

Interview with Reverend Robert Thorpe

Narrator: Reverend Robert Thorpe

Interviewer: Dr. Jolvan Morris

Date of Interview: August 28, 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 28, 2014, Dr. Jolvan Morris interviewed Reverend Robert Thorpe as part of the Georgia Black Fishermen oral history project. Reverend Thorpe, one of the original members of the Harris Neck community, explains fishing, crabbing, and oyster picking in McIntosh County, Georgia. He recounts the locations and ownership succession of oyster factories in the area. Thorpe's oral history describes how catch was sold in Harris Neck and surrounding communities to support his family; the roles of men and women working in oyster plants; and wintertime trapping as a way to supplement fishing income.

Robert Thorpe: In 19 – what's that, 1939, we crab fished at that time. We used what we called trot line, and those trot line, what we did we bait, I'd say about every two, two-feet apart with uh bullnose. You'd buy pickled bull nose cut it up in small pieces like you, like you finger like that and tie it every, bout every...bout that long...bout every two feet apart and uh we'd get a ten pound line and that line would run oh, but all, we had a line run about how long? Something like three, four-hundred yards. Yes, a long line. Then we had a dip net; we had the line rigged in a way that we had what you call a buoy and an anchor on each end. Then we row up to the – and pick up the buoy 'cause you got the line stretch out tight on the shore and see and in the water on the shore, you know you row your boat along. Then it had something called a reel, that's a board that's a crook, we crook... take a iron and bend it and make a "U" out of it, and when we get to it, start to go through there then we take up our buoy and that give us the line then and put it in the reel. Then we row along, as we row along the line will come up out the water, and we – as it come up out the water and the crab on it, we take the dip net and catch the crab. We did it like that. Now when I began – they had two prices on the crab, the female had one price and the male had one price. The female then was 50 cents a hundred. A hundred pounds of crab, you got 50 cents for the female. And the male you got was 75 cents a hundred; a hundred pounds for seventy-five cents. At that time we would have what we called, "croaker sacks" and uh we would put them as we catch them and put 'em in the sack and keep the sack wet; you know? because the sun is hot now. You see it's hot now; it was hot then. And we keep, you know, keep throwing water so it'll keep it alive, because we had to come back to Harris Neck and then the man, Sherman Giger, who would take the crab, and weigh the crabs up, and take them to Brunswick. So you know you had to keep 'em alive a long time, take 'em to Brunswick. He would come and uh weigh the crabs up, take 'em to Brunswick; that's five days a week. On Friday evening then, what ever we made, we got paid. Now we did the trout line from time until 1955.

Jolvan Morris: You said you started in 193-? What year did you start?

RT: I said we did the trot line like that I'm first telling you about until 1955, then we went to crab traps. Then we start using traps. Well, we got more money for the crab, but it was more expensive. You had to buy the traps, you had to buy the fish bait. We used to use the pickled bullnose on the line, but we used fresh frozen...frozen or fresh fish for bait in the traps; and it was more costly. But they paid off. We caught a whole lot of crabs. I caught up to 2,000 pounds one day with the traps. Yeah the traps really did paid off, but like I say they were expensive. Then besides that we would, if the crab didn't run good, to supplement what we was doing, we'd take cast net at night and go and catch fish and, like on Thursday – well on Thursday night we'll go fishing. We'd take those fish we caught on Thursday night; Friday we cleaned them and season them and dried them; so that Friday evening we could bar-b-que those fish. Then we go back out Friday night and catch what we called, "the green fish;" the fresh fish so when we go to peddle fish, we'll have the bar-b-que fish and the fresh fish. And sometimes we'd take the uh...net and catch some shrimp and have shrimp to peddle also, and sometime to boil some crabs. And people would buy the boiled crabs, the shrimps and the bar-b-que fish and the fresh fish.

JM: So what was the significance of going out at night?

