

Wild Caught
Ray Swaney, Jr. Oral History
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Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: So, but here we are.

Ray Swaney Jr: Okay.

MB: Here I am in Greensboro, but so documentaries I like doing because I can totally – the carnival documentary –

RSJ: Yes.

MB: – that's what I want to say about carnies really.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: We just showed that yesterday at the Screen Gems Studios in Wilmington.

RSJ: Oh, really? Okay.

MB: They did a thing with UNC Wilmington with the film school.

RSJ: Oh, yes.

MB: They did like a three-day kind of conference mainly about feature films. But they had a panel discussion about documentaries, so, I took part in that panel. We had just interviewed this (Jerry Schiiff?) guy or so – we've been talking at length with your father about a lot of different topics. Well, maybe just start off with he mentioned in the interview and the previous interview before that about how he wouldn't really want you to go on a commercial fishing.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: I mean, that's interesting.

RSJ: Well, growing up I always wanted to have a shrimp boat. Go out shrimping and everything when I grew up. But the last few years with the regulations, I've seen the headaches that he's had through it. The sleep that he's lost, the money that we've lost and everything. I just kind of came to the conclusion that if there was any way, I probably need to find something else to do. Because it really looks like they're trying to stop us. It's not just regulation. I don't know what you want to call it. It's just like they're trying to put us out of business. I mean, some of the regulations they have, have no statistical fact behind them. I've had statistics classes I know how easy it is to manipulate it. They do that with some of them. They've had to have their statistics. I think when was it last year? Last year or the year before, they had to have their data looked over, I think, by an outside agency to see how the National Marine Fisheries was collecting and gathering their data, all for the basis of their regulations. They found some problems with it. But I'm just growing up with it. I remember how it was when I was younger, my dad was able to make a good living at it. He wasn't worrying all the time over bills and things. Now, because of the regulation and everything, that is a constant worry. So, I figured with a lot of push from my mother too, because she didn't want a life for me like that and my father. They just pushed me to

go on and further my education so that if I want to fish, I can. But if it keeps going how it looks like it is and they're going to force us to shut down, I'll be able to do something else with my life. I'll have the education, the ability to do it. So that was pretty much our – my standpoint on going and furthering my education. I remember one day I used to go to some of the meetings with my father. I know he was telling you earlier that sometimes when you talk to people, they find out you're a commercial fisherman they talk down to you. I remember being a kid and being at the meetings. I don't know if you've ever been to one or seen how they conduct them, but all the National Marine Fisheries people sit on a panel in front and all the commercial fishermen are just in regular seats in the back. So, it's almost like there's a clear division to begin with. During the meeting, I mean, I was very young and after we sat there and everything, I remember telling my dad afterwards that it was like they were talking down to us. So, it is just always, kind of a was a driving force that one day they'll never be able to talk down to me because I wanted to go on, to get an education that would be at least equal to or supersede some of theirs.

MB: So -- well, you went to Utah State.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: Can you talk a little about what you studied there?

RSJ: Yes. I studied business management there. I went to Chowan College in Northern North Carolina for two years. My family's LDS. I wasn't happy at Chowan College. I wouldn't feel like I was getting the college experience. So, I'd come home, all my friends that were going to UNC or State or something, were just having this great time. When I was at Chowan, I just didn't seem to be having that much fun. It's basically just an athletic college. That's what I went there for, was to play football. I'm quite frank when I tell people that I went there to play football. I didn't go to get an education there. But after a couple years of playing, I don't know, I had an injury that just kind of reprioritizes things for me. I started to put a little more emphasis on education. When I started to sit back and examine the education that I was getting there and the potential education that I could get somewhere else. I felt like the best thing I could do was to move on, to try to go to a school that if I ever need to go into, apply for a job or anything, I'll have a degree that carries a little bit of weight with it. So, that's why I went out to Utah, and I looked at a couple of different schools out there. I just thought it would be neat to go. I'd never been out west. So, I picked Utah, went and looked at some of the couple of the different campuses, and I was accepted to Utah State. Their business degree was pretty good in Carnegie 1 Institute. So, I figured a degree from there would carry a little weight in the business world. So that's what I decided to do.

MB: What are you doing? Tell us about what you're doing now.

RSJ: What I'm doing now is, we opened up (Outriggers Marine?). It's a marine supply, a business and it's both for commercial and recreational fishermen. I know how hard it is to make a living fishing. I figured one of the next best things I can do to be in the fishing sort of lifestyle community a little bit, is to be there to provide the services to fishermen. I would also like to kind of try to bridge the gap a little bit between sport and commercial. Some of the differences I think are really hyped up more by the media and things that are really there. I mean, you can

read a book and now you think the world's going to come to an end. It's just because of the way things are written. It's the same thing with magazines and that's – I would just like to try to use that business to kind of bridge the gap a little bit. I kind of show sports fishermen and that commercial fishing, we aren't just trying out there, trying to kill the sea and in turn try to make the commercial people to be able to get along with the sport people a little bit.

MB: So, how's it going with this new store?

RSJ: Oh, pretty good right now. It's still building. As you know, we've only been open a couple weeks now, it's our second week. But our response is really good. A lot of people are saying that's just what it needs. Right now, I'm going to some of the local North Carolina Fisheries Association meetings and talking to some of those guys. They really seem to like what we're planning on doing down there.

MB: That's good. Well, I'm just going back a little bit. Why is it, do you think, that people have this stereotypical image of fishermen like your dad was talking about earlier.

