

Interview with Kenneth Dunham

Narrator: Kenneth Dunham

Interviewer: Dr. Jolvan Morris

Date of Interview: August 14, 2014

Location of Interview: Townsend, GA

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.

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Abstract:

On August 14, 2014, Dr. Jolvan Morris interviewed Kenneth Dunham as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Kenneth Dunham describes his early life in the rural coastal Georgia community of Harris Neck. Kenneth recalls his father's role in the community as a boat builder, and how lessons in woodworking, carpentry, and boat building have been passed for generations. Kenneth talks about (and demonstrates) how nets and "trap lines" are made, as well as recounts how the different fishes, crabs, and terrapins were caught in this homemade gear. Other topics covered in this interview include the role of cropping and trapping to supplement income during off fishing seasons; selling and marketing the catch; the Harris Neck Environmental Justice movement.

JM: So, have you ever moved away from Harris Neck prior to the eviction?

KD: I went into the service after I finished high school and I stayed in for two years but before then... well I was born in Chatham County, but then we moved to Harris Neck I guess in the early eighties because that's the only place that I knew you know where I grew up, and...so that's the only place that I know where our home was and so forth and so on. We owned our own house and property and whatever etcetera we had there... understand that my grandfather lived on Harris Neck, I didn't know him, grandmother either. I didn't know either one of them on my father's side, but other than that I was there working and when I speak of work that was the beginning of my, I guess, my childhood. I remember Daddy telling me that he'd bought a cow and he paid ten dollars for the cow and he then had to train the cow how to work or whatever he wanted done. And years later, I don't know how many years later but... so that was in forty...early forties and we moved out of Harris Neck in the late, late forties the cow wasn't very old. Daddy paid ten dollars for it and he let the cow go and all he could get there was ten dollars more; which was letting him go practically for nothing. But that was what we used for our gardening because we didn't have no tools or anything like that – horse and wagon and so forth. We did not have no horse, we had a cow; and we had to train the cow how to do whatever we wanted done. And that's what I did the whole time I was there, I trained – Daddy told me how to train the cow what to do and so forth and so on and that's what I did.

Daddy, my daddy was a boat builder as well as a fisherman and every day I would go out...and it seemed like it was every day and I would do whatever Daddy was doing or whatever he asked me to do, I did it. And several days you know he would say that every time he would put his tool down, I would move the tool. And he'd say, "Hot damn every time I look around, you're moving my tools, you're moving my tools!" He'd say, "When I want you to put it up, it will not be up...you know it's gon' be left in the yard" and so on and so forth. And sure enough one day, I got up early that morning and went out into the yard where the boat was and the boat had the water or something like that was on the saw, you know rust looking and I knew Daddy was gon' get on my case as far as working my behind over real good you know. So I had got there that morning and I had raced, traced, you know I rubbed the ground up...I smoothed the saw up and everything else you know...polished everything else. So Daddy got up and he didn't need the saw then, but when he saw it the saw was looking good you know, so I felt relieved. But the point that I'm trying to make is he taught me how to do whatever it was he was doing. We did not have a leveler. A leveler tells you when the boat is level and when it is not. But he'd use a bullet, and a bullet is a piece of lead that had a piece of string on the end of it and in the bow of the boat it was maybe about ten, twelve, maybe about twelve...fourteen inches that the bows came up; and he'd take a nail and put at the end of that bow and in the back of the boat, the back part of it he had some pieces of board and he made sure that that board was level the best he could. But the purpose of that bullet up at the top, it tells whether the boat was listing...the boat was listing to the right or to the left. So he didn't have a leveler, but that's what he used and that went along well. Now as far as the boat itself, now you turn the boat over to put the bottom on the boat; so he used one by fours, or one by sixes. I think most of the materials he used...one by sixes, but they were not straight, so what he did...he had his hand saw, we didn't have no skill saw back then, they had the hand saw. And he would cut in-between the pieces of board, and he'd cut it from one end to the other. And if that...because if it wasn't...one of the reasons for him cutting it... if something was wrong the boat would cause it to leak on one side and not the other side of it, but by cutting through it two or three times, making two or three passes...it was even, so he didn't have to worry about the boat leaking.

