

Wild Caught
Hubert Smith Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Sneads Ferry, North Carolina
Length of Interview: 00:27:31
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: We're going. Well, since in the last year, there's a lot of things that have been going on.

Hubert Smith: Right.

MB: I don't know where to get started, but let's start with Johnny Wayne and the whole fight over him offloading his crab on his aunt's property. You can start there.

HS: Well, what's happening with Johnny Wayne here is happening up and down the coast of Carolina and up and down the East Coast. Sneads Ferry has been discovered by the baby boomers who are retiring. I understand around five thousand of them a day are now retiring. We were largely undeveloped. People looking for waterfront property flocked here. It just so happened that that coincided with the real estate boom of a couple of years ago. Things really got hot and heavy and prices escalated at an unbelievable rate. Now, they've come back to reason a little bit. But there was such tremendous pressure on waterfront property here that the fishermen were really being pushed out. The way I got to meet Johnny was some of the new residents attempted to use zoning regulations to put him off of his property and to do away with his business because they didn't like having a commercial fisherman in their neighborhood. Kind of interesting that his family has been here for three generations and they've been here for a couple of years. [laughter] But that's how I really got involved in Johnny's case.

MB: So, in other words, if he was offloading the crab on his land, he had a right to do it?

HS: Yes. But they tried to claim that because of zoning that he was in a residential area. Commercial fishing had never been addressed in the relatively new zoning ordinances of Onslow County. They came in about 2004. It's amazing to me that when zoning came to be in this county, they didn't address commercial fishing in a county that has two large festivals that deal with commercial fishing, the shrimp festival, and the mullet festival. But the powers they didn't ever think about the consequences of zoning and commercial fishing, so –

MB: Well, it's been quite a struggle, which we've filmed over the last almost a year now of this case. It's gone back and forth. How are things looking now for –

HS: Right now, it looks pretty positive. The county commissioners have taken a pretty good stand, I think, on the side of commercial fishing and realized that it's heritage and history and that we've been here a long, long time. That just a few years ago, that's all that was here. Things have changed just in the last decade or so, really. So, I hope there's actually a lot of talk now in the state about trying to preserve some of the coastal heritage of North Carolina, not just here in Sneads Ferry and Onslow County. That's being worked on right now in the legislature as we speak. So, I've got hopes for the future that maybe there'll be a little bit of slowing down of the development and the disappearing of the fishing industry.

MB: Well, of course, this latest (wrinkle?) we were just talking about in the marine base wanting about Homeland Security and all that. What about all of that?

HS: Well, the problem there, the Marine Corps has got a big job to do. They're trying to protect

this nation. For them, they're concerned about two things. One is obviously terrorism because terrorists would love nothing better than to attack Camp Lejeune and break the morale and hurt some marines. But number two, they're worried about civilians complaining about their training activities. Because around the country, they've had instances like El Toro and Oceana where they've had a lot of problems from complaining civilians. They're trying to limit growth and keep people away from the base, so that they don't have that problem develop here. I understand that. The locals have always kind of accepted Camp Lejeune. They've been here forever. We know all about it and kind of gotten along and never bothered. But some of the new people coming in have different perceptions. They have begun to do a lot more complaining. The base has accurately identified that as a potential threat. So, that's the reason they've gotten so proactive about trying to keep people away from the base.

MB: So, have they started in certain areas you can't fish?

HS: Yes, already now at Brown's Inlet. They won't even let you stop and bottom fish, even civilians, not just the commercial fishermen. You only can go through there under power now. You can't stop for any reason or anchor for any reason. They won't let the commercial fishermen set nets or crab pots there anymore. That's just been in the last few weeks that that's come to pass.

MB: Then there's the enormous economic Camp Lejeune. I mean, that's what drives the county, right?

