

Interview with Leroy Beavers

Narrator: Leroy Beavers

Interviewer: Monet Murphy

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Location: Savannah, Georgia

Project Name: Georgia Black Fishermen

Project Description: African American participation in marine-related careers began as early as 1796, when the federal government issued Seamen's Protection Certificates to merchant mariners defining them as "citizens" of the United States effectively making maritime employment one way for Blacks to shape their identities. This collection This project documents the fishery-related occupations of African Americans in coastal Georgia 1865 to present and gather information for future work that may ascertain the relationship between their decreased participation and changes in regional fish populations and the fishing industry.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

Transcription Team: Michelle Duncan, PhD.

Abstract:

On July 15, 2010 Monet Murphy interviewed Leroy Beavers as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Leroy grew up in a fishing family in McIntosh County in Sherman Bluff, Georgia — 30 miles south of Savannah. His love for fishing, imparted by his grandfather, deepened as he grew older. He fished often while stationed in various locations during his 20 years of military service. Fishing taught him patience, which he incorporated into all aspects of his life. After leaving the military, Leroy began working in his father's barbershop where he still works and intends to pass on to his grandson. He recalls his family's involvement in the fishing and shrimping industries and the changes and obstacles faced by the Black community. Leroy advocates for more education and restrictions to improve declining populations of his favorite species, trout.

Leroy Beavers: 1964, you know, Civil Rights – 1964. The new found freedom these guys don't know too much about this. And it's just plain home-grown thing, you know. My grandfather—now my grandfather was a fisherman, an ocean fisherman. He made nets. He had a—first boat I remember my grandfather having was a long john boat, big one! He was a crab fisherman. And he also was a farmer and he was down in McIntosh County in a place called Sherman Bluff, Georgia. Down in Sapelo Island down in that area down there. All his sons were fishermen and they owned their own shrimp boats. My uncle Jake had owned the *Jack*, that was a 75-footer shrimp boat. My uncle Drew had the *Melody* and *Grandma*. They were named for family members. Now so far of what's going on now with our kids – why fishing not taking over cause a lot of the older guys my age are patience-less. I have a lot of patience. I take my grandson all the time, every chance I get. The first time my father ever took me fishing, the first time really holding a fishing rod and you know you got another life at the other end of it and it's something that you can take home to eat. Like “bring home the bacon.” It was just something to me. I was in the ocean ever since. I spent a considerable time in the Army. I spent over 20 years in the Army. Every place I went, it had to be a place for me to fish. I had to fish. But teaching our kids? Our kids, they don't want to do – they got they own saying, “Well I'm not going to be like my daddy. I'm not going to be like my daddy.” In other words, my daddy made me go fishing. You want to go fishing? My daddy get up early in the morning time going fishing, it wasn't necessarily I don't want to fish, “it's too hot out there”. We didn't play that, my father's generation and then I picked up on that, that's where I learned it from. When you go fishing, you're going fishing! You're not going to lay in bed and wear the earphones all day long and listen to music. No, no you gotta do something constructive. Fishing was a constructive thing. Not only that, you learned things about life. A lot of things, like the ocean — we need that ocean out there, that ocean actually it's a part of the human body. We're not taking time out to teach our kids this. We just dying out, you know. I had a friend who passed and I went in his garage. He had so many fishing rods, but I didn't know he fished! And he got old and he didn't know I fished and we never talked about it and he passed. And it bothered me so bad to see all these fishing rod, and I knew this guy for 20 years.

MM: Oh wow, and you never knew he fished.

LB: We was in the Army together. One day he told me he wanted to go crabbing. Now, I didn't never like going crabbing.

MM: Why was that?

LB: No! It was too easy.

MM: It was too easy?

LB: Yeah.

MM: Ok, so, wait, explain to me how that works?

LB: Well, you take a crab and put a crab in a basket – put a piece of meat in the basket, drop the basket in the water, crab walk into the basket.

MM: So, it was just too easy for you?