It leaked, but it leaked evenly; which meant that when he got ready to put it in the boat...in the water, it would swell just like it's supposed to and otherwise it would be a leak on one end and on the other end it was not leaking...but he had it made perfect, just like he wanted it.

Now most of the boats that they had did not have a – I guess you would call it a siding – it wasn't exactly siding but...a top part of it. But he wanted his to have...I can't remember the word that he used on it but he made sure that on the top of it. It was round around the edge of the boat and he would take his planer and he would cut it so that it'd have somewhat of a circle; and it was very attractive, the way he did it and the bottom was – the paint was copper on the bottom and then he had like a gre...white on the side of the boat and on the top of it, it was painted with green and yellow, orange trim. It was a hot looking number as far as I was concerned. Well I did all of the painting for him and the best that I could, whatever it was. But I stayed with my daddy. Whatever Daddy did and wherever Daddy went, that was me and I remember that all of my life basically.

Years later I was married. I was looking for a house and I heard them talking about paying for water. "You had to pay for water?" I couldn't imagine buying water, you know, but then when I came to Savannah...found out, yeah we did have to pay a water bill. And so I... after we were married, I was renting from this lady and we went looking for a house, and we had saw several houses that we liked pretty well, you know but they wanted so much for it. And we were not used to buying... paying for no rent or anything like that you know...on a house you know. So anyhow we saw the house, but weren't exactly satisfied with it, so we kept looking and we saw a house that belonged to other people that probably they charged there more, they would have to pay less...but if we wanted it, they would charge us a little bit more... so that didn't sit well either because we didn't have the money anyhow. So, I went to work and went to work and my wife was at home and she called me one day and she said "Kenneth, I saw a house today and I wanted to know if we can go by and take a look at it." I said "Yeah." So we went by sure enough, and we saw the house and we liked the house and we looked at the house and I noticed that there were some things that work needed to be done. But by me knowing how to use a saw and a hammer it paid off. Now we didn't have a couch, we did not have...I remember the couch we did not have and some other benches or whatever it was that we had in there, we did not have. But I learned how to make a couch...and I think it's in my house now or first house that I have...up in the attic. I believe it's there now. So we learned...I learned how to use it and it took us fifteen years I think to pay for our house; and boy that was a long time; but while it...even though it took me fifteen years for us to pay for it, I was looking at another house or land so I could buy another house...and I saw this house, where I'm living right now, it was an open field...and I said, "boy, that house looks nice," and a man that had a store and I went by and I asked him a house and so forth and materials...and he said, "yeah"... he said, "I can loan you or I can loan you the money that you need to build a new house, except for the bricks. I don't sell the bricks, but anything else that you want..." he said, "I can let you have it." Do you believe after we paid for the first house, then I made arrangements to pay...buy this house and I did all of the out...inside work myself. Just from the little work that I learned from my father when I was seven or eight years of age.

Then later I saw another house that I wanted, and I asked my son if he wanted to help me or something like this. Now when I was doing cabinet work, this is something that I did on the side. I didn't have to do it but my wife was out of town and rather than run the streets, I just had a little place in the backyard that I built cabinets and one day I asked my son about helping me or something and this...and he was helping, but this particular Saturday morning, he wanted to watch television. So I said "No, Ken..." something like this...so...he said...I said, "look here, if you don't feel well, don't worry about it." So a little later on, you know, I noticed that he...I was checking on him to find out how he was doing and so on and so forth...so I

guess he know that I wasn't going to leave him home feeling bad. He came outside, he said' "Daddy, I feel a little better now." I said, "Okay." Okay, now Ken was maybe six or seven. He was out there working with me wherever I went he was there, now Ken is a grown man, now married; and I saw another house and I asked him if he wanted to help me buy the house or something. He said, "Yeah." Do you believe, and I told him the house needed cabinets...that he built those cabinets? Just from the little bit observing what I was doing, until this day. So, he knew how to do all the carpenter work all the cabinet work he knew how to do it all. And parents are saying now, they cannot do something with that child or that boy or... I don't buy that. If that's my child, I'm going to teach him what to do, how to do, when to do it and whatever I had to do. And it has paid off. And I wish that today, the parents would do everything that they can to teach their children what to do. And in this process, they're only doing it to help themselves.