HS: As somebody said that Jacksonville is a factory town and Camp Lejeune is the factory. That's exactly right. Jacksonville was a little bitty fishing village, not any larger than Sneads Ferry in 1942. When Jacksonville came here, Richlands was by far larger, which is now one of our medium-sized towns. But Jacksonville has had this tremendous growth. It's all as a result of Camp Lejeune. It's not just the sixty-thousand marines or so. There are a hundred thousand civilian jobs and all that, too, and the tremendous growth going on over there right now. They're closing bases all over the country, this Base Realignment Commission. Camp Lejeune is one of twenty-five megabases that the military now has. So, now, we have coast guard here. We have navy here. We have Homeland Security here. So, this base has grown at an exponential rate. That's also created a problem in the housing industry. They're having trouble building homes here fast enough just to take care of the influx of people coming into Camp Lejeune, not to mention the retirees. So, that's another facet.

MB: Well, that brings up some of the issues that we looked at in the movie. I mean, we were driving to (Harvey?) last night to go get some dinner. That big project, I don't know, like townhomes near where that new coffee house is in the [inaudible], a lot of homes that are still going (there?).

HS: Right. As I just said, a lot of that is not traditional baby boomers retiring. A lot of that is high-income professionals coming in here that work on the base in various capacities. A big contingent of Homeland Security people because this is the East Coast headquarters for Homeland Security now. A lot of the growth here is just new people with jobs that are coming to the area. General Dickerson, who is the East Coast commander for the Marine Corps now, who

is also stationed at Camp Lejeune, just said a couple of weeks ago that he is concerned that there's not enough homes being built just to satisfy the military and government personnel that are coming in. That's a big issue. So, the Marine Corps finds itself in a quandary. They need homes for their employees and their people, but they don't want those homes to be too close to the base. So, it's kind of putting a lot of pressure. It's a double-edged thing for them. They need growth, but they don't need growth. So, they don't know what to do.

MB: Well, let's get back to the whole thing. I mean, I remember going to a meeting (in terms of backing John Wayne with the zoning thing?). What about that? Are there neighbors? I've never seen the hate like I felt that one night with some of those people, the anger against John Wayne. There's been so much greed on people. I think the developer –

HS: Well, there's –

MB: Did they want to put condos along there? Was that the real deal?

HS: That's my opinion. There was a developer out of Colorado who was trying to put together a real estate package for that whole area. He needed some land for condos and also land for a sewage system because down here, we have no sewage system. Any development has to have its own sewage treatment system. They needed a place for that. The Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil. You just mentioned greed. I think that greed for money and that is what caused that. Because some of those same people that were there, some of the most outspoken opponents of Johnny are people that had been here for years and years and years. No commercial fishermen and never been an issue before. But all of a sudden, when there's millions of dollars involved, it becomes a problem. So, I don't really think it was the people as much as it was the greed that was running things in that case.

MB: Is that plan why that guy is still going on, the Colorado developer to put condos in there or –

HS: I understand that it's about to follow through now. I know he had people under contract there, several landowners. Some of those people are now pulling out. The money is not coming through. That's been because of the busting of the real estate bubble. These tremendously high prices of just a few years ago are now coming back down to earth. They can't put these big mega million dollar projects together anymore because the property is just not selling for that much anymore. We've got one house in Sneads Ferry, just as an example. The house was bought for about \$300,000, put on the market with no renovations for about \$2.7 million. Then it was discounted to \$1.9 million. Now, it's been discounted to about \$1.5 million. Eventually, they'll get it down to maybe \$500,000 where it'll sell. [laughter] But that's the example of what was happening here at the beach. A home would be bought for \$2 or \$300,000 and, by an investor, put back on the market three days later for \$7 or \$800,000. There's just no way that any thinking person is going to keep doing that. But it was going on all up and down the coast. Now, all up and down the coast, there are for sale signs. If you go to Topsail Island, 10 miles from here, they've actually had to put in ordinances over there to limit the number of for sale signs that a home can have on it because the people were trying to outdo each other with giant for sale signs. I mean, they look like billboards. But there's hundreds and thousands of homes in this

immediate area for sale. The reason they're for sale was people bought them, thinking they were going to make big money. Now, they're sitting on them and they're not moving. [laughter]

MB: So, the whole real estate thing is really taking a softening up.

