the Gulf States, came to North Carolina, and we pulled in out here, Highway 24, came into town. As soon as we got out here, more or less in town, we both looked around and says, "Is this it? Is this all there is?"

FC: What year was that?

WH: This is 1964.

FC: [19]64r?

WH: Yeah. It was it, and I got the job. I had the job at the lab and went there, worked for a guy

I hated, named Robert (Chapin?). Did you ever know Chap?

JS: Yes. He hired me. He passed away in [19]85. I was just maybe less than two years under him.

WH: For some reason, he graded me wrong. He was always saying, "Bill, you need to do this now. Do that now." He was trying to tell me what to do all the time. [laughter] "Get out of here. I can do it." [laughter] So, then another guy came along. His name was (Dr. Richard Lichtenhill?). He was just a social guy. He really was full of bullshit, but he liked to talk. I was his assistant, you might say. Every day, I'd go in his office, and he would just talk philosophy. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. I'm thinking, "Man, I've got to get something done today." I couldn't get anything done with him. So, finally I got some relief. Somebody said, "They need somebody to undergo a training program for six months in Washington, D.C." "I'll go." So, got in our car, [inaudible], went to D.C., got a little apartment downtown on 9th Street, I think it was, or 12th Street, 12th and M, right in the middle of town. I went to Department of Commerce building, and I worked in there for six months. I cannot tell you what I did. I was just doing little jobs here, little jobs there. Nothing that I knew anything about. I wasn't an expert about anything, but I was just filling a slot. But we were enjoying D.C. We were seeing all the sites and having good meals out and walking around. It was great. When that went over – finished, we came back to Beaufort. I forgot the first thing I was doing, but I eventually wound up saying, "I like fish. I like to take care of fish." So, I ran the fish spawning and rearing program. You remember that?

FC: In which program? That was Don?

WH: It was under Don Hoss. It was called Fisheries, Rearing, and Spawning or something like that. One of the first things I did was I thought, well, I had spawned Atlantic menhaden in the lab. I knew how to do that with injecting hormones, then taking the larvae, and raising them up. So, I said, "Well, Gulf menhaden have never been described." This is a different species, *Brevoortia patronus*. I said, "Can I take a truck down to the Gulf and get some Gulf menhaden and bring them back? Do you mind?" They said, "Yeah, go for it." So, I got like a big 6-foot diameter tank put on the back of a truck and by myself, went down to the Gulf. Got a guy lined up to cast net some menhaden, he did that, put them in the tank, turned on the circulating pump, got in the truck, came back to Beaufort in a day and a half, nonstop driving, and got back here. Those fish were still alive. Now, I had it set up so that the pump circulated water around in a loop, so they had a current to swim in. So, they were happily swimming, always one direction. Got them into the lab, injected them with HCG, hormones, spawned the Gulf menhaden – they spawn by themselves actually – just came in the next day or two days later, picked up the eggs and the larvae, raised those things, and then got them at different stages, so I could just describe them. They hadn't been described before. Got pictures, drawings, and photographs. That was the end of that, I guess.

FC: Let me go back just a minute. When you worked for Chap and for Lichtenhill, what did you work on?

WH: That was the confusing part. Nothing with Lichtenhill, he just liked to visit. I was the guy

who'd sit there and visit with him all day. But I can't remember anything that I did. With Chap, I was a port sampler. I would go make trips for him down to the Gulf and visit different menhaden plants where they had port samplers. I wasn't the sampler, but I was the guy that took their samples. They would get twenty fish samples a night from each menhaden boat, for aging. I'd bring those fish back. I guess I brought the fish. I can't remember. Maybe I just brought the scales. I brought samples back to the lab, and we aged them, took the scales. Do you remember Ethel Hall?

FC: The old projector? Yes.

WH: Ethel?

FC: Yes.

WH: So, I would mount them, and she would read the scales and do the ages on them, so we could find out if they were one-year-old, two-year-old, three- or four-, five-year-old fish, which is about as old as they got, five years old. So, it was an aging, growth study.

FC: But then when you started the spawning on the menhaden, was that around the mid-[19]70s? Do I have that right in my memory?

WH: I don't think I have a list of my reprints right here. I don't have the dates here.

FC: Okay. That's all right.

WH: I kind of typed these up for you. I started as a GS-9, retired as a GS-13. For most of my career, I led my own research team. I co-authored about fifty research papers. I was transferred to D.C. I told you about that. As a NOAA employee, I was also a certified scuba diver and made several trips to the Virgin Islands to participate in research diving. I was topside watch director for the TEKTITE II project. I said I was a fan of Jacques Cousteau [laughter] of course. My first diving experience was in about 1953 when I used an old fire extinguisher tank as a scuba tank and attached a single hose regulator to it and made it without a problem down to 90 feet in the Gulf of Mexico on a homemade scuba tank. [laughter] I'm still here. [laughter]

JS: Ninety feet too.

WH: Yes. I knew nothing about the bends. I had fins on and a mask and a homemade tank hanging under my arm. [laughter] No buddy diver.

FC: Wow. But you couldn't do that today.

WH: I wouldn't, no.

FC: With the regulations, that's amazing.

WH: Oh, yes.

FC: After you spawned the menhaden, Bill, how many other species did you get into the spawning activities?

WH: I think I tried spot. I may have tried croaker. I didn't do flounder. But those are the other two species.

JS: You made a trip to the Gulf Bill and did cross-fertilization, didn't you. with yellowfin and gulf menhaden?

WH: Yes, I did.

JS: They were like gillnet captured fish. Then you reared them on the boat, or did you have a lab facility down there?

WH: Now, that's a good question. That's kind of slipping out of my memory how I did that.