JM: So would you say that, that same mentality of parents teaching their children...That you learned the boat building...you taught your son how to take that...those carpentry skills and translate it until today...did any of that...did you build boats for the community or for just your family?

KD: My daddy built boats for the community, but then in my case I was...we moved after a certain age. The government took our property then, and I did not stay home very long after that.

JM: You didn't?

KD: No, Daddy was home, but I was not home.

JM: Okay.

KD: But the little that he did, I was there helping him.

JM: Okay, did that translate into any fishing in your family?

KD: Yeah, well...in other words you have to have the boat to fish. JM: Yeah.

KD: And we had to learn how to make the nets. JM: Okay, can you talk to me a little bit about that?

KD: And he taught me how to make the nets. So then you have your shrimp net, and you have what's called a mullet net. That's just a different... another fish they have. Your mullet net, and then your cast net...well you said cast net...it's another form of net that you use to catch mullet and all the different kinds of fishes. And I learned that and I learned how to build it, to make the net and whatever it was that we had to make. And I stayed home and then Daddy died in '49 and I was not home very much after that, you know I just stayed and come and go. But we had our property not too far from where our house was, just outside of the gate so to speak and then Daddy bought some land there and we just...he stayed there and I would go back home to see him and check on to see how he was doing and so on and so forth. But I did whatever we had to do and my son learned the trade and others have learned the trade and it has really paid off for us, even until today.

JM: The trade of carpentry? Or boat building? The trade of woodwork or carpentry?

KD: Woodworking, but once you do carpentry it's a difference in the carpenter work and the woodwork, but it's basically the same. It has to be square and if it's not square, and if it's boats you know it causes the leak and the same way it is with your house...you know if it's not right it's not plum and then it's gon' be...not gon' be level so they both go hand in hand. The thing about it is being able to use a saw and a

hammer, regardless of whatever it is that you had to use you'd have to know how to use it.

JM: So would you say it's that family connection that inspired you to keep going and pushing for the Harris Neck movement?

KD: Right. Yeah, up until today. It has really paid off for me...at this very moment. I mean, I have stuff out in my yard there now that I use for...well, whatever that I want to use it for.

JM: Okay. Okay.

KD: It has really paid off. And then my son is doing the same thing now. The house that I have across the street there is for sale so he bought it. So now he know how to use the saw and the hammer and we use the saw and the hammer because the things of skill have changed now from saw to hammer and electrical tools and all that other stuff, but basically he knows how to use the saw and the hammer. But it has really paid off for him and it paid off for us. And it was really a blessing you know from then on.

Now when we go to fish, you have to have your bullet and that's just a type of weight and then... but before you get the bullet you have to have a piece of thread on it then you put it up so that you can tie your...make your net...but then a cast net is round, like an umbrella...and how do you get it round? Well, can I show you a little bit of it?

KD: You would put in what you call a "widening." If that knot...the reason why you put that knot there because it would cause your net to have a circle. If you don't put that net knot in there it won't have a circle, the same if you start off like this the width of it, when you get over there fifty feet away it still have the same square, so that the reason why you put that what we call a "widening" in it and that's what you call...what they use for a mullet net and it goes out like you know like this and you put...I think this is every...either every other round...or I think it's every other round, I think or maybe two, but you have to be sure that it's right. Now you won't see this in until you start to make the second row, you pull this down and then you come back in between here and when you come in between there, then you put it just a little bit different but then you would put that and that's what you would call your widening. If you don't put that widening in, it won't...it won't give you the spread and if you miss this, you're in trouble... You go around and then when you come back you look, you see... "Where is that widening knot at?" Then you have to unwind all of those things, you know. And that's what Daddy would look for, to be sure that I had it right like I was supposed to. But that was the purpose of a cast net...Okay now if you were going to do what you call a "gill net." Gill net is one that fish...the gill... you catch the fish around here and you hook the gill somehow or another, like that. So a gill net and a terrapin net they made almost on the same order, but the gill net is one that...it gills the fish to catch em' round here and it cause him to hold, but when you are fishing this is the shore here... that's the shore...so I would go...this is the shore, no this is the shore here, that's the shore right here...so I'm out here in the river but I'm looking, then I could look and see if there is a break, and if there's a break it means the water...the fish moves like this, you see... and if that's the case then I would see the tides was going like this...if the tide is going like this so to speak, then I would go up and get ahead of the tide and then put an anchor here...row boat and everything, then I would come out almost like that and then I'd come behind the fish, then I'd make noise and then we'd go into the fish and the net and get him... gill him, then you catch the fish. That's what it is with the gill net. Now here's a... a gill net...when I say a gill net we're talking about the trout, bass, I said the trout, the bass; I believe those two...now you have a mullet but a mullet fish it's a little bit different. You can catch him almost like that but...you can't... he's a little bit, you have to fish for him differently. Now that's the same way with the...fish. You've heard a terrapin?

