

Interview with Charles Murray

Narrator: Charles Murray

Interviewer: Dr. Jolvan Morris

Date of Interview: 2010

Location: Pin Point, 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 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

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Abstract:

In 2010, Dr. Jolvan Morris interviewed Charles Murray for the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. One of 10 children, Charles grew up in Savannah, Georgia surrounded by a fishing community his entire life. He learned the trade, which he found easy, from his father who was a commercial shrimper and was the first African American in Thunderbolt to own his own boat. Coastal Georgia was the epicenter for shrimping and was where he, his father, and two brothers made their living. Charles provides insight into his life as a shrimper and recounts the growing difficulties, including fuel prices, foreign imports, and regulations, that caused him and many other African Americans to leave the fishing industry. During his fishing years, he traveled from Savannah, Georgia to Apalachicola and Key West, Florida each year to harvest seasonal catches of shrimp, spot, croakers, and whiting. He equated the process to sharecropping the ocean and shared his techniques of using the tides, wind, and the moon to increase yield. Charles describes stopping into Cape Canaveral, Florida to watch the first space launch by John Glenn on February 20, 1962. In early 1960s, while in the Florida Keys, he traveled to Cuba in his shrimp boat to help people escape the communist country. The family's legacy in the commercial fishing industry ends with him. He encouraged his children to get an education and prevented them from fishing because he knew the fishing industry was a "dead industry."

Jolvan Morris: Glad to be here too if you could please state your name and tell us a little bit about yourself.

Charles Murray: I'm Charles Murray Jr. and I started fishing with my father when I was about... a teenager. Going off and on and then my dad got {inaudible}, my dad bought two boats. My brother ran one and I ran one for him.

JM: So, are you originally from here?

CM: I'm originally from Savannah.

JM: Originally from Savannah; so, when you are fishing what all did you catch?

CM: Oh, we catch whiting, spots, croakers, crabs, sharks.

JM: Okay, and this is, you ran this for a living? You did this for a living?

CM: Yes, I did this for a living.

JM: Okay. Did you work under anyone?

CM: No, I worked for my dad.

JM: You work for your dad okay. So, are you familiar with the Ambose?

CM: Oh, yeah! We used to pack out to Ambose. See, they had a big fish house.

JM: Oh, wow and where was that located?

CM: They used to process, right in Thunderbolt where those condos at. There used to be a big dock there. See, we used to unload all our catch, right. He was a buyer. And we used to unload our catch right to him.

JM: So, about how much did he buy it for?

CM: Oh, all he could get. Because he had boats too.

JM: Okay. So, about what was the price range back then?

CM: Oh, a long time ago, you know. Fuel was cheap. And the price was steady. You know, you could fuel was cheap, you get fuel for about 10 or 12 cents. So, you could make it, make two

dollars out of it.

JM: So y'all made a living then? Oh, wow. Okay, so I was hearing spots and croakers. What was more plentiful out of those?

CM: Well, well, it's according to you know, sometimes, run into like school of spots or a school of whiting. You know like that. You know but the most we used to sale was whiting. We didn't never hardly see too much spots and stuff like that. Mostly (inaudible)

JM: About what timeframe was that? What year?

CM: Oh, we start round about April or May. The roast shrimp the big roast shrimp, you know.

JM: Oh okay. So, like, 19—what about? What year?

CM: What year? Oh God, that's a long time. It should be.

Mrs. Murray: Sixty, seventy?

CM: No, no earlier than that. Because when, when did they shot John Glenn. We're going to Key West then.

JM: Oh, you went to Key West too?

CM: Yeah we was carrying the boat to Key West. And we stopped in Kennedy and we saw when he shot the first missile up. Yeah, what's his—John Glenn. What's the first man who went to space? We saw it.

JM: Oh okay. Wait, Neil?

CM: No, it wasn't him. The first astronaut that went into space. We saw that. You know, the shoot 'em out the Cape, Cape you know. And we was going all the way to Key West. And uh, we stopped in the Cape overnight and we saw, you know him go up that morning.

JM: Oh wow. So um, you said you worked with your your father and your your brothers? How many of them were you guys?

