

Interview Subject: George Knight

Interviewer: Lillie Waters and Lilah Henderson

Project: Dock Stories Project

Transcriber: Lillie Waters

Primary Investigator: Jennifer Sweeney Tookes

Others present: N/A

Date of Interview: April 11, 2024

Duration: 33 minutes and 2 seconds

Place of Interview: UGA Marine Extension/Georgia Sea Grant, Brunswick, GA

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LW: Okay, so this is an interview with George Knight on April 11, 2024. The interview is being conducted in Glenn County in Brunswick, Georgia. About the dock called which dock...

GK: Well, I was going to talk a little bit about all of em

LW: Oh, okay, that's perfect!

GK: That's where I grew up marching up and down this waterfront.

LW: Okay. It is part of the research project and interview collection titled Dock Stories. The interviewers are Lillie Waters and Lilah Henderson. Okay, sir, so the first question that we have is tell us about your connections. I guess to all of the docks that you know pretty well okay.

GK: My grandfather was a shrimper for a while until it got really bad, and he went and moved on to construction work. And my dad got back into it in the early 60s, part time he worked for a washer dryer repairman is what he was, and him and his partner bought a shrimp boat and fished on the weekends. And it turned into more profitable for them to go shrimping full time. So when we moved to the south end of Brunswick, this became part of my playground, so to speak. And this was the first place I was introduced to is this property that Marine Extension is sitting on today. I believe it was a quail fish company, Joe Cruise Fish House, which is where we unloaded at the time, and next door was Brunswick Marina owned by Ed [inaudible], who had a railway at the time, it was mostly run down during that time period. And next to him was Paul Morair Fish Company. Further down was Sigman Seafood, which my dad eventually bought. Next to that was Dixie Seafood. And then Lewis and Company Lewis Crab Factory was next to them with a railway and marine store and other businesses also. And those are primarily the facilities that I remember. There were a few more further down the river but they were mostly gone.

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LW: Wow. So when did you first come here or work here or become associated with the docks like how old were you when-

GK: I was about nine years old when I started coming down here on my own. And you know more for profit. I'd get back there and head shrimp with the older generation, primarily black, you know it must look pretty funny little white boy. Only white kid, but I loved it and they loved me. That's when I started and of course shrimping on the weekends or when needed when my dad and like I said that started at about age nine. It developed from there. The love for the industry developed from there.

LW: Around what year was that?

GK: I guess that would be around 1967 or 68.

LH: And then during that time what was like the name like what name did y'all have for it? Or did you like have any other names before it like

GK: What was the name of the fish houses or the industry?

LH: I guess the industry.

LW: Probably the industry.

GK: Well you know it was a fishing industry, shrimp and business. There was crabbing going on back here at that time. A little shed fishing, gill netting. But primarily the shrimping business was what was the big one here. Shrimp and crab.

LW: The docks that you were referring to, were those the names? Like are the docks that you know today were those the names of the docks back in the day?

GK: Those were the names of the docks back in the day-

LW: The same?

GK: I knew the owner pretty well. Had his name on the building.

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LW: Yeah, wow, that's really cool. How long have you, well I guess you've pretty much answered how long you've known these docks like did you I guess get involved in them when you were nine or did you get involved in and kind of learn more about it as you got older?

GK: Yes. I became more involved there as I got older and I became a commercial fisherman myself, I guess. Right after high school, which would have been early 1975. And I progressed there and I would say for over 30 years, you know, until things started going south for [inaudible] the money just wasn't there. The money wasn't there. The profit was not there. So I moved on from there. And skills, I stayed in the marine industry. I run sportfishing yachts for several years and then I joined the Union IUOE local 25 Marine Division. It run tugboats, so up until a couple of years ago when I retired. And that was enjoyable because I got to see different fisheries from the north seas to South Florida. You know it was interesting to see how things have changed. Who's making it and who was not.

LW: Was that the most of the stuff that you I guess fish? Was it mostly shrimp that you did? Or was it crab or was it fish?

GK: I done a little bit of everything until we were, you know, eventually was regulated down to just the shrimping. Yeah, I've done long line and [konkin], crab and so it has I guess there was there were many aspects of the business there that I derived a living from you know. It was a have to or move on.

LH: And then was there any dock similar to like, the other docks operating in Georgia? Were there any similar ones to it?

GK: Oh, yeah. Up all along the Georgia coast. From St. Mary's to Savannah. There were many fish houses. And many fishermen a lot more so. Oh, you know, back then there is today. And we've pretty well all mingled around with each other. I mean, and not just in Georgia, but all the other states also you know. Our circle was rather large. You know, because we would migrate

with the shrimp. Wherever it was the best fishing that's where we would go whether it was North Carolina or East Texas.

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LH: And then was it common to like really kind of you say talk with them? Was it a lot of conversations between other shrimpers?

GK: Oh yeah, a lot of em good a lot of em bad you know, it was kinda like you're not supposed to be here this my territory, or hey, I enjoy fishing around your house. You're welcome here. You know, it's the same today as it was yesterday.

