

Interview with Olive Smith

Narrator: Olive Smith

Interviewer: Dr. Jolvan Morris

Date: August 12, 2014

Location: Townsend, 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

Abstract:

On August 12, 2014, Dr. Jolvan Morris interviewed Olive Smith as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Olive is one of the original members of the Harris Neck community in McIntosh County Georgia. She recalls how her mother provided food for the family by picking oysters at low tide during the winters and catching crabs. Olive's account is a brief glimpse of what life was like for the women of this fishing community.

OS: Where we live at we wasn't far from the river. We could walk...

JM: Which river?

OS: Thomas, Thomas Landing. And my mother used to go down there on low tide, when it was time for the oyster season; she would go down there and...see the logs, it was logs in the bottom of the river and when that tide go out it goes off the log. She'd go down there and she'd open oysters, bring back and fix for us to eat, and then she would take the little dip net when the tide coming back in and you see the crabs would be coming back too you know and she'd take that dip net and she'd put it out there and see the crabs comin', and she'd put it out there and catch them and put it in the bucket. We just had a good living in Harris Neck; it really was a good living. Yeah.

JM: That's great. So obviously...did your dad do any fishing?

OS: Fishing?

JM: Yeah, your dad.

OS: Oh yeah, he was a shrimp fisherman. My father was...My father he died when I was little. My step-father raised me and he didn't fish and he was working for Ms. Lily Livingston, down at the grove in there...he was taking care of...she had a greenhouse, he was taking care of that and tending to the horse and stuff like that...yeah, raised the garden for her.

JM: Okay, so I know you say your mom, she caught the oysters and the crabs and stuff, did you uh...did she help...?

OS: And she worked in the field too; she raised...she raised our vegetables.

JM: Oh okay. Did she do any fishing? Like catching mullet or...?

OS: No, she just get those crabs and then oyster, when the oyster season.

JM: Oh okay, so mostly crustaceans, alright. And you said she went according to when the tide was...so she knew...she knew when...

OS: She knew when the tide was low, yeah she'd go out there and get them oysters when the wintertime, when it's oyster season...go and them oysters be on the log you know and she'd go on low tide, open them oysters and come back; and when um season for the crabs, she's go out there and that coming in tide, them crabs be coming back in and that's the time she'd go out there and take that dip net and catch them.

JM: She used the dip net? Did she use a cast net or anything or only...?

OS: No, she didn't use no cast net.

JM: Only a dip net?

OS: No, only a dip net. You know what a dip net is.

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

OS: That's what she used to catch the crabs. But she had a brother, he use to fish...he'd go castin'. He kept us up with fish.

JM: Oh okay. What kind of fish did he usually...?

OS: Well, mostly mullets and little yellow... talk about yellowtails. Yeah mullets and yellowtails. That's them little flat fish with the tail is yellow.

JM: Okay, and everybody knew where to go and when to go?

OS: Oh yeah, everybody know where to go. That's right everybody know where to go.

JM: Alright, how did they know where to go?

OS: Huh?

JM: How'd they know?

OS: Well, they was born and raised and they know where to go when the tide go low, they go down to them holes where the fish would be in and they'd cast and that's how they'd get the fish.

JM: Oh so...they just tell...they tell everybody and tell the kids where?

OS: Well, that's was the family of us who lived near the river. It was a lot of other family, but they lived back to the other rivers you know? Yeah, uh huh.

JM: Oh, I got you.

OS: But Harris Neck was a blessed place.

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

Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/13/2024