Wild Caught
Lisa Whitman-Grice Oral History
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Interviewer: MB – Matthew Barr
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Matthew Barr: All right. Well, to start us off, Lisa, can you give me your full name and then tell us a little bit about your background, where you studied, what you studied, and maybe a little bit about what led you to your career here at the Onslow County Museum.

Lisa Whitman-Grice: Okay. My name is Lisa Whitman-Grice. I'm the assistant director here at the Onslow County Museum. I am getting ready to celebrate my 13th anniversary here at the museum. I am originally from Onslow County. I did great undergraduate work at East Carolina University in public history and have a master's degree from UNC Wilmington in public history, museum administration. The reason I am here is because I'm from here, and when I graduated from college, I had the opportunity and the good fortune and blessing to be able to come back and take care of my history, my family's history, and the community that nurtured me. So, that's been very important.

MB: Well, talk a little about your family.

LWG: I have ancestry on both my mother and father's side who have been in Onslow County, literally, since the 18th century and had two grandfathers who were in the United States Marine Corps who came here during World War Two and married local girls. So, I have a connection to the Marine Corps in Camp Lejeune, which is a significant part of our county's history as well. Came from primarily agricultural roots here in the area. So, that's been a real, as I say, a blessing to be able to help preserve that history and heritage.

MB: Very good. I'm trying to provide a little bit of context for some of the early days here on Onslow County. Obviously, the documentary is centered on Sneads Ferry, but fairly typical of a number of coastal little towns where fishing has become – and farming. But talk a little bit about how people came to settle in this area.

LWG: The real motivation for people coming to Onslow County was what natural resources could be provided to them. Here at the Onslow County Museum, our permanent exhibit is called The Water and the Wood. That's because our natural environment, our natural setting, provided for the life ways of the people that were here and provided for their cultural development. We are a product of the natural setting. So much of that is the dependency upon the rivers, the waterways, the sounds, and obviously the Atlantic Ocean. That's what people came here to do to make a living. They would tap the pine trees that were here for naval stores, and naval stores were used to build ships. What attracted people to this area were those abundant natural resources. They could tap the pine tree for naval stores. The sap of the pine tree could be converted to tar, pitch, and turpentine used in shipbuilding. Ships were built here. They had the abundance of the sea. Here in Richlands, our name is pretty self-explanatory, the abundance – fertility of the soil for farming. So, people here depended on those resources, depended on the waterways, and depended on the land and depended on the soil to provide for their families. In our coastal communities such as Sneads Ferry, that was a mainstay. Their livelihood, they were farmers, but the sea supplemented that income. They depended on the sea. Our very nature of the people who are here in this community in Onslow County, are products of those natural forces, the environmental forces that they deal with.

MB: Could you give us some of the dates? When did people first settle here? Besides,

obviously, the Native Americans.

LWG: Oh, certainly. You mentioned the Native Americans, and that was approximately ten thousand years ago that Native Americans came here and made use of those same natural resources. Their favorite food, if you will, were oysters. They tapped those oysters that were there thousands of years ago and lived off of them. Then the first European settlers who came here came here in about 1713. They made use of those same resources that the Native Peoples had thousands of years before, even so much as using landings on the river that had been kind of cleared and footpaths through the forest. Again, those first people came here primarily for naval stores, but because of the abundance that the environment provided.

MB: So, around 1713.

LWG: That's 1713. They settled in places like Stump Sound community or district – township, which is what Sneads Ferry and Topsail and Holly Ridge are all considered part of what we call the Stump Sound District. The Stump Sound, obviously, is that area, that waterway, which is in between the mainland and the barrier island and then the ocean. So, the sound was very, very important, important not only for providing food, but also transportation. Because waterways were the primary means of transportation, especially in that early colonial period.

MB: So, can you tell a little about the development of towns like Wilmington and Morehead City? How did those towns grow up?

LWG: Well, those towns which surround us, which are in other counties, again, very much follow a similar pattern but different means of motivation in terms of development and a different character. Onslow County has a very different character from Carteret County and from New Hanover County to our south. There's a different nature that we all share the idea of being a coastal community and kind of those same things you learn about in school, about man and nature and living with nature and then battling nature, things like hurricanes. So, being a coastal community has, with it, its own very special circumstances and this love of the sea that we all share. Then there's obviously the fact that we do have to, you know, do battle with hurricanes. It makes us very different from Piedmont and from the mountains. So, we share that kinship, being coastal people.

MB: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about how fishing and commercial fishing really began in this area?