CM: Shrimpin'?

JM: Uh huh!

CM: Oh, it's two of us shrimpin'. Me and my brother.

JM: Okay. Did your—now did your father teach you or did you kind of just learn it?

CM: Well, my dad showed me everything and I caught on. You know, this wasn't nothing hard. You do everything over and over with the wench and a net. Wouldn't nothing hard.

JM: Okay, so you gotta teach me now, I don't understand shrimping. How does that work? How does that process go?

CM: I don't understand you.

JM: Like how did you guys shrimp? What, materials did you use?

CM: Oh, we used a net and a door. Some doors and nets and doors, chains and floats.

JM: How long—about how long did that process take?

CM: Oh, it didn't take that long to put 'em on. You know, bout a couple hours to put a net and a door on.

JM: Oh ok. So, was—you caught a lot of shrimp? I mean, did you catch shrimp when you went to Key West too?

CM: Yeah, we did pretty good. We worked in Key West you know. We'd be out eight or nine days. Sometimes we come in with 35 or 40 boxes, you know, of shrimp.

JM: So, is it seasonal? Like did you guys go to Key West in the winter?

CM: We'd go to Key West and take the boats down to Key West in the winter and around April or May we'd come backs up here.

JM: Okay, now what's your catch, did you share with the family or the community or was it just specifically for the family?

CM: No, for the family. That's how we made our living. That's how we was making our living! Now we we you know like we home we used to give some of the community some of fish and the shrimp, but that was my living. That was my living, you know.

JM: Yeah. So, was it hard worker?

CM: No, no, it was easy work, you know. Harder things just came to me you know. You just had to take the heads off, that's about the hardest. Then ice them down, you know. Ice them down.

JM: Okay. So how about how long did you work? You know, as far as shrimping and stuff?

CM: All my life. I was shrimping ever since I was 16 years old. I never had a hill job. I never worked for nobody. I never had a hill job, never worked for nobody. Except for my daddy and myself. I never say, work and get a job there on the hill. That's all I did all my life, shrimp.

JM: Okay, okay, so how about your mother, what did she—?

CM: Housewife.

JM: Housewife?

CM: Raise kids. That's all. Ten of us.

JM: So, do you all have children? Did any of them go into—?

CM: No, no, no. I never, I wanted them, I wanted them to get an education.

JM: Okay, anything interesting like that you felt that, you know, African Americans contributed back then that time? As far as like what you guys did?

CM: Oh, dad was about the first Black to ever own a boat in Thunderbolt. And then the Washington came along. Washington. He got a boat. And then my dad kind of spread out from there, you know. And then my brother uh James, he spread out. James had about five or six boats. Five or six boats.

JM: And did they all do the same thing? Did they all shrimp?

CM: They all shrimped, they all shrimped.

JM: So, it seems like the shrimp and the whiting are very popular.

CM: You know at that time, in the 80's and the 70's, it was good money you know, in shrimp. But now, you know we got some much of that foreign stuff and that killed the price. And the fuel was so high, you know, we got those big engines, 300 some horse, and those engines burn about 200 gallons of fuel a day.

JM: So as time went on, things got a little bit more expensive?

CM: Yeah, things got more expensive things got expensive.

JM: Okay, so about, you know, in this area how many fishermen were there, along with your

family?

CM: Oh, it was quite a quite a few Blacks around here shrimpin'. But none of them never was the owner. They used to work for Ambrose, you know, but none of them was the owner. But we had a bunch of Blacks, but not say owning shrimp boats.

JM: Yeah, I know I heard some were captains.

CM: Yeah, we had a bunch of Black captains, but not no owners.

JM: Not no owners, so you guys were the first to own.

CM: Yeah, my dad was the first to own. My brother started out, then I started behind him.

JM: So, you owned your own boat yourself?

CM: Uh huh.

JM: Oh ok. So, like you're doing good. You yourself did what did you do as far as...?
(Interviewer asks Mrs. Murray this question)

Mrs. Murray: I didn't do anything as far as the shrimping season. When I met, he was married before, and when I when I uh—we got married um oh I was teaching. I was teaching in the elementary school system here in Savannah. And I didn't do anything. The only thing that I did was when he brought 'em home, cook and you know and I ate a lot of fish and I eat a lot of shrimp. But as far as the work is concerned, I was only a teacher.

