

Wild Caught  
Jackie Thompson Oral History  
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Length of Interview: 00:24:36  
Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr  
Transcriber: NCC

Matthew Barr: All right. Jackie, talk a little bit about, just to start things off, what it's been like – well, while it's fresh in the mind, you were talking about this incident that happened with your son, I believe.

Jackie Thompson: Yes.

MB: Talk about what happened there.

JT: Our baby son, Billy, was out in the river here with his wife and two kids were on the boat with him. They were up in the pilothouse. He was going on the back deck, bringing the nets up. He was spooling the cables on the winch. They don't usually do it, but he put his foot up to stop the break. When he did, it slipped, and his boot got caught in the winch. The winch was spooling the cables around the winch. It took his foot and started up and going in the winch. He saw his boot as it come back on top of the winch. His leg was in the winch at the time. He stopped it. Then he backed his own leg back out of the winch. His wife said she saw him go down on the back deck. Then she knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what it was. When he finally came up to where she could see him, she said from what she could see, his whole leg looked like it was just spaghetti hanging there. I mean, it had crushed his ankle and popped his bone out the side of his leg. He had to be taken off the boat and brought to Everett's fish house by another boat. Then they took him to the hospital. Right to this day, he has a steel rod from his knee to his ankle. He's got pins in his ankle from that, but he did that.

MB: So, how has it been for you as a wife of a commercial fisherman and with sons who are commercial fishermen to be in – it's a dangerous job.

JT: It's a dangerous job. You worry a lot. When the weather gets bad here, you wonder how it is out there. You really never know if they go out, if they're going to come back in or not. You worry about if they're going to catch anything. Because there's good times, and there's bad times. I've seen some lean times as far as financial with the shrimping industry and the fishing industry. My father was a commercial fisherman. So, we've seen some good times and some bad times. But they all outweigh their – if you use your head and spend your money wisely, you can raise a – we raised a family of five kids in the ocean. They never went hungry. They never went with patched clothes and things like that. I can proudly say my husband was a very good provider. So, we have done real well with it. Although, there's been times, like I say, that I used to go to the beach down there and watch him come in the bar. One of the boats he had was about a 50-footer. He was coming in one day, and it was rough. It had started getting rough. Now, I had sat out there and watched him. I could see the boat rocking just a little bit back and forth. Then all of a sudden, it started getting worse. But I saw him turn to come in the bar and I couldn't watch it anymore because the boat was rolling and dipping and diving so bad. It really scared me that he wasn't going to be able to get in the bar without getting hurt or something happening to the boat. So, I don't like to watch things like that. Another incident, so, I was down here at New River Inlet. My daughter-in-law and I were there watching my son come in. He got right in the middle of the bar and his steering broke. It just happened so there was another boat right ahead of him. He went back and got him and towed him through the bar. Had it not been for that, he probably maybe would've lost his life. So, there's been some – it's dangerous. It's a dangerous living, but it's a nice living. Because you can make your own hours.

You can go out and you know when you need to go out. You know when you don't need to go out. They learn a lot. People think – when they think about fishermen, a lot of times, I've come in contact with this when I was a younger child going to school. They would think if you're a fisherman's daughter or a son, you were kind of looked down upon because they just didn't know anything. But they just don't really realize what all you have to know in your head to be a fisherman. Because you have to have a lot more knowledge than people think you do. When you go out there and you've got to be against all Mother Nature, that she's put out there. You've got to know what to do when those things come up and what to do to keep you and the crew that you've got on there safe.

MB: Well put. Because it's inevitable that some things are going to happen, it seems like.

JT: Yes. Yes.

MB: Well, so, that must – I've done interviews with policemen and policewomen. I mean, their husbands or wives always have to worry.

JT: Yes.

MB: I mean, that must be hard though, year after year.

JT: Yes, it is. It is. It's very hard. I mean, because you never quit worrying. I mean, he's been doing it all his life. My father did it all his life. Really, I could stand on the – when I was small and could see my father when he would come in the inlet, and he'd come where I could just see the boat. I could tell if it was his boat or not. You just know it's their boat. Whenever I would watch him come in, I could see when he was coming in and everything. It's hard to really put into words how you do feel about it. But then anything you do this day and time, there's a danger in it. There's a lot of people who say they don't know why people want to get into fishing business because there's not any future in it. But how many people do you see nowadays that's having – they're in a public job for nineteen, nineteen and a half, twenty, twenty-two years, and then they get rid of them before they can retire. So, I mean, it works both ways.