RSJ: I think a lot of it is media. Then a lot of it is when for instance, when people come here to Sneads Ferry. The people you see walking around holding the beer cans and stuff, they're fishermen, but that's not the only ones. There's just three quarters of the fishermen are at home with their wives and families and are respectable people. But in anything you go at, you always have those that just seem to flock to the bars and fights and everything else. They'll just give the whole crowd a kind of bad name. So, I think that's probably a lot of it.

MB: Yes. Same thing with a lot of people.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: What was it like growing up in Sneads Ferry?

RSJ: Well, I did a lot of my childhood down in the Keys, because we moved back and forth a lot when I was younger. I guess we moved back and forth three or four times. It just depended on where my dad was doing the best at for a year or so. But we moved back here when I was in sixth grade. It was really neat moving back. I liked it a lot better than I did in the Keys. Like you said about Miami, it's a nice place for tourists. That's the same thing with the Keys. I mean, when it comes to living there, that traffic gets really quick. When you try to go to Kmart or something, it takes you forty-five minutes to get there and it's three or four miles from you, just because all these Winnebagos and RVs are on the road. I don't know, everything down there is geared to older people, retired people, and stuff. Up here was a lot better. Growing up, when we came back, I was able to get a boat and start fishing in the river and stuff. Me and my friends would go out on it at night and stuff, and just for extra money or just for fun, just to go out on the boat. There's a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it.

MB: Have things changed much over the years?

RSJ: So, what I can tell from being gone two years that it's changed. That the traffic flow here

is unreal compared to what it used to be. I mean, in the evening times around here, there used to be a few cars here and there. The restaurant right up here had some business. But all down on the waterfront where our place is now down there, that's unbelievable, the difference in that. I mean, that's went from being like a little ghost town to just being a boom in metropolis with all the cars and people walking around down there in the evening times. So, yes, it's changing. I don't know, a lot of people around here don't like the change that's happening and everything. But I mean, change is happening everywhere. You just kind of have to go with it. Find out how you can help the change or how the change can help you. So, just like progress with anything, things are going to progress and it's going to go with you or without you.

MB: That's the truth. You can't stop it.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: You can't live in the past.

RSJ: Exactly.

MB: I know you want it to be nice.

RSJ: Yes. I mean, it would be nice for things to be like it was around here back in the 50s. I've heard my dad talk about the way things were. It would be awesome to live here if things were like it was then. It's still a great place to live. But things are changing. Well, it's still got a lot of commercial fishing and stuff here. But increasingly, you can just tell that sport fishing and stuff like that is becoming increasingly popular too. I mean, you can go up and down the coast, and this is one of the last places that I haven't been to all up and down the coast that has a river. The size that we have here with the water that it has in it and that there's not some city built on the side of it. I think the base is partially responsible for that, which is good. There are not many rivers you can go up that don't have houses and condominiums built all over the side of it. But you can ride up the river a couple miles and it'll look just like it did back in the 1800s. That's really pretty neat, I think.

MB: Yes. I'm really glad the base is there.

RSJ: Yes.

MB: Otherwise, (Jackson?) will be right here right now.

RSJ: Exactly. It would. This would probably be a seaport or something having factories all along the river and everything. So, it's nice the way it is. It really is.

MB: Kind of a unique place in a way.

RSJ: Yes. It's unlike any other which you'll ever go to. I know I really enjoyed being in Utah a lot, but there's no place like home. I mean, there are very few places you can go to that you can ride down the road and wave to everybody, everybody waves back. If you don't know them, you

know somebody that does know them. So, it's kind of neat like that. I don't know, to me, everything's here. I have the beach within a five-to-ten-minute drive. I have a river that I can just walk right up to and there's plenty of big towns within driving distance.

MB: Yes.

RSJ: I don't have to put up with traffic and trying to get back and forth to work, to leave the house an hour early or something. I'll leave here and in two minutes I'm down there. So that's nice.

MB: Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add, Ray?

RSJ: Not really, unless you have –

MB: I hope in the future, there will still be commercial fishing in the near future?

RSJ: I think there will, probably. I think that there needs to be some serious actions taken with the National Marine Fisheries to look into it. Because it's not that people don't want to fish anymore, it's not that at all. But when you can't make enough money at it to support a family or support yourself, then you have to look for something else. But I think that the biggest thing is just getting people educated on the subject. I've talked to several people that don't even understand what's going on inside the fishing industry. They just see what 20/20 puts on TV or something like that. They just see all the bad and they don't see any of the good side of it, and that's bound to hurt you. But I think that the more people that we can educate through different fishing committees and just talking to people and stuff, the better off we'll be. Because then they'll start to understand our side of it. I'll kind of hit home with them if we can relate it to them somehow.

MB: Well, maybe this film can help a little bit.

RSJ: Well, I really hope it does. I think what you're doing is a really great thing.

MB: Well, I hope so.

RSJ: I mean, well, we've talked about it before, there's not many objective things. Here's the facts on commercial fishing, make of it what you want to make. Everything is usually slanted to one side or another. I don't know, all I'm thinking is it would be really good to have something that just doesn't say slam commercial people or something. Because a lot of it in the regulations and stuff, the commercial people don't have the money to put lobbyists in D.C. I mean, now you can get anything done if you got money and stick a lobbyist up there beating on a senator's door all day long or standing out in front of one of the committee rooms. You can get anything done like that. But when you're talking a couple of a thousand dollar budget against a couple of million dollar budget, you know who's going to win. As sad as it is, money's into everything and it's into politics, probably the worst of anything. So, like I say, I just think education of people is the best thing. The most helpful way of saving our industry now is having people understand us and understand what's happening rather than just seeing what they read in a sport and fishing

magazine about the commercial fishermen killing reefs or something. Because it's not like that at all.

MB: Great stuff. Okay.

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