CM: She never came around the boats. Sometimes when I would call her, you know, when I couldn't get a ride home. I'd call her to pick me up.

JM: Ok so you worked in Thunderbolt and the Keys. Anywhere else? Did you work at any other areas?

CM: A little place called Apalach, Apalachicola.

JM: Oh, okay. So, what you ca—I've heard about that—what you caught there?

CM: Oh, we caught shrimp.

JM: Same thing, shrimp? Was there a certain time you went to Apalach?

CM: Yeah, certain, yeah 'bout the fall of the year we went over there, you know. Well, how we do

when things around December, things get slack. It's something like sharecropping you know. There's a crop in Key West, you probably hit a crop, crop in Apalach. Tampa, like that, you know, just moving you know sharecropping. That's how shrimpin' is and it's just like sharecropping. You get a crop here this time, you get a crop tomorrow; so, you move.

JM: I got you! Did your family maybe like team up with any other family or was it just strictly you guys?

CM: It was just strictly us, we didn't team up with nobody. We had a bunch of friends you know.

JM: Okay, so it seems like you guys were doing more commercial. How about you now? Do you do any recreational fishing yourself you know just for leisure and fun?

CM: No, no, no, no no. All for money! I don't want no kind of fun. Yeah, I see that big ol' blue boat all the time. You pass us all the time going out to Warsaw.

JM: Oh yeah, the R/V Savannah!

CM: What kind of engine you got in that thing? [reference to a research vessel operated by the university]

JM: Yeah, I don't know. I'll check it out though and get back to you on that one.

CM: I'm just asking, you know, what kind of engine you got? It's a big steel hull. How many of y'all sleep on it?

JM: Oooh, there's a good 16 of us! Sixteen, twenty I think it's ahh. I think it's maybe three beds per room and about four or five rooms.

CM: Oh, who do the cooking?

JM: Yeah, got a cook in.

CM: Ya'll got a private—you got a cook too?

JM: Um hum! So that's where a lot of our research happens.

CM: Oh, how long y'all work?

JM: Um, usually we're out there for about a day or two. We do our water sampling and we do some trawling ourselves. You know, I guess you're seeing no, no shrimp for us. You know, there's usually a time where this we go out and we see some shrimp, but it's population kind of been depleted nowadays.

CM: What time ya'll start to working?

JM: Um, well they usually have them spread out throughout the school year. So, maybe there'll be some in um...

CM: No, no, no, no. That's not—what time do ya'll—ya'll be offshore—what time do ya'll get up to work?

JM: Oh, we have around the clock crew usually. For every time from 3am to about—

CM: Oh! Ya'll work around the clock?

JM: Yeah. We work around the clock. We take turns, somebody would sleep, the other person—

CM: That's how we do in Key West you know. We drag 'em all night, we work around the clock all night in Key West. Working at night.

JM: Did you do the same here in Thunderbolt?

CM: Sometimes. When some change over on the brown shrimp. Brown shrimp—we get two shrimps over here. Brown shrimp and a white shrimp. Now the brown shrimp, sometimes you work at night on 'em. Sometime we clog 'em. Work day and night on 'em.

JM: Does one sell for more or they about the same price?

CM: Oh, shrimp sell by the size, you know by the size you know! Jumbo, you know like that. They sell by the size. That uh, that uh that oil spill in Louisiana down there that you know, sorry to say, you know that happened over there but that's gonna help us a little bit. Because it's no no docks in there no, no, no big docks, you know, can't process none of 'em.

JM: Okay so are there still only processing factories around here anymore?

CM: Yeah there's one or two. Yeah one or two.

JM: Where are they located at?

CM: In Thunderbolt. They packs 'em out you know. But they don't head anymore, they probably pack 'em with the heads on. One time, you know, we had a bunch a ladies come on the dock and some of them make a living headin' shrimp.