RT: There, that's the time you best catching for your cast net fishing at night, you see. At night it's something with the night. In the day time it's bright and they can see the fish can see you so plain, but at night, you know how it is when it's dark you could slip up almost anything. So, at night time, that's the time we go cast net fishing. Now in the winter time, it's kind of different; it

is a difference in the winter time. In winter time, especially mullet – all of the fish, 'cause I gotten mullet, the trouts, and bass. If you know they go to a creek that is a woods, that runs into a woods and always a wood creek, mostly in the winter time, you'll catch them; they go there into a hole and sometime you'll catch maybe four-, five-hundred pounds in one place, 'cause they stay...go up there and they stay up under there getting in. I don't know if they – probably just a place for them to hide or getting warm under the woods area in a hole, and you go and you find a hole there and you get all you want in one place and come back.

JM: So how did you learn where the different places to fish were?

RT: How did I learn?

JM: Umhmm

RT: Well, by my grandfather and different people naming the place and going to find out, sometimes you've never fished that place, but you'll know the area by going to and fro all through the rivers, you see because we didn't go no one place, we go all through different areas of the river. Now, we had a place we called from Thomas Landing, now that's where the place where we were living closer to Thomas Landing. Thomas Landing, then you go cross Thomas River, we had a cut called Mitry Cut; and that's why uh we had to get up sometime twelve o'clock at night, because the tide would be up so you could get in that through that cut, and get in the next river; which would be Row Station, which is uh South New Port. North Newport, South Newport comes down through Thomas Riverside, and has to be North Newport goes down the other side. So we'd have to get up early in the morning in the middle time of the night, whenever the tide suit, get high enough to get through there, because see when the tide get low then. One night my grandfather and I, we got caught in that place and had to spend the night. It was cold. It wasn't enough water to push it through so, it was on a New Year's Eve night, we spent New Year...caught us right in there in the cold. No fire. No nothing, but we made it some kinda way...the fishing, the fishing...what else about...?

JM: So did your family build nets or boats or anything? Did you um...did your family um know how to build the boats? Or did you...?

RT: Oh yeah, my dad could build a boat and uh Kenneth's daddy was a boat builder. Kenneth Dunham, his daddy was a boat builder. So we didn't suffer for nothing, we had some people 'round there knew how to build boats, houses, or whatever. The trade, some kinda way they knew; they was good at it too. Yes, good at it.

JM: Okay, now you said when you went fishing at night, the "green fish." Who were you selling them to?

RT: Sell 'em to different people. I be like to leave Harris Neck and come on through, go up there to Riceboro and Jones. I used to take my route first through Jones and come on through Riceboro and on, sometimes Flemming and McIntosh and all up that way. Until I see out; sometimes go to Hinesville, also...mhmm...yeah, always had a sale. You know somebody always on Saturday morning and you'd hit those places like I'm talking about there a route like that and you will sell fish. They will buy, people be there waiting on them.

JM: Really?

RT: Let's see, 'cause they didn't – what fish they got would be fresh water fish. Breems and such as that, but to get a variety like we would have. Well, we mostly carried mullets around, but we'd catch other fish too, like bass and trouts, but not as – not like the quantity of mullet we'd catch. They would buy it, and we'd have no problem

JM: Okay. Did you do any oyster picking?

RT: Oh yes. Oh yes, we pick oysters. We pick what we call, "raw oysters;" that's what the oysters that the factory there – when you pick for the factory, then you be picking, they say, "raw oysters." They had some, oh boy, these barrels uh cut in half, what they call a "bushel;" you be don' give them about two bushels and a half or a bushel, but anyhow that's what the measurement was. And the women would do the shucking of the oysters. That's what Sam is working on, the oyster factory. He came and I showed him how the uh...how it was fixed and how they handled that.

JM: Now this is Tiger Bluff, or what oyster factory is this?

RT: Okay, now this, any of 'em round there, Tiger Bl – All of them run 'bout the same order. It was Tiger Bluff at Harris Neck. That's the Timmons family uh factory. Old man William Timmons and family, that's what it was. Then, they don't even much – nobody don't talk about this because I don't think none of the people 'round there, younger people know about Wesley Curry factory. Wesley Curry had a factory over there on Thomas Riverside, this Timmons was in Tiger Bluff and another factory there, Thorpe factory, .down there off of – not far from Ghould Landing. Where Ghould Landing is and as the river curve around then there's a creek right up there; he build him a factory up in there. After that factory went down, Roy Barthem. He was I think from Thunderbolt, no, Thunderbolt, Wilmington Island somewhere there. But anyway, he and his wife, Cille – Lucille, they ran a factory right there on the curve as you're going down to Ghould Landing and you make that turn. That factory was right there right at that turn at Ghould Landing, just was Roy Barthem.