JS: But they were yellowfin and gulf menhaden that you did.

WH: Yes.

JS: Because you got the paper on those.

WH: Yes. They hybridized. Or I did it.

FC: Wow. You retired what year?

WH: 1992.

FC: [19]92, oh, okay.

WH: I think. That's after I came back a second time as a contract.

FC: Okay. A couple of things, of all the work you did down there, what was the most satisfying scientifically to you?

WH: I think spawning of the menhaden.

FC: You were the first to do it, right?

WH: I was the first to do it. Nobody had ever seen a need to do it, much less try to do it. It wasn't that hard. [laughter] It's just hard to handle them and keep them – you have to take them out of the water and inject hormones into them, figure out how much to do, and then put them back in the water and wait for things to happen. They do it themselves.

FC: Then the larvae lived.

WH: Yes. You just go in the next couple days and scoop out the eggs, transfer them to a rearing pan. I got some up to maybe a couple of inches.

JS: You and Allyn Powell were kind of a dynamic duo. He fed them. He raised the food for them and reared the larvae and juveniles.

WH: Yes, he did. He was good to work with.

FC: Now, are there things that you may have accumulated over the years that you might want to donate to archives that we're building of the history of the lab? Is there anything there that might be appropriate?

WH: That I have from the lab? What do you mean? No, I don't have any.

FC: I'm talking about like, I don't know, pictures of the fish when you did them or anything from those early days.

WH: I left all the slides with the lab. I don't have any lab slides in the house. When I retired, I think they asked if they could keep them. I said, "Sure." So, they're somewhere around the lab.

FC: Okay.

JS: Your last years there, Bill, or last few years, you did a lot of ichthyoplankton sampling a bit, Ocracoke, maybe in Hatteras?

WH: I did.

JS: Was that SABRE project? Was that part of the SABRE?

WH: That sounds familiar. Yes, I think it was.

JS: It was the ingress of the eggs and larvae.

WH: Yes. Right. I did three inlets; Beaufort Inlet, Ocracoke Inlet, and Hatteras, I think it was.

JS: Right. Didn't you use that go-fast boat for a while, the one up there.

WH: Yes. [laughter]

JS: I remember that being in the vessel pool at the lab.

WH: Yes. That was quite exciting.

FC: Jose ran that? Rivera ran those?

WH: I ran it myself.

FC: You ran it?

WH: Yeah. Later on, Jose ran it, but I ran it to start with. Yes. [laughter] That was fun.

FC: You could do a lot in one day.

WH: Gosh. Yes. It would go 50 miles an hour with no trouble.

FC: I could hear you could leave the lab sample and go up to Ocracoke and around Pamlico and all the way around, one day, cover all that area.

WH: Yes.

FC: [laughter] Well, that boat, we took good care of it. NOAA Corps took it back and set it up to [inaudible] port to be part of the guard boats around Bush when he was president, the first Bush.

WH: I didn't know that.

FC: That's how we lost it. We got a second one. It wasn't nearly as good. In fact, they were running up toward Ocracoke, Jose was. It started to leak that he had a beach it to keep from leaking – from sinking.

WH: I think I heard that.

FC: Then when we had the good one down there, NOAA Law Enforcement Officer –

WH: Radonski.

FC: – Jeff Radonski would take it out on the weekends. I don't know who drove, I think Jose. He'd go out there, and they'd fish around the fishermen. They would go and board people, and he'd write tickets and stuff. [laughter] They used it for that. Because he said once they knew it was them, once they were identified, up came the lines. Everybody just split. [laughter]

WH: My gosh, that's not fair.

JS: You touched on it a little bit, driving into town with Loretta. I know that look from the wife. It's like, "Where have you brought me to," kind of thing. What was the county like in [19]64, Morehead and Beaufort area?

WH: Well, Morehead hadn't changed much. It's just gotten a lot bigger. But I suppose down east was the same. That's hard to assess. It was just a lot smaller.

FC: It was different. Like we came in [19]67, it was old mom-and-pop businesses, shut down

every Wednesday afternoon and open every Saturday morning. There was no liquor by the drink. You had a brown bag.

WH: That's right. I remember that.

FC: It was a lot of good little mom-and-pop restaurants in town back then. Very good.

WH: We came in. We needed a place to stay. We didn't know one end of the town from another. So, we just kind of drove around, and we finally rented a house over off of – on Yaupon Terrace. The back door was on Calico Creek. We stayed there for three years. We rented the house. But then after we lived there for a while, I got sent to Washington, or we went to Washington. We were afraid to give up the house because we needed a place to stay when we came back. So, we kept paying. Did we rent that house? Yes, we didn't buy that house. We kept paying rent on that house while we were in D.C., which was hard on our budget because we had to pay rent up in D.C. too. But we did it. We came back and said, "We can't live like this." So, we came out here to Mitchell Village. It was nothing out here at the time. This was all woods, no houses. They had a street here. We decided we like this lot to build us a house. The house is going to be built whether we took it or not. So, we said we'd take it. The only choice we had was whether the garage was on that side of the house or the other. This is a Kingsbury home. You know that brand, Kingsbury? That's a model of a truck house that they were building back then. They made thousands of them. They would come in on a truck. They'd erect the frame and do all the flooring and everything like that then put the bricks on separately. But it has been a good house.

FC: Do you have any regrets about having spent your career somewhere else?

WH: Not a bit. No. I'm very blessed, I think, had the career I did.

FC: Yes. Most of us feel that way.

WH: Yes. It's been great.

JS: – this up then. Thank you, Bill, for the interview.

WH: Oh, yes.

FC: That's good.

JS: Appreciate the invite here.

[end of transcript]