JM: I know Mrs. Thorpe was telling me that she used to head the shrimp. Was there a price that you guys got for heading or—

CM: Oh, a long time ago by 25 cents a bucket, yeah 25 cents a bucket. Things kind of cheap you know.

JM: So, whatever you guys had leftover you would bring it home?

CM: No, no.

JM: No? Everything got sold?

CM: They got sold! They head 'em, the pay them and dump them in a vat and the weight 'em up and put 'em in a box. They paid them per head.

JM: Okay, so your factories were there more African Americans or were there more whites working in the fac—?

CM: There was more Blacks.

JM: More Blacks?

CM: There was more Blacks in factory. More Blacks. And then they gotta—they put a Ambose. They put a big (inaudible) plant down there. Oh God, that worked about I don't know about 50-60 ladies. All they had to do was devein 'em and peel 'em and cut 'em down the back. They had a big crew down there, you know.

JM: How long did that factory last? Is that one of those that's still down there?

CM: No. It's not there anymore. Since they daddy died, you know how it is? As you know the boys took over and it went away. Daddy was in the shipping business; after he past you know things changed you know. You see all those condos down in there?

JM: I saw them.

CM: Right in front of Tubbys. All those used to be fishing docks. All that whole front was, was fishing dock, shrimp boats used to tie up there, now it's yachts all that.

JM: So as far as your opinion goes. What do you think caused the African American decline in fishing you know? You may think they were lost or it was things get too expensive?

CM: No! I don't think things got all expensive you know all you know. I don't know how to say that because things never got that expensive you know. You know a bunch of them you know didn't have to buy none of the stuff because the man who owned the boat, Ambose, they bought all the stuff and a bunch of fellow got tired of leaving home, you know. Got tired of going South in the year, going back and forth.

JM: So, nobody just decided to stop working?

CM: Just stopped going to Key West, Key West.

JM: So, someone still stayed in Thunderbolt though was that easier to stay home or stay closer to home?

CM: No, all of 'em who was there scattered out you know scattered out, different places, all of 'em that stayed.

JM: So, what makes you think people like me, I mean, I don't see anybody my age going into the fishing business.

CM: I wouldn't—the way things is now I wouldn't advise nobody that's got some money to put in it. Less'n you know about it. But I wouldn't advise nobody to put no money, not right now. Less'n you know something about it.

JM: Lack of fish and stuff. Like you said that oil spill might have been a help.

CM: It's kind of helped us a little bit, you know, because they don't have that big plant over there. You know, the price you know, and then that foreign stuff kills us. That foreign stuff kills us a lot too you know. Why? Charging you five or \$600 for a box of shrimp. And I can get box over there for about two or three hundred. That foreign stuff.

JM: I can see that? I can see that, price is—.

CM: Price kill us you know. Price and the fuel shot up. Take fuel now, uh, about \$2.38 and you turning about that engine for about eight or nine days. That engine burning about 2500 gallons of fuel. Say you make a trip; you got put a least about 2500 gallons of fuel.

JM: That's a lot of money.

CM: And ice and ice is about 10 or 12 dollars a block.

JM: Wow, that's a lot!

CM: That's a lot of money you figure with you in the hole before you—and you gotta go get equipment. Stuff for the boat.

JM: I guess as a person like you said you own your own boat. So, you had nobody paid for that. I know that had to be—.

CM: You in debt about four or five thousand dollars before you leave the dock. You better come up with four or five thousand dollars' worth of shrimp.

JM: I understand.

CM: And the crew too! You got to pay the crew. His money got to come out there. Things got so high! Equipment got so high, you couldn't make it. And they kept cutting the price and you go out, come back and the price then cut five or 6, 10 dollars. Don't never go up, just cut it. It's rougher now, it might come back, but I doubt it, I doubt it. It's a dead industry. I don't know. In St. Augustine, they used to have so many boats. I mean they just like cars they come off line, assemble. Like cars, but now you don't see that no more. Boats going back to South America. Send boats back to South America, folks come over here and get them. But not no more. Business got so bad. Yes sir, got bad.

JM: So, back then were there any restrictions for African Americans or were you free to do what you need to do? Were you free to fish?