MB: Well, it seems like there's a sense of freedom in being –

JT: Yes, there is. They've got a lot more freedom. They're their own boss. That's one thing I think. A lot of them go in, it gets in their blood. They go out there and they – I've heard a lot of them – and I know myself, when I go out on the boat, there's a peace out there. You can leave the boat and get on the boat from the dock. You're not even 15, 20 feet from the dock, and there's just a peace out there that you can't explain. It's just a calmness out there on the river that nobody can explain. I think that's why a lot of men do, and young boys do get in it. I know a lot of our boys have followed in their father's footsteps and I think that's why. It's because they were on the boat as young children with him, and they found that peace and that calmness. It got in their blood and that's what they wanted to do.

MB: So, it's been a good life here.

JT: Yes, it has. It really has. I was born and raised here. In fact, I was born, I guess about a hundred yards from here. My home used to be right – my aunt and uncle used to own this house. We bought it from her daughter and son that had bought it. But my home used to be right across the street here. That's where I was born. So, I've lived here all my life. So, I've seen a lot of changes in Sneads Ferry. But I've seen some for the good, some for the bad. But as a whole, right in this area where the fishing community is, it stayed close knit. Most of the ones that are here are local people – local fishermen. We've got some fishermen that came from other areas and things, but most of them are still local people.

MB: So, talk about the sense of community in Sneads Ferry.

JT: Well, there's a lot in this area that we live in, what we call the landing down here, close to the water. That is Fulcher's Landing. This is what this area right here has been called because it was so close to the water. It's like we're one big family. Everybody knows everybody. You can go to the store, you can go to the cafe, and you'll run into somebody you know. A lot of times you go to Jackson and see people that – 20 miles away from here, you'll see people from here that you've known all your life. It's just like if there's a death or if there's a sickness or something like that, then the rest, they'll all come around and help do what they can.

MB: Yes. I heard about that when I interviewed Little Paul Huey, the clammer. When he had a massive heart attack, and they had to take him to Duke Hospital and all that and the whole. I interviewed his wife too. The whole community came out and helped out.

JT: Yes. Yes, they do. They do. Everybody seems to stick together because everybody knows what it is to be in a – because when the breadwinner of the family is a fisherman and his income is completely cut off, everybody knows what the family's facing. So, everybody kind of comes together and tries to help everybody how they can.

MB: Well, living in a big – Greensboro is not that big a city, but I lived in Los Angeles for a long time, and Miami, they don't even know you exist, let alone when there's a problem. Because you're just some guy walking down the street. So, if you have a problem, that's your problem. I think that's really part of the problems we have in our society. A lot of it's just due to all these people that don't know each other. There's no sense of community, all that stuff. So, you've seen a lot of changes in Snead's Ferry.

JT: Yes. Yes. Like you were just mentioning now, there are people that move in here that may be our next-door neighbor may live two or three doors down, and they may be the type of people that don't want to communicate with you that much. But still, the people that are from Sneads Ferry that have been here for a few years or they're in the same industry, seems like they're all together. They're mainly together. It's just a tight-knit community. It always has been. Although, there's more people here now than there was when I was smaller. It's still a tight-knit community.

MB: It's pretty amazing growing up right here. I mean, literally right here.

JT: Yes [laughter].

MB: Not many people have that.

JT: I mean, I saw this house built. I saw this one here built. So, this is –

MB: That's pretty amazing. Talk about your church a little bit. You're very active in the church. Can you talk about that?

JT: Oh, yes. Yes. I'm very active in the church. Well, my mother and father were members of the Salem Baptist Church here in Sneads Ferry. That's where I grew up, and that's where I first started going to church at. But in 1974, I became a member of the Sneads Ferry Pentecostal Holiness Church. That's where I've been ever since, and I'm very active in that. I'm church secretary and treasurer. I'm the song leader and the choir director. I'm the women's ministries director. The conference has now appointed me as a women's ministries director over our district conference. So, I'm quite active in that. That keeps me pretty well busy. Keeps me from worrying about him too much [laughter].

MB: Well, that's wonderful. I was very glad to be able to be there this last Sunday. We'll be filming a little bit of it this Sunday coming up. I think it's also wonderful to have a fisherman who's also the preacher.

JT: Yes. John has been a real blessing to our church. Because when John first started, he was a Sunday school teacher. I remember the first Sunday he ever taught Sunday school. If anybody had seen him then and to see him now, there's no doubt. You know that there's a God in heaven that would have to bring him as far as John has come. I mean, I've seen him grow. I've seen how the Lord has really brought him and how he's wrestled with his fishing and his preaching too. He feels the duty to – he's got to do both. Our church is not big enough that we can have a full-time pastor. So, he has to work on the side as a commercial fisherman. But still, he's got that freedom that he can go out and come in. He don't have to punch a time clock as far as having somebody say, "No, you can't go preach tonight because you've got to be here." I think that's why the Lord called him to do that.

