Interview with Wilson Moran

Narrator: Wilson Moran

Interviewer: Dr. Jolvan Morris

Date of Interview: August 19, 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.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Dionne Hoskins

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Abstract:

On August 19, 2014, Dr. Jolvan Morris interviewed Wilson Moran as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Wilson provides a firsthand account of traditional environmental stewardship and fishing practices within the Black community of Harris Neck before its transition into a wildlife refuge. Wilson reflects on his family's history as commercial fishers, detailing the sustainable techniques they used, including seasonal fishing, culling undersized or egg-laden crabs, and replenishing oyster beds. He discusses how these practices, along with the community's control over their resources, was eroded by economic and political power structures, leading to ecological and cultural loss. For example, the leasing of marshlands to private entities restricted Black fishers from accessing oyster beds without permits. This, along with the commercial exploitation of soft-shell crabs and years of environmental pollution caused by septic tanks and industrial runoff, contributed to the decline of the local fishing industry.

JM: So transferring a little bit back to Harris Neck and the environmental justice movement – you've said it to me before that the people of Harris Neck knew how to take care of the environment prior to it being a wildlife refuge, so can you explain to me what does "taking care of the environment" me to you?

WM: Well for instance oysters. My grandpa was among many things that he were was an oyster picker and in the seasons…with everything, every month that has an "R" they would pick oysters, right? In the spring they'd take the shells and plant oysters, so therefore oysters were always in an abundance, right. Now, when the white power structure realized the money in the oysters, they worked with the state of Georgia and they gained some kind of ownership, leasing ownership so that the mostly Black pickers could not pick oysters anymore; not unless they got a permit from the people who now had the lease, all the marshes, you had to get a permit from them. It was like – almost like share cropping or slavery. So now my papa'nem could not or would not replenish their stocks anymore, because they weren't getting paid to do it. Plus they realized they were depleting the oyster beds, but the power structure didn't care about that they just wanted the oysters. So, that's when the oyster industry began to slowly, slowly decrease to the point like now it's almost nonexistent. You only have one oyster picker in all of McIntosh county, and that's another story, but the same thing with the blue crabs. But my dad knows, they never got the undersized crabs, they always threw it back and the egg crabs. Tey always threw the egg crabs back because they knew if they didn't throw the egg crabs and the smaller crabs back, they would destroy the industry, but then the power structure came in and also what they call peeler crabs, we call them soft crabs, soft shell crabs, they would throw those back. Maybe you'd bring a dozen or so – not a dozen, maybe half a dozen to the house, but they always threw those back up into the creek because they knew that the peeler crabs would be the big crabs in a month or so later but now the peeler crab had become a giant industry and so therefore that depleted the crab industry along with our environmental things like septic tanks and people who are putting poisonous chemicals on their grass and the rain runs off into the estuaries, all that came together and that's where we are now. But a lot of the times you don't realize what's happening if it happens slowly over a period of 20, 25, 30…now we are at a point that it's a disaster, but it started 40 years ago.

JM: But you would say that largely the Harris Neck community knew that you know…you put…

WM: They saw.

JM: They saw what was going on and they knew how to replenish?

WM: Yeah, but they had no control to continue that way of life because they didn't have the power. So therefore, what you do, you go with the flow, but you're killing yourself but you can't change nothing so you have to live so that's it and that's what happened to the saltwater cat. You hardly ever catch a saltwater cat anymore, but fifty years ago they were all over the place, now you ask people do they see them and it's a bottom feeder, and we know what is partly responsible for it is the septic tanks and the chemical plants that came on line on the on the coast. And then

we're just killing ourselves.

JM: So in the heyday, when your family, your father was fishing, he was a commercial fisherman in Harris Neck?

WM: Yeah, he was a commercial crab fisherman in Harris Neck and they didn't catch hundreds of pounds, they caught thousands of pounds of blue crabs even though they culled and that's the reason they caught thousands of pounds because they culled them. They egg crabs are in June, July, you throw them back, April, May, the small crabs, you throw them back. And would have these – by September you would have these giant crabs. Well it don't work that way anymore.

JM: Okay, were there any other fish or was he strictly crab?

WM: Crab. But he did a little shrimping, but not like – primarily was a blue crab fisherman. You got realize everything here was seasonal, so there was a season for the blue crab, there was a season for the shrimp, there was a season for the oysters. And, that's how they work. And when they – before the mink ranchers came on, there was a season for the fur trade. So they had a season and worked within that environment and they helped preserve the environment. Now everything had to work in connection with each other for you to get the maximum benefits from the environment. I don't really think that they know that they were environmentalists, but they were good at it.

JM: So what type of gear was being used? You talked to me a little bit about the bull nose. Was that one of the types…?

WM: Oh yeah, bait…

JM: Yeah, bait and…

WM: Bait is salted beef nose, or the parts that the butchers didn't use, especially when they skin the cow. We took that meat and that skin and we chopped them up in inch pieces about half inch wide and two inches long with a hatchet. And that is when we used a crab line, you call it a trot line instead of a crab trap and they'd come in salted wooden barrels and you'd take these out and you'd chop these up and you'd tie them to your trot line and the trot lines will be from fifty to a hundred yards and that's what we did. And that was, that's when everything was in abundance. It was a wonderful time. Shrimp was all over the place, now there are dead spots where nothing is. I never knew a dead spot when I was – from say I was eight to eighteen, I did not know dead spots in the water.

JM: That was going to be my next question, "How'd you know where to go?" …but I guess everywhere.

WM: Some were more in abundance. You had to have a working knowledge of the estuary and you had to know what fish fished where or where was crab more in abundance and there were

certain times of year the crab was plentiful here, but not here and as it got colder thy left this area and went to this area. You had to know they had this – my grandfather had this built in knowledge of what season, what time of year, to go where to catch the maximum amount.

JM: So would you say it was a combination of experience as well as being passed down?

WM: That's absolutely right, and you had to know the estuary. One thing that they couldn't get a handle on was the gradual change of the environment. They couldn't get a handle on it. And things were changing around them, like the plants and the chemicals in the ground, the septic tanks, they couldn't get a handle on that, they didn't have that knowledge so things began to deteriorate slowly and they couldn't figure. They felt they knew that they couldn't figure it out. Does it make sense what I'm trying to say?

JM: No, I understand.

—----------End of Interview----------

Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/07/2024