HS: Yes. It sure has. There's just no way that a home can go in one day from being worth \$2 or \$300,000 to a million. That's what people were doing here. For a brief period of six or eight months, it was actually happening. People were actually doing that. It's reminiscent of the tech moon that happened in the early part of this century. People were investing in companies that had never made a dime of profit. Stocks were going for millions of dollars on a company that had never turned a dime. All of a sudden, reality struck. People said, "Wait a minute. These companies aren't making money." Now, reality struck here. People are saying, "Wait a minute. These houses aren't going to sell for a million dollars." [laughter] So, that's the reason there's so many for sale signs. A lot of these projects, like the one here at the landing, the Colorado Group, they're on terminal hold right now because they got caught. They were based on those kind of prices. Those kind of prices aren't happening anymore.

MB: Another big issue that I am going to try to cover that's kind of little epilogue, or however you want to call it, the incorporation deal. That's a big one. But talk about that.

HS: There are three groups of people, in my opinion, that are interested in incorporating Sneads Ferry. I think, by far, the largest, most active group is the ones that want it for real estate development purposes. They want the taxpayers to foot the bill for the infrastructure improvements that they need here to be able to develop. Sewer and water and various things like that that they just don't have here. The fact that there's no sewer here is really holding back the waterfront development. Restaurants can't do well. They have to pump their sewer in trucks and things like that. The second group are people that really care about Sneads Ferry and really want to see our heritage preserved and don't want to see us gobbled up by some other community nearby. Then I think the third group of people, they're control freaks. They want to control everything around them. They don't like those crab pots stacked up over there. They don't like that house that's painted blue or they don't like the fact that this guy's grass is a little taller than it ought to be. This is a commercial fishing area. There's lots of equipment lying around and things. They want it to look like one of these control communities. I think those are the three groups. But the most active and outspoken of those has been the developer crowd. They want the infrastructure. That's what they're after.

MB: I remember talking with the people who owns the Millis fish house. I think it's the biggest one.

HS: Yes.

MB: It's a prime piece, (which is?) for sale. I don't know if it's still for sale.

HS: Yes, it is.

MB: They told me rumors of twenty-story condo towers there.

HS: Yes. Immediately adjacent to that was the other Millis fish house, Jack Millis', which has been bought. That was this Colorado Group that was trying to put together a big package in that entire – both sides of the creek where Johnny Wayne Midgett's operation is. They wanted to get both sides of the creek, part of it for sewer and part of it for condos. They were throwing lots of money around. But unfortunately for them, the real estate boom ended right in the middle of all that. The banks kind of started holding back money and those kind of things happened.

MB: Do you think that's not a viable plan anymore?

HS: No, no. The prices that real estate is bringing down here now won't support what they were trying to do. In fact, there's another project that the High Rise Bridge here in Sneads Ferry where they paid almost \$5 million for a piece of property, were going to develop forty-seven units. The sales price was going to be in the \$700,000 range per unit. That project is now unraveled because \$700,000 condos are not selling down here right now. That's way above what the market will bear. The banks are saying, "Wait a minute. This isn't going to sell. So, now, this whole project is on hold." The same thing has happened to the one down where Johnny is. That project is on terminal hold, too. That's the reason some of the landowners (won out?) because they received little down payments. But they haven't got the bulk of their money yet and they want to get out of it now.

MB: So, there was a lot more. I think part of the interesting thing with Johnny Wayne was that the county would have been glad if they could have worked out a deal for him alone, but he wouldn't do that. He was determined to get a county-wide for all the fishermen.