MB: I also liked the way he brought in some examples from his –

JT: He does that a lot. His experience is from the – and I think when he's on the boat, he – I talked to him one time because I'm also on the church board of the church. He was talking and he said a lot of times, that's where he gets a lot of his sermons and a lot of thoughts when he's out there. It seems like his mind is clearer. I can understand that because you can have a lot clearer thoughts out there. Because you don't have the hustle and bustle and the people running in and out and talking to you and things like that. You can get quiet out there, and things can come through your mind. He's brought a lot of things to the church through that way.

MB: Well, let me ask you this. I mean, when Dolphus was talking about that really serious incident of the glass that almost got his jugular vein. My God, when you heard that, what was it like for you?

JT: Terrible. Terrible. [laughter] Terrible. It is just one of those things that – I'm one of these types of people that I can go through a crisis like that. Then after everything's over is when I fall apart. Just like when he had his heart surgery, I was okay until after he had it, then I fell apart [laughter]. But when you hear something about that, you wonder, "Well, Lord, why are you allowing this to happen?" Because he was out there trying to do something good, and he was out there trying to make a living. But it's not for us to question a lot of things that happen. A lot of things are going to happen regardless of what – we don't understand things the way they do happen sometimes.

MB: Yes. Well, and I wonder a little bit why, when people eat seafood, do they even really think about just the people who literally are risking their lives?

JT: No. I honestly don't believe that people realize. I've been down to Topsail Beach years back when he sold shrimp off the boat. That was when shrimp were a lot more plentiful because there were less boats shrimping this area. So, there was more. One boat could catch more shrimp. Of course, he would catch, say five or six, seven boxes a day and he'd sell them off the boat. They'd see him getting all that money. "Oh, my gracious, you're getting all that money." But they don't stop to realize that all the fuel and the parts, it's got to go on the boat. The nets have got to be made. If you tear up a net – I mean, he can go out there one day and destroy a net and cost 700, \$800 to put it back on. He can go out there and blow an engine. I mean, the boat that he's got now, we bought it. We didn't even get it home before the engine blew up on it. We bought it in April, and it was June before we got it running. He put two engines in it. He put two engines in it before he ever got it going. So, I mean, there's a lot more – when people see seafood, I think they really have the misconception, oh, all they've got to do is just go out there and get it and bring it back in. But there's a lot more danger and risk. If people really knew, they'd have more appreciation for it, I feel like, and the people that do that work.

MB: I understand how, especially, that it is one of the most honorable and most ancient professions in human history all over the world. People fish all over the world. Every culture. How is it that some people could not have a good regard for fishermen? How do you think that holds? Stereotype that go on about this?

JT: I think it's because people don't take the time to really look and see, and really think, really watch and talk to people. Mainly, it's the not talking and not finding out what – like you're doing now, not really talking to people to find out what does go on and how you do this. All they do is walk down there to the boat and see what's on the boat. They don't realize what they had to go through to get that up there and get it on there. So, I think that that's what it is, is people just don't understand. I think a lot of people think that it's just fun [laughter]. They don't see the danger. Because they're not doing it themselves, they don't see the danger themselves that there is.

MB: I also do think that in our culture, a lot of people don't appreciate what working people do. Not just fishing.

JT: That's right. That's right.

Dolphus Thompson: That's right.

MB: All kinds of working people, whether miners or farmers. Look at the farmer, nobody cares about the farmer.

JT: Yes. Just like our food that we eat, they take that for granted because they don't understand what that farmer has to go through to get that food to their table – what expense he had to go through. They gripe because they've got to go to the grocery store and pay so and so for it. But they don't understand what he had to go through with and what he had to spend to get it to that grocery store.

MB: A farmer has a bad year if it doesn't rain or whatever, then – there are similarities between farming and fishing.

JT: Yes. There is a lot of similarities. Just like these hurricanes that we've had, they hurt the fishing industry and the shrimping industry quite a bit. The floods and things like that, because it'll wash the baby shrimp out of where they're in their tributaries. They'll wash them out before they're grown and ready to go out. So, when it's time for you to catch the big shrimp, they're not there because they've already been washed out by the – because they're not going to stay in fresh water. They're going to go out where salty water – where the water's more – got more brine to it, they say. So, when Floyd came last year, it hurt the shrimping industry this year.

MB: Well, so you've raised five children, and you've seen the town go through a lot of changes. So, do you think there's still a sense of community in Steads Ferry?

JT: Yes.

MB: You talked about that, but –

JT: Yes, definitely. Yes, I really do, especially in the ones that have been here a long time. It's grown to the point that there are a lot of places that they'll come say, "Where's so-and-so at?" That they go down in these cart paths and these woods, and they put up houses in these little developments. But the main people that have always been here, there's still a sense of love and community because everybody does – when I was little, just about everybody was kin around here. I mean, in some way or other, through your mama, through your daddy or something, everybody was family. That's the way it was. It still is to a certain extent. There's a lot of first and second and third cousins. Just like I'm kin to some of the Millis. I'm kin to some of the Midgetts and the Edens and things like that. So, it's still a lot of family connected. That's the way it was. When I was growing up, it was mostly, you could go around the shore, and you would bump into some of your family [laughter].