LB: Yeah, you got to put ‘em in the bucket. But fishing is actually skill, patience—it taught me a lot of patience. It’s been days I’ve been fishing and didn’t catch no fish at all, like eight hours, but it was sort of a piece of serenity in there that I know that I can just sit there and have that much patience. That gave me patience for other things in life. That will give you patience to sit down and explain to my grandson. My grandson went out there one time and said, “Poppy, we ain’t catchin’ nothin’.” “Well, son we can sit and talk.” We had a good conversation and then all of sudden that bite hit. Now once we you have a first strike, it doesn’t matter if you catch a fish or not. It really doesn’t matter. But life as a fisherman—you talking about fisherman in general or African American fisherman?

MM: Any fisherman, it don’t matter.

LB: Well, African Americans, we don’t have time to teach our boys [when we could potentially work and make for the family?], and then our vacation time come round, we are not going to spend no time sitting there in the water with a line and a hook. Talking ‘bout pulling up a fish.

MM: I understand, right it’s your time to relax.

LB: Some other guys, [they were raised a little different?]. It’s a social and cultural thing in a sense, especially us as Black men. Because there a lot of Black men—see I learned differently because I came from a fishing family. My grandfather would take me out on the river. My grandfather didn’t eat no pork. [laughing]. He would take the hog and slaughter a hog and use the hog meat for crab meat. And what pieces of hog that he didn’t use, he’d give way to other families who did eat pork. He raised hogs specifically for the meat just to use for the crab bait.

MM: So where did your grandfather fish at?

LB: Now, you know where Sapelo Island at?

MM: I do!

LB: And that river between Sapelo Island and Cressent, Georgia, right in that area. I think that’s called Sapelo Sound or Ossabaw Sound. Somewhere in there, but all through that river Newport, South Newport, the name of it was South Newport.

[Break in audio].

LB: But fishing in the United States and then it’s gotten so commercial. You know, bass boats

and these tournaments. It's almost like golfing. I can't afford golf clubs. You know what I am saying? The boats, the prices are out of some people's range and if you don't get the sponsors, it's not recreational no more. It's not just the fun and game, it's the livelihood. It's about who can catch the bigger fish, the most fish, who can make the most bucks. You know, it's a commercial thing now. Some of these guys want to do, they want to get them a boat, get a sponsor and make their commercials, but fishing actually really hasn't changed that much. We still got, mostly old guys still fishing. Old men, they still fishing, and they are at the river. That's because now we are now in our golden years, we don't have anything else to do. I missed [inaudible]—I didn't do too bad as a young man that made me be able to be in the position I am now today. I own a business—my father owned a business. What it was, the business was passed down to me, which I'm going to in turn pass down to my grandson. It was a profitable business, a barber shop. Leisure time to me now is strictly fishing, strictly fishing. I was to the beach the other day. I was at the beach when the young lady saw me at the beach? I did not go to play in the water. I was upset because there were so many people out there. Things have changed! You could go to the beach and just fish! Now you get all these, the influx of people come in now that you can't fish. And the area we used to fish at is being—it's like the rainforest being cut away for the timber. You know what I'm saying? Since, figured out what I'm saying? Because now the people are there, so the fish aren't there and then the fish are getting smaller. What's happening with that? And we used to go one time to catch fish, now you be lucky if you come back with at least three fish. Now you go further out in a boat, in the ocean, you could get maybe about 15, 20 maybe 100 fish. But you know, I like to fish in the surf. Because I don't like boats too much.

MM: I understand.

LB: Yeah, I stay in because I was born into a fishing family and I was raised on a shrimp boat, I never trusted the ocean. I had an uncle who died in the ocean. Oh yeah! A storm sank their boat and they died.

MM: Right here on the coast of Georgia?

LB: Yeah, yeah. My uncle Harry, he died in a storm down in Sherman Bluff. This was before I was born. My uncle Daber, he's since passed, he was in storms; a lot storms. All my uncles endured storms, but they good boats. Mostly laid down on the side and get right back up. That's the part I didn't like. I couldn't too much handle that. And then you know, the fish life was being depleted; something was happening to 'em. Sometimes you pull a fish out of the water and they got a different type of growth on 'em. You know, genetically you know what is this here when you see a growth on a fish. You know, you scared to eat that.