LWG: Commercial fishing began as more of supplemental. People have always fished. People have always fished in this area. People have always depended upon the sea and the waterways, the rivers. Commercial fishing was first more of a supplement to a farmer's income. It wasn't something that was done year-round. It really kind of began as a true vocation after the American Civil War, the 1880s, 1890s, 1900. Simultaneously, commercial fishing and fishing as real practiced recreational fishing kind of came up around the same time, around that turn of the century, when this area began being recognized as almost a resort community. It was called a sportsman's paradise. People came here via the train to hunt and to fish. So, we had rod and gun clubs, or gun and reel clubs, people who were coming here to set up camps for people to hunt

and fish. At the same time, there were people in our coastal communities who were commercial fishermen. So, that was – they came up together. People have always either fished for food or for recreation. But for real, directed recreational fishing and real commercial fishing, that was really kind of a late 19th, early 20th century development.

MB: Talk a little bit about the early days of commercial fishing. There was obviously a very labor-intensive process. Can talk about it? Like the menhaden and the gathering, what was it like?

LWG: Well, when we look at photographs, we see the number of men that had to haul in nets. I recently heard of a story from one gentleman, when he talked about hauling in nets and having to be careful about sharks. You know, not only would it tear up the net, but there was the obvious danger to the fishermen. So, there was that challenge. There was that – the fact that so many hands were required to haul in those big nets. Then the little details, when we think about the small work, the small handwork, and real focus work, like making nets by hand, that, to me, is an artistry. It's like weaving a blanket or quilting, the small handwork that men and women did. We have a lovely photograph here in the museum of a woman mending a fish net with – it's a cotton net, and she uses a wooden needle that's obviously handmade. It's not something that you would be able to go and purchase. It's a custom hand tool that she then uses to create this web of this net and weaves it. I just think that that's beautiful. It's not just the fact that it's labor intensive, but the love that the fishermen had to have had and still have, obviously, for the sea and their families and the connection there, I think is very important.

MB: Well, that's a very good and well put. I mean, to me, that's really motivation for doing this documentary, for me, is that sense of tradition and love of the sea and of an ancient occupation that goes way back to the beginnings of human history, really. Living here now, do you still feel like that's a powerful part of the Onslow County culture, the fishing, the commercial fishing, and the places like, well, I guess Morehead City, or all these towns along here have?

LWG: There is still that feeling when you visit those small pockets. Because that's what they are. They're these little hidden pockets that when you drive off the main highway, such as Highway 17, which runs, you know, the full Atlantic coastline, and when you duck off of Highway 17, and you go into these small pockets of fishing villages, they're almost – I don't want to say lost in time, but they retain so much of their original character and the pockets of the local accent that you still hear that hasn't become softened with time. There's just such a beauty of the language of the people who live in these little communities. There's still such a commitment to the water, not just from my livelihood standpoint, but wanting to preserve it and conserve it and protect it because that's their livelihood. But it's also from where they came from. The water has sustained families for two hundred years, and they want it to continue to do that. So, there's that component of it as well, is wanting to take care of the waters that have provided for them for so long. You can still feel that.

MB: You hit the nail on the head. I mean, that's exactly right, that feeling. This is funny; you've had the language. I've heard some words in the last five – nary. You didn't catch nary a shrimp. It sounded like some old English thing, you know? I mean, it's funny. I know I've heard of the high tiders and all that.

LWG: I love the high tiders. But even here in Onslow County, we do use – my mother used to tell me to take up, when I was a child. That's an old English phrase which means to stop. You still have – here in the south, but especially in areas which have remained somewhat isolated – those words and that language that's been retained. My grandmother lived for years on Stump Sound in the [19]60s and [19]70s. It was just such a special place for me to go as a child. Because she had an alligator in her backyard and ducks and a maritime forest. It was just such a beautiful place.

MB: This is very good stuff. I like the energy. Going off 17 and these little pockets, like Sneads Ferry is a good example.

LWG: Exactly.

MB: What is the future going to be, do you think? What do you think? Will they be able to keep going?

LWG: Well, there are challenges, but I feel good when I hear about programs at high schools and community colleges, where they want to train young people to bridge those two cultures, the technology of modern fishing and the traditions of traditional – it's redundant, but the traditions that are there in the community and that love of the sea and that love of the waterways, with the new technology that's available and wanting to ensure to do conservative – not conservative, but conservation-minded aquaculture. We hear about agriculture, but aquaculture, really knowing how to make the most of those resources without depleting them, making the most of technology. Then with projects at the schools and here at the museum and in the community, ways in which to preserve that, I think, is really crucial. We have to start focusing on that now because we would hate for that to be lost. We would hate for those traditions to be lost or for it to be something that's, you know, considered anachronistic or just quaint. We want it to be a living, thriving thing. That would be my hope for those communities. With current efforts, things like the Shrimp Festival, which still celebrate those traditions, I think, are promising and really hopeful ideas. I think it's terrific.

MB: Good. I think this covers it. Is there anything else that you can think of to what we've been talking about here?

LWG: I don't think so.

MB: Okay. Good. All right.

LWG: Was that okay?

MB: That was great.

[end of transcript]