MB: Yes. That's amazing. People start saying, "Oh, that's my wife's first cousin daughter," and I think, "You lost me a long time."

[laughter]

DT: They say, "If you don't [unintelligible], you might hurt somebody [unintelligible ].

JT: Well, just like Tim Millis' mother was my grandmother's sister. So, when I was growing up, everybody was just about related around here.

MB: Well, that's another thing. In other words, when one boat tow the other one in, the community of fishermen, like if they're out there, they'll drop anything to help you to [unintelligible].

JT: Yes, they will. They will.

MB: They won't wait for the Coast Guard.

JT: No, no.

DT: Well, the Coast Guard will tell you that they hardly ever had to help anybody in Sneads Ferry because Sneads Ferry is a place that takes care of its own. If one says he is broken down, somebody's going to pick him up.

JT: Well, he had about a 70-foot boat at one time, and he broke down in the ocean. I was down there by the river when he had was coming in. The man, J.B. Edens that towed him in, now he had a real small boat. Now, that was a funny looking sight – seeing that little bitty boat come up that canal, up the river, pulling that great, big boat behind it. But he stopped what he was doing and pulled him in that day so he could come in.

DT: Yes, she was 7,500.

MB: So, yes, when we were out on the boat, when the boat in front of us was having that problem the other night, you hear on the radio

JT: Yes, that's right.

DT: That's right. They're ready to help him right there.

JT: They will.

MB: They're all went back and forth on what to do and how that –

JT: They all know what to do. I mean, it seems like when something like that happens, they all come together, and they all know what to do. Because most of the time, some of them have been in that same spot themselves and they know what to do to help the other one.

MB: So, there's a tremendous amount of knowledge.

JT: There is. There's a lot more knowledge in it than what people give the fisherman credit for. A lot more. Like, they have got these machines and everything, but they've still got to have the knowledge to work the machines. If those machines may go out, they've still got to have enough



knowledge to still work that boat and get it back in and know what hang is to tow where. So, really, they can't rely on the machines so much because they've still got to have enough knowledge to get in and out and to catch the shrimp.

MB: I sure got that feeling like with all these people I've been out with, like Mac Liverman or John knowing – just having also the instinct or knowledge of where to drag.

JT: It is. It is. I don't care. They can have all the modern equipment on there that they want to, but they've still got to have enough knowledge in their head from past experiences. Because if that machine goes out, then what are they going to do?

MB: Yes. Well, like when the alternator went out, all those machines went down except for the radar, for some reason. I don't know why. But anyway, I mean, they had to feel their way back –

JT: That's right.

MB: – basically, in darkness.

JT: That's right. So, if they –

DT: The radar is an amazing piece of machinery. The time the lightning struck us, said the [unintelligible] melted everything on it, but the radar. I had the [unintelligible] the radar. Had several kids on there. It never hurt nobody. It just melted all the data in that big [unintelligible] about \$2,000 on there and everything on it. All the radios, everything that was operating off of FAR, except that radar, and it never did quit working.

MB: That's amazing

DT: I mean, when it hear it just – and all the antennas looked like where you took an aircon and put the shutters down, well, they just destroyed all the antennas. But getting back to the people, 90 percent of the people that go out on a boat and see it done appreciate it. But we got a contractor come by here. He went out with me one time. He'll stop doing anything he's doing right now if I call him, and he'll be ready to go. He loves Buddy more than anything in the world. He said he understands what the situation is. Most people – that lady that called her that wanted a 100-, 150-pound shrimp, she's from around Illinois someplace. Because she comes every year.

MB: Well, I think a lot of people appreciate it. Unfortunately, some people just don't know.

JT: Yes.

MB: It's a matter of just being interested and trying to find out for yourself, not just –

JT: I don't think there's enough publicity really out about things like this, like you're doing. There's not enough of it out for people to understand really what does go on. They think that, oh,

they're just going out there for a boat ride, or they're just going out there. They don't understand what really the technique there is to going out and to doing what the job that they are doing.

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

JT: No, not really. Like I said, it's a good life, but it's got its ups and downs. You may have a paycheck this week, you may not have one next week. But you just got to know where to put everything. But mainly, it's a good life. Like I said, we raised a good family, and I'm proud of our family. Proud of the boys that follow in their father's footsteps. But we try to get them to do another business because it is getting to be more complicated because there is so many people in it. But other than that, it's –

MB: Well, there it goes.

[end of transcript]