CM: Oh yeah. You know we had to have license and stuff, but everybody had to have license and stuff. We were free to fish; we didn't have no problem working.

Mrs. Murray: How about the (inaudible) in Key West? The Cuban lift.

CM: The Cuban lift? Oh, we went over there, but it wasn't no problem over there.

JM: Now what happened now?

CM: The Cuban lift. A bunch of us went over there when the Cuban lift. You know when Castors sent all of those Cubans back over here. We went over there and got a bunch of those Cubans and brought 'em back here. A bunch of Black dudes, then went on back.

JM: Ok, so at any time was it like maybe like unusual population of fish. Did you get anything unusual besides your whiting and your shrimp? Anything unusual? Get caught in your net?

CM: No, nothing unusual. Nothing around this side. You know what kind of fish we get around here you know, but nothing unusual. Certain times of the year we get that big black turtle—leatherback turtle—you know sometimes we get a couple of big leatherback turtles and they probably tear up the net you know. You ever saw one of those?

JM: I've seen one! I've seen one!

CM: The big leatherback turtles. Sometimes you know, that's about the only one. Then sometimes we get that big stingray, that big stingray sometimes, you know.

JM: Now the stingray, how did you guys get that out?

CM: Sometimes we got to let him come out the wing of the net. You know that wing of the net is pretty large. Sometimes we got to let him float out there. Sometimes he busts out the net sometime that big stingray.

JM: Now did that affect you like he had to go and purchase new nets?

CM: No, sometime we could fix them. And if we can't fix them, we'll probably send it to shop and let someone better than me fix it. But they can tear up a net too, that big stingray. Yes sir.

JM: Now they've cause me to lose a couple of nets trying to get them out. (phone rings)

CM: But we let them come—see those nets we got there be 75 foot, the mouth, and sometime we try to get them to go out the mouth of the net and sometime they float out, they floats out.

JM: Yeah, I know in one of my graphs I was seeing like 1970s, it was a big spike in sea bass. That's why I didn't know. Yeah.

CM: What happened?

JM: They just went away.

CM: Oh, we don't have no problem with them bass, them big sea bass. The only problem we had to throw them away it's against the law.

JM: It's against the law now?

CM: Yeah it's against the law now, that big seabass.

JM: Okay, it's the same way you were saying with the sturgeon yesterday.

CM: Oh yeah, the sturgeon. Shut you don't mess with that. They get around the dock and find you know one of those sturgeon. Well, uh, how deep when y'all go out, how deep y'all go?

JM: We go a good mile, couple miles offshore a good couple of miles.

CM: Ok, but I mean depths of water. He look like he go—

JM: We go reel far. I got to get the depths for you. I don't want to tell you wrong. Incorrect depth. We definitely go far out that I know. Like now though. We usually we catch in jellyfish, you know, a few shrimp. Nothing too big nowadays. And of course, the horseshoe crab. That always—.

CM: Yeah that horseshoe crab sometimes—well that uh, we don't hardly have no problem with them horseshoe crabs, but we got something called a shooter.

JM: Oh, now what is that?

CM: It's a big bar in your net. Ya'll don't have one of those?

JM: I don't think so.

CM: Oh, it kicks, they kicks 'em out. Big old round bar like that called a shooter. It kicks kick them out. We working and that jelly ball that jelly ball—ya'll catch those way off in that deep water? Ya'll catch 'em? How about sharks?

JM: Um I've only been on two trips that we've caught sharks. I think we caught a black tip.

CM: Blackfin tuna? Ya'll be way out to catch that blackfin tuna. That rascal is expensive. We catch 'em in Key West we would be out there in 100 foot of water. That little blackfin tuna, yeah we catch them in Key West. But we don't really get that far off round here. The deepest we get around here is about I don't know 40 – 50 foot. That's the deepest we work around here. We don't go way offshore.

JM: So, did you guys did you trawl open ocean for shrimp or did you stay kind of in the estuaries and canals? Where did you guys go?