LW: All the docks that you know, what have they gone through over the years?

GK: Constant change and change has no beginning or end. You know, some for the good and today more for the bad. I mean we're losing our industry.

LW: Do you have any thoughts about like what's causing that? Is it different for each dock?

GK: It's the economy you know, it's the money I mean, if you can't stay in business, you cannot afford to stay in business. You got to move on. I mean, you know you have some hobby fisherman today that will be around forever. And you have some diehard fishermen that'll be here till the day they die. For me, it was like I said it was about the money. I couldn't afford to raise my family on what I was making. Send them to or give them the education that they needed to make it in today's world.

LH: Okay, and then can you tell me more about the people that you work with at the dock? I know you said, once you go to different docks to different locations, it was y'all had different conversations based on if you're stepping on their territory or can you tell me a little more about that?

GK: Oh yeah, I think I'm getting where you're coming from the type of people who and to be honest with you, it was primarily black folk, that you know, that was the labor of this business. Early days, a lot of Portuguese in it, different ethnic groups. But I would say you know, the labor force was come mostly from the black community. So yeah, I was involved with it a lot. And, you know, I enjoyed it. I'll take it give me a better outlook, you know, in the culture.

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LW: Will you tell me about, like the funniest thing that has ever happened at these docks? That's just a core memory.

GK: I mean, you hit me with one I would have to mole over there. You know some of it you shouldn't be said at all. Every day on the waterfront had its funny moments, serious moments, tragic moments. And I can't go to the most one that really sticks in my mind but every day give you a funny moment.

LW: Is there an example that you could give like, just something that

GK: No, I can't. Not right now. I mean, it's just not on my brain right now. You know what I mean? It's just not. I mean if something comes to mind I will let you know.

LW: Go ahead! Feel free to let me know. Stop me if we're doing anything. And if you come up on it, tell me all about it.

GK: Oh, you know, I think of all the times I fell overboard. Other people who fell overboard.

Some had been fishermen all their lives and couldn't swim a lick.

LW: Goodness.

GK: You know, just it just like I say so many funny moments every day.

LW: That's awesome. Well, if you think of one let me know.

GK: One in particular I will let you know. We may have to turn this recorder off.

LW: If we have to, then we will.

LH: And then as we went from the funniest moment, but what is what would you say is your best moment while at the docks?

GK: My best moment? Boy, I guess the best moment it was when we launched a new boat named after my mom because she meant so much to me and this industry. That was probably the best moment.

LW: When was that?

GK: Late 70s. So maybe 77, 78.

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LW: So in the industry in the water and the weather and the sea life over these many years that you've been in this industry? What changes have you seen in all of that over the years?

GK: Well like I said, constant change. Some good some bad, you know, the bad I think we've overfished a lot of it. Believe it one time we were at a happy median and we're not there now. The good thing is kids like you that's taken an interest in saving our industry, that's the good change.

LW: Is there anything like specifically that you can think of that has, you have seen particularly changed throughout all the years?

GK: I think, you know, with you know, more concerned about pollution that's been devastating for us. You know, the demise of wetlands, which is still ongoing. You know, the elimination of tidal flow that we have too much of, you know, look at all the causeways we [pay], all the rivers we blocked off. You know, it's taken a toll on our resources. And, with the industry has always had a curve up and down. I'm sure it will rebound with the help of our youth. It will rebound. I just hope I live long enough to see it.

LH: And then I know you said it's all about the money. Have you noticed any hard times on the dock or any business disruption?

GK: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, yeah, I would say starting in the 90s there is a serious decline in the businesses. You know, with the imports, made such a impact on the prices fuel, products fuel for these guys. You know, it's to a point where they were trading fuel for money, no problem. And yeah, like I said, you know, I counted on earlier in our conversation to many fish houses we have in Brunswick. And what do we have on the border front now? One. One.

LH: And then with any other hard times on the dock, have you experienced anything with weather changes? Or?

GK: Oh, yeah, I, you know, you see weather patterns change I remember, you know, we used to look forward to every day afternoon rain shower. We, you know, we don't seem to have that anymore, but, you know, we're in a constant state of change. And I'm sure our environment right

now has adapted. You know, like I said, our biggest concern is pollution and the loss of our wetlands, you know, I can't honestly tell you the state of our resource without I don't have the facts and figures in front of me to tell you, you know, I'd just be guessing. So last couple of years with no more pressure than its had seems to be doing well for shrimp. I couldn't tell you about a crab or other species, but seems to be doing well for the shrimp.

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LW: Do you think like, are there any, I know you mentioned that, you know, people are having a hard time financially. I know that you said gasoline prices went up and that was a big issue.

What are some other, if any financial struggles that people have?

GK: Well y'all are having the same struggles today. It's just [supplies], supplies. You know, just too much for these guys. And you know, some of them are getting [inaudible]. I've said I've been out of the, you know, out of the industry now for over 20 years. But I'll still stop by and you can see what's going on. You don't see the boats here you've seen many years ago. And it's a tough life. It's not a job. It's a life.