HS: Right. Johnny Wayne is a very unique individual. He truly is concerned about everybody, not just himself. That's the reason so many people have rallied to help him. They know what kind of man he is. He's an honorable person, and people realized that. If the developer crowd would have picked on some people, they could have easily had their way because not many people would have defended them. But Johnny is a guy that everybody here respects. Even some of the people that were his most outspoken opponents respect him. They might not have liked what he was doing, but they respected him as a person. But he refused to just take a settlement in his behalf. He kept pushing making this thing be county-wide. That's the reason we've gotten as far as we have today. Now, it looks like in May or June, there's going to be some things adopted that will protect him and everybody like him.

MB: That's a great thing.

HS: Yes, it is. Actually, now, Mr. Millis' fish house that you just mentioned, he is actually now in negotiations with the State of North Carolina. There's some talk of the state trying to buy some of these commercial properties and preserved them in perpetuity as commercial fishing properties, so that they can never be developed. That will do two things. It will protect our heritage, but also it will protect a valuable source of economy. Commercial fishing is still a big thing here. Last year was one of the biggest catches of shrimp in history. The blackfish industry had one of the largest years in history. I mean, there's nothing wrong with the fishery. But the problem is if the fishermen don't have anywhere to land their catch and the trucks don't have

anywhere to come pick it up and take it to market, the entire economy here will unravel.

MB: That's also what always amazes me that people even from a tourism point of view think – I mean, go to the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco [unintelligible 00:18:02] place. It's a great draw.

HS: For the last thirty years, Sneads Ferry has been a place that people came to go flounder gigging and fishing. It was kind of a middle class resort area where normal people could have a trailer or a little cabin. Then all of a sudden, the boom hit and it got to be where normal, middle class people couldn't be here anymore. But most of the retirees here – and I deal with a lot of them in my business and I talk to a lot of them about this – most of them are really worried that the commercial fishing is going to leave. They came here because they like the quaintness of the area. They like looking out and seeing the boats and the nets. It's interesting. All these developers, if you look at their brochures and their websites, they've got pictures of commercial fishing boats there to sell their developments. But they're the same ones that are trying to manipulate the laws to get rid of the commercial fishermen to get their property. So, that's what people are buying when they come here. They're buying that quaintness and they're buying that history. Then all of a sudden, nobody wants to be here if all you're going to look at is condos. What kind of place is that to live?

MB: Like Myrtle Beach, they've got too much congestion and traffic.

HS: Right. Well, at least at Myrtle Beach, they've got some theaters and some shows. Sneads Ferry doesn't have a lot going for it. We don't have a lot of shopping. I mean, you've got Jacksonville and Wilmington. But right here in this area, there's not a lot to bring people here other than fishing and going on the beach and all that. The quietness and the quaintness of it are what people flock to. Now, some of the people that have been here for years are selling their places and moving because there's too much development here for them.

MB: Interesting. This is kind of a hard question to ask in a way. I mean, given that I'm obviously involved myself in this whole story. When I started this film, I never thought it would end up this whole story, the way it would change, which I try to show in the film. First, it's a film about fishing and the way they fish and the whole infrastructure of it. There are great stories of survival and way of life and all that. But then the whole story of how the town, the struggle to keep it going with all the things we're talking about. Then the film kind of get involved itself.

HS: Yes.

MB: Can you talk a little bit about that?

HS: The film has been instrumental, particularly with the politicians away from this immediate area. We have sent copies of this film to a lot of senators and a lot of people around the state that don't live here and don't have constituents here and don't have direct knowledge. But it has been a wonderful way to let people see the struggle and understand. The film has captured a lot of emotions. That's the thing that people don't understand. It's not just an idea about a piece of real

estate disappearing. It's an idea about a people's way of life disappearing. That's what the film has conveyed. I think, quite honestly, if it weren't for the film, that we would not have the state negotiating with Mr. Millis right now. We wouldn't have the county willing to make concessions and change things. It's hard for county government to do anything that cuts in tax revenues. When they start putting commercial fishing ahead of development, they're limiting tax revenues. No county likes to do that. But I think that people realize, based on the film, that this is a much larger issue than just dollars and cents. This is people's lives. This is people's families. I think that's where it's been so instrumental. Also, it's pointed out the economic impact. I don't think people realize the economy. This country is losing factories daily and losing jobs daily. We're turning into a nation that doesn't make anything or produce anything. Those fishermen are like farmers. They go out there and they do things that help a lot of people. It helps restaurant owners and it helps everybody. I think that the state has begun to look now that we're losing a valuable industry. I think the film has been instrumental in that, too.