JM: Okay. So it wasn't just people from Harris Neck operating the factories?

RT: No.

JM: You can come from anywhere and open a factory?

RT: Yes. Yes. So he bought that out from either Thorpe or Thompson run – oh yeah, Thompson ran a factory there first. A fella by the name of Thompson. The after Thompson, he must be sold out to Roy, and Roy ran it until he died and Lucille, she finally – I don't know what happened to her. She stayed around for a while, but that was the last oyster factory that was around there was Roy Barthem oyster factory. That was the raw factory, oyster factory. Now, there were the, what do you call them oysters? We would pick them and take them to on the boat from here to Darien. Paul [Plagger?] had a uhh oyster factory there for steam oysters. We used to pick up steam oysters for them to steam, so we just load a lighter or load a boat with four- or five-hundred bushels or whatever the boat would carry and take it into Darien and they steam, they had a steamer there, there was and then they had women there. Oh they always had to have somebody

to handle that stuff. Just like the crabs they take there, the womens had to handle the crabs. They cut the crabs and get the meat out of them.

JM: So you say, for the most part the men did the fishing, but the women handled the product?

RT: Yeah. Yes. The product, when it get to the factory, the women folks handle that.

JM: Okay.

RT: Now when it get to the factory with the oysters, they always have a man to handle the oysters to give them oysters; keep oysters on the shelf; keep shell away from – keep that open up for them to work and such as that. One man will handle that, but it'd be about twelve to fifteen women in there at stalls...each one of them had a stall and what you call a "cracker;" something – made out of cement with an iron, piece of flat iron in the top, and you'd put you oysters on there and hit the mouth off like that and take your oyster knife and open it and cut it out. There with the steam oysters, he'd – Timmons, Edgar. The old man Edgar Timmons – this young preacher Edgar's father, he and I used to oyster together. We had a boat one time from Darien, and the boat was leaking and we would load that boat down; now, you got to sleep sometime and for fear if the leak start, water start coming in the boat, we slept in our bunk with one had on the floor. Now you can't forget to sti...'cause you sleep you can forget to take that hand up. Your hand, the purpose of the hand on the floor was that if the water hit your hand you know it's time to get out of the boat or do something, 'cause the boat is sinking. So we slept with our hands on the floor. So that would let us know that the boat was getting full of water and we could get out. We came through some stuff, we came through some stuff.

[End of first audio]

JM: You told me a little bit about the types of gear you used and the different types of boats; in terms of that was income generating for...that was your income. That was full-time? Or was that like you did it during some seasons...?

RT: It was a seasonal thing. Now in the summertime, we would crab fish for crab and mostly mullets. Well we did the mullets winter and summer, but crab was the thing that...the main thing that we depend on for a living during the summer. When summer go, the crab went with the summer, you couldn't catch no more crab 'round here at that time. It was recently, lately find out that those traps, you would put them in the channel and catch crab right on year-round, but at that time we hang it up until it get warm 'til the spring until the next year; but um uh we we...what point I was fixin' to make on that, so then we go to oysters and trapping. Oh I didn't talk about trapping. That was our main way of living for making some money during the winter. We put out box traps and steel traps for minks. Mink was bringing a good price at that time, uh ten, twelve dollars, sometimes fifteen dollars it would get us; and otters and coon, but mink was the first thing. We make box traps for minks, then we usually use steel traps for coons, raccoons and otters. Some people stick to trapping and like me, a young man trying to raise a family on that and some more, would trap and pick oysters. Do all, both of them. See because you didn't have

to go to your trap everyday. We'd visit our trap every other day and if we could pick up three or four minks, we did well. And but and then the same time you oyster picking...picking oysters everyday that's keeping some food on the table 'cause your making something when your picking oysters. So, that was our living for the winter; oysters, picking oysters, and trapping was the three main things. Every now and then we'd hit some fish, but that was not nothing regular you know, but the trapping and picking oysters was the main thing for us to live in the winter time.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador 10/08/2024