MM: I understand.

LB: And then we're getting different type of species here that we never got before.

MM: Now what types are you seeing?

LB: I see a—they got what they call angel catfish. You ever heard of that before?

MM: I've never heard—I've heard of the two separate fish, but never heard of that.

LB: I never knew they had a saltwater catfish!

MM: We was just talking about that. I thought they, like you said, only in freshwater.

LB: Freshwater, right, in brackish water. I have caught—he gotta a long dorsal fin with a spine in right? But it got a long piece of needle or whatever you want to call it, that hangs off that makes him look like an angelfish. His head is like a bull catfish, it's a catfish! He got the whiskers, but I've never—but I said, "What in the heck does the catfish come out of saltwater?"

MM: We were just discussing that.

LB: And uh, porgies. Have you ever heard of that before?

MM: I have!

LB: We ain't never had them down here, but you catch 'em down here now. I think a lot times, these fishing trawlers when they catch both at sea and come back, some of the fish are still alive, and they kick back and then they don't leave and I think that's how the migration – they start living in this here part of the country. Like sharks, you go fishing now and that's all you catch is sharks now—blacktips. It's just certain time of the year, it's nothing but blacktip sharks. Nothing but blacktip sharks. If you catch you a whiting, you better pull 'em in fast 'cause blacktip, he's trailing right behind your heading to get 'em off that line.

MM: So are whiting plentiful in this area or where you fished at?

LB: Sometimes. Sometimes. Seem like whiting—I read in a book that whiting's supposed to be a year-round animal. Certain times of the year —

MM: You can't find them?

LB: —you won't catch 'em. It's supposed to be a cold-water fish like a perch, [inaudible] but in the wintertime you might could catch one or two. But it's supposed to be a cold-water fish, you supposed to be able to catch 'em out there! And the spot tailed bass, can't catch them. They are far and few between. It's just that, you know, I know it's older fisherman gone. I know they got

trawlers out there.

MM: Yeah, of course.

LB: I know they pullin' 'em in by the tons. If there's anything y'all need to do, ya'll need to stop them from fishing in American waters. Really! Because I know this is all we got in the United States. Our states ain't Korea. You know what these guys do over there in Korea? When they catch a fish they immediately gut it and throw the remains back into the water. They don't care about size or weight or anything like that. They don't have the restrictions over there. Now see when these people migrate to the United States, and you know we have pretty strict laws here now too now. I know that, but they got to be enforced. You got these foreign nationals come here and when they fish they do all kind of things. They catch—and I have seen crab [inaudible]. Education is something else also about what you can catch. I have seen women come out there and crab and they catch the smallest little crab and all they can think about, that's for they gumbo pot.

MM: And that's not going to do anything.

LB: Right! But they don't understand that little tiny crab needs time to get big enough to do anything or have more babies or whatever. You understand what I'm saying? And a lot of 'em are female and they take a lot of female crabs, they take a lot of female crabs.

MM: That will deplete the population real quick.

LB: If you go to these fish markets they got round here, the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] need to go check these fish markets because they have a lot of, you can actually go to fish market and buy a spawning female crab. Cooked! The egg sack still on. Think about it now. You got—ya'll know about that more than I do.

Male Speaker: So, you pulling for stricter regulations on fishing?

LB: Strict, yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yes, yes! That's right I do! I got to go get a license. They need more commercials on TV to talk about the restrictions. Yeah they need that! They need things that educate the people. The DNR sometimes just don't do enough sometimes. They go by—they send and they don't have enough personnel either, you know. You got this coastline here and let's take Tybee for instance. You got maybe three guys, for the whole area. Three, maybe four. And they have to check Tybee, Moon River, and surrounding fishing areas, Isle of Hope, Skidaway Island, and they just not enough personnel to do the job. And then now they got the correspondence, they need to either get volunteers to go out to put it up in the fishing areas. And then the way they put 'em down there, it's either ripped off or torn off and you can't understand half of it. You understand what I'm saying? Like they put up—they got a scale that you can measure fish what you catch. It's no good if somebody come there and rip it off.

MM: That's true. Right.