JM: Yes.

KD: Okay now, usually...well let's go back to the fishing so to speak. When I look over this side here as

I'm driving along...what'd I say driving? I'm using the boat...and I can see when the water was breaking and I can know then, you know, that's the fish so I go ahead of him and I would drop it...but when you do it, you have to be quiet because if you let it drop there then he'll move and go someplace else...but you pull it all the way around here, like a circle... then you come by here and you making noise, and the purpose of making noise is so he can go into the net and gill him, then you come back and you pull the net...see how my fingers are right there? This is a little bit out more than the top part of it...so I do it like that, because if I do it like this, he could get under...so you do this like this...then you pull the net, you're not pulling it per se, but...you can't do it by yourself, because you have to have your buddy here pushing the boat. But I'm watching and I'm pulling the net all at the same time, then when I get all of my net...all the net in then I take out the fish that I caught.

Now, you look at them and see...now there's a drum and there's a bass, and those fish...those were the main ones that we caught. Now, you'd get more for them than you'd get for the mullet fish. The terrapin...you ever heard of a terrapin? ...Okay, you look at in his case you'd see about that much of his... I believe it's either the nose or the head...I don't remember now exactly...you'd see just about that much of it, and you'd watch and you'd watch your tide again and if the tide is going this way then you'd have to come out here and go around to get ahead of him and then he'll swim into the net. Now, his webbing is made different from the way I made the others. Then you hold the bottom line a little bit tighter, then he would get in, but you don't gill him...the net will not gill him, he'd just get hung up in there somehow or another, then you'd just pull this thing here, and when you're back in the boat like the other one, you were pulling this one, but in this case you would have to push the boat like this and keep the boat away from him, but you got to have him because if you're not...see he's gon' come out...you can't gill him and then you pull him on up until you get it all into the boat. After you get him into the boat, now he...you can catch him almost anyway except for his mouth. You can catch him, put him in a bag...most likely you have a bag or a sack or something like that to him in...you put him in there then because if not he'll crawl out somehow or another because sometimes you might have a bag or a sack or something like that, that the end is on the side of the boat then he'll crawl on there and get back, but now a fish can't do that. You can put him in there and you won't have to worry that...the fish don't do that.

Now, Daddy had a stern...a boat...a boat like...now this is...Daddy's boat like maybe twenty feet, he'd have a place back here, just about like that and have a place right in the middle there that he could open it up, then he would catch the terrapin, and push in that slot and he would nail him in there, you know now...kinda' can't come out, but now you know if you got a weak board then he'll sneak out or something like this then he might be able to crawl out. Now, he won't crawl out of the boat but if it's a sack there or the net there hanging up then he'll crawl out and go back into the river. When you looking for the terrapin, you're looking on the side of the bank and that's where your eyes is...more or less centered on that side of the bank...you watch all as you go along...that's where your eyes is...keep your eyes on that, and sometimes you make some noise (tapping) and you see his head come up, then you know he's there and you go on and try to get ahead of him, and you knock him like that (tapping) so can come back into the net. And that's about how it is, but now his net is about...the webbing...maybe I think about five, maybe about three, or four inches. But the mullet, the bass, and the trout...the webbing is different, because it's a finer webbing and that's basically the difference, how it is, but we fish for them basically the same... the same way...Now when you're making a terrapin net or a gill net and you take and you'd put it out overnight and you'd ride maybe over maybe fifty or hundred feet over to that house there...all the way over here and pull it as tight as you could...both sides...the top and the bottom they...because we used to be side by side. And then you'd have a marker at about the sixth inch and you'd mark here on that line...on this line...then that'd stay out overnight stretched real tight, because if you don't, then tomorrow

when you get up, it won't be tight and you'll have trouble. It won't fish good. So you have to do that in order to be sure that your terrapin net is fixed like that. And it goes...his net goes straight down...the same way it is with a gill net. His goes straight down, but the way the weight on them...is made different and I guess that's about it with the terrapin.