LH: And what do you think about the future for commercial fishing within Georgia?

GK: The future? I don't know. Truly. I mean, it all depends on the resource. I see the resource rebounding, but you know, will regulations allow us to utilize our resource. I don't know. We have to make our resource available to the people at state of Georgia. Not everybody can go out and catch their own seafood. And the only way we can benefit from our resources if we have commercial fishing. and I'll say the state needs to adhere to that. We need these guys.

LH: And, what do you think the docks need today in order to be successful? Like what resources do you think the docks need today for them to be successful?

GK: I think state funded help would be a great resource. You know, I think we're gonna need more of that.

LW: When you think ahead of future storms, hurricanes or unusually high tides, how do you think these docks will fare?

GK: In Brunswick? Well-

LW: Or out of the docks that you know you've been speaking about with us today?

GK: Yeah, I mean, most of them are gone, but that they'll fare well here in Brunswick. I mean, we have the least amount of weather than any other city on the coast. So yeah, we always fare pretty well. You know, blow 'em down we'll build 'em back up.

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LW: If anything like that, you know if y'all did have bad weather or when y'all do have bad weather is there anything that can be done to help you know, these buildings or these docks or ships or anything like that? Is there anything that can be done to help it survive that event more successfully?

GK: Nothing that's, I don't think there's any more than we can do. I really don't. I mean not to be cost effective.

LW: Pretty much like what you said before, just if something happens, you build it back up.

GK: You build it back up. Hopefully better but, yeah.

LW: If it's better, what in your opinion could they do to like build it better?

GK: You know, now you're gonna need to talk to an engineer.

[everyone laughing]

GK: I grew up in a time there where you put most anything you had in the ground and put a board on it called the docks.

[LW laughing]

GK: And it seemed to last.

LH: And then what investments could can be made to this dock to be successful for the next 5 to 10 years? What do you think investments can be made towards for the dock?

GK: I don't know honey. That's you know, that's almost for an economist to try to get a hold to. You know, how I would like, like I said, you know, I would like to see some help with the resources for these guys. You know, I would love to see more the resource stay home. You know, I can remember a time where, you know, the more local markets, the fish house markets you know, we're full of local people buyin fish and shrimp and crab at a reasonable price. Now it's a luxury.

LW: You said that was like shrimp and fish?-

GK: And fish and crab. I mean but today it's a luxury.

LW: What are some recommendations you have for the future of the commercial fishing industry?

GK: Have more young people involved with it. I'm all about today's youth.

LH: So you would like the youth to get more involved within fishing and shrimping as well?

GK: Without being more involved? My day has passed and gone. I mean, yeah, if I'm needed I would be, become more involved. I mean, if they wanted my experience or some of my old knowledge, I'm here for it, but you know, my days are come and go.

LH: And then I know how we talked about we need more investments from the state to give more funding. But if you had that money, how would you invest it into the dock, or what would you spend it on? What supplies do you think the dock might need?

GK: Well, you know, primarily you know, on education, getting our youth more involved with the industry as a production model, not just you know, the education of it there. But yeah, we need more youth in our industry. We may need to make it affordable for them to go out and crab and fish and shrimp. You know, let's, you know, let's start bringing it in and in small ways, you know, into our local markets, you know, not in you know, we don't need to ship to Arizona. We need to feed our communities here in Georgia. You know, I'd like to see more of that. It's a good life. It's a good life.

LH: I was gonna say if you had any more stories to tell us-

LW:I know you-

LH: greatly appreciate-

LW: mentioned the snow. I want to hear more about that.

GK: It was I know Christmas. Sometime early, mid 80s. I have pictures of it. We had a rainstorm come through first that that froze. And I guess it was on Christmas Eve we were having a

Christmas party, and it started snowing and it didn't end and there was in some places on these docks. They was two and three feet of snow you know and it lasted a few days, which for South Georgia is very unusual.

[LW & LH laughing]

GK: You know, it was pretty but it was also devastating to the resource. You know, I mean, it just literally killed what shrimp we had left in sight and it did damage to the fish also, but, you know, we recovered from it. For shrimp more so than other species. But yeah, that was a good and bad time all wrapped up into one. Yeah, we've had other freezes that were similar and we recovered.

LW: Did you think of a funny story?

GK: No, like I said, I'd have to turn this recorder off.

[LW laughing]

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LW: I understand. So the last question that I do want to ask, is there anything that you can think of that would be very, very helpful to our research or interviews that we have not asked you about or mentioned?

GK: Yeah, you know, all I can say is y'all keep it up. People need to know. I mean, there's far better than I out there to talk to. Just keep searching for em.

LW: Yes sir.

GK: And I'll start making notes for you.

LW: Perfect!

GK: You know, hopefully I'll be working here one day so we can stay in touch. I'll tell you a funny story.

[LW laughing]

LW: That would be great. All right. I think that's all we have so thank you so much

GK: Thank you ladies.

LW: Thank you.

Ends interview

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