LB: That's not serving no purpose. I carry my own scale, my own scale and my own ruler and everything. Is there any other question you want to ask me?

MM: I'd like to ask you to go back to your family now. You said your family was a fishing family. Did your wife or your mother, did they do anything like that?

LB: No. My mother did.

MM: Your mother?

LB: My mother was a striker.

MM: Ok now tell me about that.

LB: My mother was a striker on a shrimp boat. She helped pull that line. When the trawler go out and they strike for shrimp. my mother and her aunts all were strikers. My grandfather made sure—cause see the boys had grew up and got they own shrimp boats, which left the girls home. So, the girls had to [inaudible] guide the river, [inaudible] grandfather.

MM: So, what you caught, was that at any time used for profit or was that strictly used for your family eating?

LB: Profit.

MM: Profit.

LB: And family! Matter of fact, my uncles and my grandfather fed the family, we ate a lot of fish, honey. We ate a lot of fish and shrimp. Right now I'm not a shrimp eater, the only thing I do with shrimp is fish with it.

MM: I got you; I understand.

LB: I done ate some shrimp in my life, just like Bubba Gump. Boiled, fried, fricasseed, I done had it every kind of way can be done. All my uncles were good fisherman; I had one cousin now that still run a shrimp boat. Now if you want me I can set up an interview with him.

MM: That would be great.

LB: He'd be the one that could really tell you about that deep sea fishing. Fishing on the trawlers and things like that. He know a lot about that because he used to take the boats from Savannah and

go down in the Gulf of Mexico and down to Corpus Christie and things like that.

MM: So, what did you catch that you preferred the most? Was there a certain fish that you remember?

LB: Yeah, absolutely. Whiting and the bass and in the winter time the trout. Loved the trout. Trout's a fat fish, very delicious fish. They are far and few between too, though. Those fish are really scrutinized by DNR. If you get caught with one of them you get a hefty and if you not right you get a hefty fine. A hefty fine! Because people is just taking them and they actually are a part of Georgia's natural— they are indigenous to the Georgia coast and it's a called a summer trout, a spotted trout. He's beautiful and he's a fighter, yes he is. But I like the whittings and the trout and spot tail bass. Every once and while maybe a grouper, but most groupers, they get so large. The groupers and sheepshead, they get so large. They not good. They relatively good when they're younger fish, but once they get a certain length.

MM: They're not too good?

LB: No. You can almost taste the sand. Let's say a male fish, is just like you can tell the male by the way how he taste. You can taste certain—you can taste that maleness in him, and the female fish she is much sweeter. You can taste a male fish, but they say fish are asexual, I don't know. Some fish are, I just I don't know. But I had caught a bass one time, a huge one, he tasted awful! What make him taste like that? And mullet, I can't stand a mullet. Because when you catch a mullet and if you don't clean him right – let's say you're cutting and you don't cut right and cut the liver, you spoil the meat. He's finished; he ain't good for nothing else no more. Any other questions?

MM: I think that's about it. So about where, what, well let's see about what years were you, your father, and your grandfather fishing?

LB: Woo, my goodness! My grandfather, I want to say my grandfather was fishing ever since the 30s.

MM: Oh, wow and that was still here in Sapelo?

LB: Yeah, until he died. He was the son of slaves, and his family was brought over here.

MS: He came out during the grandfather clause during reconstruction.

LB: Right! Exactly, because he died in 1962 or '63; he was about 90 years old when he died. Then his sons were Jake and Joe, Ernest and Elmo. Uncle Elmo was cripple; he had polio. And Jake and Joe, they were the fishermen of the family. They ran boats, huge shrimp boats. There's only one uncle left now, that's Uncle Jake and he's in his 80's. He's about 84 or 85 years old now. My uncle Joe just recently died, but Uncle Daber died, he's been gone for a while. Family after

grandpa died, and I'm giving you some personal information. I don't know if I should say this because you know the sons of my uncles had ulterior motives for them boats. If you understand what I'm talking about by going down to the Gulf of Mexico and South American and things like that and the illicit things that they brought back. My uncle Joe lost all of his boats.