JM: Who were you selling your fish to?

KD: ...They had a man at Isle of Hope...I can't remember the name, but he was the dealer. He would catch the...go there... we could take our...the crab...our terrapin to him. And then we had one in Brunswick, named Ernest Robaugh. He would have a place there where we could take the terrapin there. Fish, we had somebody from Hinesville. He would come to catch the fish...not catch the fish, but you know come and get the fish that we had to sell. Daddy had twenty-one hundred pounds of fish there one time in one of his boats that we had. That was a lot of fish... and this thing that this man had in Brunswick, he would...you could...the crab, not the crab but the terrapin...crawl up to the top of it and they would make a nest and they would have young terrapin you know later on and then they'd come back down. But those are the only two places that I know that sell terrapin. Now the man would come down...Bobby to Ernest Robaugh...to Bobby...Bobby was in Savannah. But Daddy...I wanted Daddy to sell to the man in Brunswick, but the man had a ba...bag of candy...and we had the candy and then was whatever it was, but you know that's the man we wanted Daddy to be sure that he sold his crabs...not his crabs, but his fish to. Now the crab was a little bit different. The crab was a little bit different. You catch your crab on the side of the bank out there, maybe about six feet or maybe a little bit less...and you had a bait about that size, called "bull nose." The man over here, he would have...he would sell bull nose...put it in the bucket and so forth. And then it'll last about three or four days...After that you know it's gone now...it's gone then. And...and that's what they would use that for your bait. We did that for during the summer time like Janu...I mean like May, June, July, August, September. They had a place in Fernandina; they would go down there because the water is a little bit warmer in Fernandina than it is up here. And they'd go down there and they would sell their crabs, you know in Fernandina. And the crab; you could catch maybe a hundred, two-hundred, or three-hundred pounds...I caught a thousand pounds of crab one day...quite a few crabs, isn't it? I think that's the first and the last time I caught that many crabs... I had a in-board motor, one time...you've heard of...with the out-board motor with the stern on them? Well, this was a in-board motor and it had air-cool motor. You ever heard of air-cool motor? Well then you made a shaft...the shaft...the log I guess was eight...about six feet...run from here down to the stern of the boat down there, and then you would start it and it would run slow and the purpose for running slow, because if you didn't run slow and then run over, you know, the crab and wouldn't do too well. Well we had a...we had a dip net made out of wire and I guess it's about like that I guess maybe about twelve inches I guess, something like this...and we had a line...I guess maybe about a quarter of an inch that had the bait tied on it and then you had an anchor on one end and you put that anchor here and you'd row like from here to maybe three or four yards I guess, maybe a little longer than that...Got to be sure it couldn't have no crook in there, because if you did it'd go around the bank and it just didn't work out.

Now before they came up the air-cool motor...that was in the...I don't remember what year that was. But you would have to...you'd have a buoy, you have an anchor, then you have a buoy and you'd go and get the buoy and you pull the buoy and after you catch the buoy you take the buoy and put into this reel, and you just row along, you know, and the crab would...when you get to the crab...see that reel causes the line to come up and then you could see the crab and the you'd have your net to put him in, then you go a little bit further...catch another one and another one. Okay now but when they came up with the motor...in-board motor, you didn't have that...you have the buoy, but now this was the anchor here, this was the buoy and

then you had a chain here so now you bring your boat in straight, like this and you'd put the buoy into the reel and then you just keep it straight on down. And like I say, when I caught that many crabs, I had a net and I was like this and I'd just watch it...and when it got full, I'd just dump it in the boat...I'd dump it in the boat...until I got as many as I could get that day I guess and then after all I just went on home. Now when I got home...now you know those crabs were not alive? You know that. No they were real dead...but it didn't make any difference... I mean they still bought the crabs anyway...three-cents a pound. All day long with three-cents...but anyhow that's how it worked...but that's how it worked. But, now going back to your...