MB: Music to my ears.

[laughter]

Let's see now. Is there anything else you think we need to cover?

Female Speaker: I think the film has empowered the fishermen, too.

HS: Yes.

FS: Do you want to talk about that?

HS: Yes, it has. I think that the film has done a wonderful thing. Fishermen are, by nature, loners. They're people that don't choose 9:00 to 5:00 jobs. They'll go out there and fight hurricane-force winds and horrible weather and their fingers freezing and the sun boiling down on them and seasickness and everything else, so they don't have to answer to anybody. They're very independent-spirited people. It's hard to get a group of people like that together because it's just not their nature. They're independent. This film has done a wonderful job of reminding the fishermen that they all have a common goal, that they're all really in the same struggle. I've seen them come together more as a result of this film than any other thing. There have been efforts here for years to organize the commercial fishermen. You could only get a handful. Some of the ones that I've seen come forward and take time and go to meetings and spend money and do things now, I think is the direct result of this movie. Because I think it's kind of given them a common rallying point. We're all in this thing together. It's kind of erased some of the individualism in that industry.

MB: Well, Johnny Wayne brought a whole lot of fishermen, Johnny, all the people. I remember that meeting where they were staying remotely in the back of the hallway behind the meeting, the [unintelligible 00:24:19].

HS: Right.

MB: They stood there for hours. I think Johnny is an eternal optimist, too. I think that all of us that live here realize that there's room for everybody. There's room for growth here. There's room for development. These fishermen need these people. They need somebody to sell their catch to. It's nice to have growth. As long as we have some planning and protect the industry, there's room here for everybody. I think in twenty years, if the state and the county and the local people protect the industry here, I think Sneads Ferry is going to be a very unique place and a wonderful place. I'm hoping that the film will be instrumental in that, too, because there's no reason that we can't be like Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. There's no reason that we can't be famous for our commercial fishing. There's no reason that we can't have educational centers here for kids to go see what it's all about. Just like Fisherman's Wharf, where people can sit and eat a nice lunch and watch the fish coming in and things like that. I think most of us are optimistic about the future of Sneads Ferry. I think that the film has been instrumental in slowing down some of this rampant destruction of the industry and of the infrastructure of fishing. There, again, the film has been a big tool in that. If we can preserve it, I think, in years to come, you're going to be making a movie about Sneads Ferry being very unique and being one of the places that things actually got saved. We're optimistic about our future here. We've got a lot of hard work to do, but I think it's going to be worth it. Had that gone against us, which it probably should have based on the laws – I'm not saying I think it was right because I think the laws were wrong – but had that Board of Adjustment meeting gone against us, then the only move would have been Superior Court and probably \$10,000 minimum to appeal. But because Johnny was able to get that large crowd of people there, the Board of Adjustment refused to rule on it. That put the ball back in the Planning Department's court. Then they had to fix it. But had the Board of Adjustment just said, "No," guilty that night, this would have all probably been over. That was a big night. That was a night that the opposition really underestimated. They sent one spokesman. The lady that showed up there that night to speak against Johnny just couldn't outweigh the hundred or so people that he had there in his behalf. But people didn't realize that was the big battle. That was when this thing really got turned around that evening. The rest of it has been kind of superfluous.

MB: Interesting. The ebb and flow of a (bower is fascinating?).

HS: Yes. It wasn't so much that the laws were bad. It's that commercial fishing didn't get addressed in the first versions of the zoning. So, when it doesn't say anything, it's pretty easy for people to interpret it any way they want to.

[end of transcript]