[End of audio].

MM: Oh wow. So, most of your family own their boats?

LB: Yeah they owned them, lock stock, they had owned their boats.

MM: Did anybody work for someone? Did any of your family work for somebody else or all of them own?

LB: Yes. My uncle Ernest did. He worked for a man named Billy and that's all I can remember. Down in Wilmington Island, they had a dock down there. Matter fact the dock is still there where the trawlers come in now. His name was Billy; I can't remember his last name. My grandfather now, uncle Darber worked for him. Now my uncle Joe and my uncle Jake owned they owned boats. And they had a dock down there, but their sons unlike our father and my father's footsteps right. I think they should have did the same thing. Me and my family we don't get along, we get along, but we had that little cloud that hand over us by not doing the right thing.

MM: I understand, all families have the same.

LB: It sort of get used to—my daddy made this for me and I couldn't see that barber shop going down.

MM: I understand.

LB: You know, they daddy had a big shrimp boat business. What did you do? He decided to down and pick up drugs out the ocean from the drops, airplane drops, and got caught. Yeah so you know what the government did. Matter of fact my uncle Joe, he would get license number, government stopped giving him a license. He couldn't own another shrimp boat. They took his boats, he had work for somebody else. Now I don't know if I want to print that or say that.

MM: We can edit; everything can be edited.

LB: I never speak of it.

MS: They used to bring in immigrants.

LB: That's what had happened. My daddy said my mother side of the family. In other words, they

were rich! They made bundles amount of money and you know how we do, when we make money and what we do?

MS: Looks a little different (inaudible).

LB: Exactly! Exactly you know. My uncle Joe, he had Cadillacs. Back then it wasn't fashionable for a Black man to have a Cadillac. You know what I'm saying? This was back in early 60s, '61, '62, '63. They had Cadillacs all through them years, all down into the 70s. Yeah exactly, exactly and Jim Crow existed in fishing too you know. Oh yeah! Black men would go fishing. You know what I'm saying? White guys had they own spots and Black men just couldn't go there. We had to have permission to fish in certain spots. Now that was another thing that turned the young generation off, you know. Why must I go to—but it's not like that no more. Now you know and I know racism Jim Crow will exists until the earth blow up! You know, so get over it. I don't—it happens on the outside of the city, but on the inside of the city it can't penetrate the city. I see it all the time, even in my barber shop. I got guys that come in my barber shop, White guys and don't speak to nobody in the barber shop. I had an insurance collector come in all the time, would not speak to nobody in the barber shop! First thing he come do, "Where your insurance book at?" I had to stop him. I said, "Let me tell you something you walk in and (inaudible) money and then go back to your business. I said the next time you come in this barber shop, you gone speak to everybody in this barber shop, if not you not getting anything and you can tell your boss that I said that!" So, you know he had to change. It sort of screwed up when you let the dollar bill dictate how social life is supposed to be. It's not supposed to be like—God didn't intend for it to be like that. Well getting back to fishing, I'm sorry. Fishing today as I see it today, is a commercial thang and needs more regulation and we need more boys club or recreation centers, offering more classes for little boys and girls, excuse me. We need that to teach these little kids, like summer camp. We used to have that when were kids, like boys' scouts and things like that and girls' scouts. They had buildings that used to gather the kids would go at and fish. And learn about the regulations and the size and the dos and don'ts and the ends and outs of fishing—recreational and commercial fishing. We need that, we need a stiff education. And you guys are one, National Oceanographic, yeah you guys are the ones to do this to change this here. Start with the illegal immigrants coming in and they do a lot of fishing. And because they got a lot of restaurants and fish markets and they all under cover. You understand what I'm saying? And they buying a lot illegal fish and I know that for a fact. Shrimps, thinks like that, they get that illegally! I knows this! And they got they need to check these places out. They getting a little more stiffer on them. And it's not that they slacking, but if I got to abide by the rule damn it you got to do the same thing too. So, have y'all eaten?

MM: Oh no we were waiting on you—thank you so much and let me stop this and let's get us something to eat.

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Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 10/26/2022
Reviewed by Molly Graham
Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/15/2024