JM: About when...before you move on about when was this, about what year was this?

KD: That was in '50...'50, because I went into the service in '51 so and then we had certain drops, you know you could tell where certain drops were, you know go this way and then go to the next one.

JM: About how many drop would you have at a time?

KD: Well, I guess maybe three, maybe four...

JM: And they'd all be baited with the bull nose?

KD: Well you'd have you line, you see...you put your bait out. And then you set it out, then you wait a while. Then you come back and then you try to catch whatever you have. And then you take the line up, then you go to another and you always try to get it when the line is – when the tide is coming in. You don't want it to be when the tide is too high and then it'll go in the grass – little tricks of the trade. But that's what we did, that's what we had, and that's how things worked.

KD: On one part of Harris Neck down by the riverside now, it was a two story house there...white...structure. On that side of it, it was a oyster factory there. I'd pick oysters there.

JM: Whose oyster factory was this?

KD: It was E.M. Thorpe's; yeah it was his oyster factory. And, so he didn't have the land per se, as far as the cows are concerned, but Davis had the whole use...the whole of Harris Neck for cow pasture...all of it. Harris Neck run from East to West...a fence...all the way down. He didn't have to worry about no fence or no nothing, he didn't have to worry about no fertilizer, nothing. His cows ate out there like they were...he didn't have to worry about anything, not at all. Dr. Hull, I don't know who he was, but he bought a piece of property where Gould Landing was and he built a bridge that went across the river and it was going to Barbour Island, I believe it was...he died or whatever it was. But we have not gotten anything, nothing, nothing at all, nothing! Until this day...they got it all. I know he wanted my daddy to work for him, for I think like for a dollar a week... a dollar a day, probably a dollar a week or whatever it was...Daddy didn't do it...they...my daddy provided for us. We had plenty to eat and we had plenty to drink. They work hard, but he provided for his family. We were never without anything. Why would we work for him for nothing? He wanted it all. He had a big house down on that far end...a house was there right up until a few years ago, I guess maybe they tore it down and all of that, but Harris Neck was enough there for everybody to enjoy. You stay where you want to stay, with who you want to stay and everybody stay where they wanted to stay, everybody was happy. We had a cemetery down on the far end...my grandparents...probably their graves...well, I don't know where it was, until today. What happened to the graves? I know where mother was buried...I know where my grand-daddy...my daddy was

buried...where my daddy was buried, where my grandfather was buried, my grandmother...not my grandmother, my mother's relatives lived in Chatham county. But I know the cemetery was there, and they just wanted it all...and it's like I said it was enough then and even now, you know. I just don't understand. We...take Thomas Landing on the west...north side...and we did whatever we wanted to do...I mean we fished, we crabbed, we provided for ourselves. We didn't ask for no hand out, we worked for whatever we had, whatever we want, whatever we had we worked for.

JM: You said you were an oyster picker too?

KD: Yeah, I used to pick oysters...fifty-cents a bushel. You know last time I was coming home and my daddy always told me, he said now, "be sure that..." he said, "you have an open space on the back of the stern of the boat," or something like that you see, because if the oyster's shells up here, you can't shovel you know you can't get and I was – my boat was pulling on and I was pulling my boat you know, and all of sudden I look back and my boat was half full of water. I couldn't go back, but I always had a sharp knife and then what I should have done, I could have aimed the boat to the bank...only thing I could think about was cutting it loose. And those oysters was in there because it was in the fall of the year, like west wind, the water would go out. You could go down there and get oysters from way down, big oysters, you know. And that was the kind of oysters I had in that boat that day, but all gone. Well we did it all. Well that's what we did in the summertime, we'd crop...and then when it was the summertime or whatever it was we provided for our family, we cropped, you know cropping whatever we had to do to provide for the family and after all of that was taken care of and then we went fishing to catch fish for a living when the winter came then we trapped for a living. In the wintertime we did whatever we had to do so we were not beholden or asking anybody for anything.

-----End of Interview-----

Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/12/2024