CM: No, we worked right around here the beaches, on the beach. Shallow water bout 20, 30-foot 40 foot. We don't get out in that 80-90 foot like in Key West, you know. In Key West we get down there depths of water around a 100 foot, but around here we work right up on the beaches. Around the beaches.

JM: Sound like you guys have a good time fishing around here.

CM: Yeah. Used to be good times you know, sometimes, you know, you catch shrimp by the tide. You didn't know that? By the moon.

JM: I didn't know that. Yeah when the moon comes you get a bigger catch.

CM: No, you get a bigger tide. So that push things out. And then sometimes you catch shrimp by the cut back tide. See tide be running so strong it don't move them shrimp, but then tide cut back then the shrimp came move out. Then you catch shrimp by the wind. We catch 'em by the wind. Like the north, northwest wind. That's not too good round this way. You catch 'em by the wind. Wind and the tide.

JM: Now is there a particular spot that you love the most that got you the most shrimp?

CM: No, no, not really. We do good around Warsaw Island on that Warsaw Beach. We do

(inaudible) in the winter time. We do good on the white shrimp on there. Have some good days there.

JM: That's good. So, do you know any other fishermen that are still around that you worked with?

CM: Oh, yeah. There some more round back round here.

JM: Okay, you gotta give me the names and numbers, when we are done.

CM: Ann you got um (Mrs. Murray speaking inaudible). You got George Brown number you probably can call him this weekend. You got a number?

Mrs. Murray: But you'd better let me husband set it up for you.

JM: Oh yeah, by all means.

CM: I'll call him and tell him that you want to come around. He been around a good while. George. He live right up there. What's the street? Right across from Savannah High, rough there round Savannah High. He been around a good little while.

JM: Alright. Thank you. This has been one of the best interviews. Thank you any anything else want to add before I—

CM: Anything you want to add?

JM: I'm good!

CM: Yeah Mrs. Thorpe been around a long time, her and her husband. She been around a long time.

JM: Yeah she was telling me about shrimping over here and having to pop the heads off.

CM: The house next, next to her, the yellow house, I was raised there. It's my mama's house, my mama passed, my daddy built that house. She's been my neighbor.

JM: So, out of all your family as far as your father and your father. Have they all been in fishing? Did it just kind of start with your father?

CM: Yeah my daddy, my daddy's brother he was in the shrimping. He was into shrimping.

JM: Sounds like he had a seafood family.

CM: Like I say, it was real nice long years ago, you know, it was big money in it. You know, the fuel shot out just like driving cars, you know. You can't go no more; you can't travel like you want no more.

JM: I understand, things get expensive.

CM: Ten or twelve dollars for a block of ice, shit. Shrimp are al—, fish almost as high as shrimp! Whiting, I went in the store one of those (inaudible) and I saw some whiting in there and I won't lie, I didn't see how they got in there because, we gotta throw them away. Got to be at least nine inches, you know? And shit they want \$3.90 a pound for 'em them little small whiting.

JM: Yeah, same way with my mother she likes to do crab. She's really good with seafood and she was born in Bahamas, but she doesn't do it anymore. She said it got expensive.

CM: Everything's expensive. Everything's expensive. Yes sir. I don't know what a basket—bushel of crabs cost you now, but Maine crab I bet it cost you pretty good for a bushel of Maine crab. By now, they uh since those Vietnamese came over here they go to that old garlic crab.

JM: Yeah, I've been seeing that.

CM: And uh and I think they sell that by the pound, that garlic crab. They sell it by the pound. Well what kind of conch—are you familiar with those conch?

JM: Oh yeah!

CM: We don't we don't get those kind of conch like y'all get.

JM: Oh, I know my my professor Dr. Hoskins, who is over this, she said that you guys get welk around here instead of conch, which is almost like it.

CM: Oh, they different. Y'all conch y'all get those little soft—I know we get uh those conch that you can eat 'em raw. You can eat the ones in Key West.

JM: That's the ones we get, you can get them raw.

CM: Yeah, but you don't get these ones here you have them boil them, you have boil them. Yeah, but you don't get the ones you get in Key West.

JM: Let me stop you real fast.

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Reviewed by Michelle Duncan 10/14/2022